The Impact of Contextual Clue Selection on Inference

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Linguistic information can be conveyed in the form of speech and written text, but it is the content of the message that is ultimately essential for higher-level processes in language comprehension, such as making inferences and associations between text information and knowledge about the world. Linguistically, inference is the shovel that allows receivers to dig meaning out from the text with selecting different embedded contextual clues. Naturally, people with different world experiences infer similar contextual situations differently. Lack of contextual knowledge of the target language can present an obstacle to comprehension (Anderson & Lynch, 2003). This paper tries to investigate how true contextual clue selection from the text can influence listener's inference. In the present study 60 male and female teenagers (13-19) and 60 male and female young adults (20-26) were selected randomly based on Oxford Placement Test (OPT). During the study two fiction and two non-fiction passages were read to the participants in the experimental and control groups respectively and they were given scores according to Lexile's Score (LS)[1] based on their correct inference and logical thinking ability. In general the results show that participants' clue selection based on their personal schematic references and background knowledge differ between teenagers and young adults and influence inference and listening comprehension.

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[1]- This is a framework for reading and listening which matches the appropriate score to each text based on degree of difficulty of text and each text was given a Lexile score from zero to four.

Inference consists of one's ability in using nonlinguistic information for comprehending a linguistic utterance. Richards & Anderson (2005) believe that inferring is a strategic process in which one generates assumptions, makes predictions, and comes to conclusions based on the given information.

In making inferences, listeners use intra-lingual, contextual and inter-lingual clue selection. Intra-lingual clue selection relates to the features of a new word and listeners' information about phonology, morphology and word class to guess the meaning of the text or speakers' utterances. Intra-lingual clues have to do with listeners' first language information. Development and acquisition of pragmatic skills is the process that occurs over time while new experiences are encountered, and vary based on the experiences in a listener's life.

Inference abilities hugely impact students' ability to interpret everyday communication and pragmatic skills. According to Richards and Anderson (2005), when listeners cannot generate inferences naturally and spontaneously, they can usually infer information from one segment of the text, but fail to integrate it with implied information in other parts of the text.

Drawing inferences requires the reader to expand on what is stated in the text. In this regard, Bowyer, Crane, and Snowling (2005) believe that pre-school children's understanding of the text seems to be literal. Children do not go beyond the words on the page and do not actively develop integrated mental representations of what they read. But according to the present study, teenagers and young adults' inference is beyond text and they expand and develop their interpretation based on personal experiences and schematic knowledge and references.

Accordingly, Constructionist Theory (CT) suggests that many inferences can be made during comprehension, and not only local inferences but global ones can be made, too. Besides, what is represented in the memory is the situation referred to by the text and that background knowledge is extensively used while an

individual is generating inference, (Graesser, Singer & Trabasso, 1994).

The results of the present study show that participants' background knowledge and personal experiences based on the real world have important role in using mental schematic reference for making inference and comprehension. Different cognitive, pragmatic and social factors as mental reference, schematic knowledge, personal experience and culture influence inference in different age groups and genders.

The Listener's Role in Inference Process

Listeners must use prior knowledge of different experiences and situations in combination with contextual clues found in the text to reach conclusions that are important in understanding the underlying meaning of read material. Contextual clues refer to one or two words from the immediate co-text of a new word, the whole sentence containing the new word, a specific part of the co-text beyond the sentence containing the new word or unspecified part of the text which may help the global understanding of the whole text. Language performs certain actions and utterances can be understood by means of reference to the context in which they occur (McCormick & Hill, 2001).

In order to develop better descriptions of such a context, a corpus might be a useful resource. Gebhard (2005) points out that background knowledge relates to the real world experience and plays an important role in selecting true clues. The real world experiences are different according to different contexts, cultures, ages, genders and according to this study different type of passages, too. Culturally, when the listener is exposed to the speaker's utterances, these factors influence his interpretation.

According to Sapir (1989), language cannot exist without culture. Language carries knowledge and cultural information and it reflects the substantial and particular ways of thinking of that people. Bada and Gence (2005) believe that the role of culture in using background knowledge affects the listener's clue selection from the context for inferencing. During these processes, the listener, drawing upon cultural background and personal

knowledge and mental references, can fill the gaps and make true inference of the text.

In this regard, Sperber and Wilson (2005) believe that according to above-mentioned factors, pragmatics should ultimately explain how listeners can fill the gap between the sentence meaning and the speaker's intended one. Researchers of ordinary language assumed that the meaning of a sentence derives from a situational background that determines truth conditions. In other words, listeners can fill these gaps by selecting contextual clues from the contextual situation. Normal pragmatic analysis engages the ability to track speakers' intentions and correlates to mind abilities access via making inference (Bloom, 2000; Happe & Loth, 2002).

Pragmatic linguistic and communicative factors have been considered in relationship with individual differences in emotion understanding and differences in contextual clue selection. Leslie and Caldwell (2008) found evidence of skilled listeners with higher levels of prior knowledge who understood and comprehended the text better and more accurately than poorer ones. McCormick and Hill (2001) indicate that listeners experience more difficulty with higher order comprehension, such as making inferences, than with literal level comprehension for which they must merely understand the facts directly stated in the text. This study, based on the previous research and according to the present statistical results, attempts to investigate whether or not listeners in two different age groups make different inferences when listening to fiction and non- fiction passages.

Key Terms

Contextual Clues

Context consists of physical setting or participants' knowledge of co-text or what has been said and contextual clue refers to the words that may help the local and global understanding of the whole text. As background knowledge and contextual information have important role in listening comprehension ability, this study has dealt with the role of

contextual clues or background knowledge at the discourse level. Considering the contextual clues significantly improve the comprehension of the experimental group.

Schematic and Background Knowledge

Linguistics is generally viewed as one of the main components of cognitive science. Listening comprehension ability involves physiological and cognitive processes at different levels as well as attention to contextual and socially coded acoustic clues (Lynch, 2002; Rost, 2002). Successful comprehension, however, is actually the result of complex cognitive processes. Nunan (2007) argues that listening comprehension relies on listeners' successful activation of their prior knowledge.

Listeners physiologically use top-down processes when they use context and prior knowledge to build a conceptual framework for comprehension. Schemata are general cognitive constructs of knowledge that listeners use to model current events and situations and thereby bring them into alignment with familiar patterns of experience. Prior knowledge can be knowledge of the topic, the listening context, the text-type, the culture or other information stored in long-term memory. The mental references that listeners experience have powerful effects on comprehension, memory, and appreciation for context.

Fiction and Non-Fiction

Fiction and non-fiction passages were used to investigate if patterns existed between imaginary information and facts. Fiction and non-fiction passages have different impact on clue selection, logical thinking skills, and inference abilities of the participants.

Kamil and Lane (2005) found that the use of narrative text is viewed as the most logical way to early reading achievement. In fiction, a reader or listener has to identify the characters and follow the events of the story. Results indicate that participants' clue selection, logical thinking abilities, and overall inferential thinking abilities were more developed in fiction passages than nonfiction

passages. So inferential thinking abilities are affected by the use of fiction versus non-fiction passages.

Nonfiction is literature that is not fictional (Mish, 2005). However, nonfiction has a different framework. In non-fiction, a reader needs to comprehend the topic, learn new facts related to it, and be able to find and remember important information (Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons, & Fountas, 2005). Non-fictional text comprises the bulk of passages that students must listen and respond to in standardized tests (Hoyt, Mooney, & Parks, 2003).

When participants understand the structure of nonfiction writing, they are better able to determine its importance. Listeners can access, comprehend, and integrate related concepts and ideas. Therefore, it is crucial that they be able to recognize the structure of nonfiction text. Duke (2003) indicated that there were many benefits to teaching nonfiction in the classroom, and she suggested that early literacy instruction should include nonfiction materials. Boynton and Blevins (2003) emphasized the fact that listening and understanding nonfiction text demands abstract thinking. Therefore, because of the differences between fiction and non-fiction passages, the present study, by means of the impact of type of passages, investigated the process of the inference in two age groups.

Statement of the Problem

Comprehension and interpretation are challenging to readers or listeners, when they listen to or read any fiction or non-fiction text. According to Nesset (2008), when language users are exposed to utterances, they can establish schemas generalizing over the sounds they hear or pronounce. Using speakers' intonation to referring to his intention presupposes a common knowledge that helps listener to infer what the intended meaning is (Adams, 2002).

Naturally, the speaker has to make assumptions about the extent to which the hearer shares cognitive and contextual resources when deciding on the form of the utterance, particularly what is made explicit or implicit. The listener needs to understand different genres, voices, perspectives, styles and to find how those elements may reflect the intent of the speaker, author, or

storyteller, and how those elements affect meaning of communication.

The present study, by comparing Persian teenagers' and young adults' clue selection from fiction and non-fiction texts, attempts to investigate the impact of selecting clues from different types of passages on participants' inference and listening comprehension ability.

Method

Making inferences is fundamental for the comprehension of the speaker's message. Comprehension of a speaker's message requires not only semantic and syntactic knowledge but also the ability to infer speakers' intentions. It is used by speakers to mark the pragmatic force of the information in an utterance. As a result, contextual events can often provide information to the listener about the situation, in addition to carrying a pragmatic message. Naturally, in a spoken interaction, a tone of voice, a feeling about the way the speaker is speaking, the atmosphere of a conversation often give significant cues to different age groups of listeners for inferencing.

According to Keene and Zimmerman (1997), inferring is going beyond the literal text for weaving utterance into our mind as a meaningful communication. Therefore, it is the listener who should identify and select correct contextual clues. This study aims to investigate how selecting correct contextual clues affects two age ranges of Iranian teenagers and young adults' inferences of English as their second language.

Participants

In this study, the participants included 60 male and female teenagers and 60 male and female young adults. The age range for the teenagers and young adults were 13-19 and 20-26 respectively. All participants were native speakers of Farsi who were learning English as a second language.

The samples were randomly chosen from 100 male and female teenagers and 100 male and female young adults studying

English as a second language. The students who, having taken an Oxford Placement Test (OPT), got scores between 15 to 18 participated in this study). Each group was randomly assigned into two sub-groups; namely, experimental and control groups, each having 15 participants.

Instrumentation

The materials for testing participants' inference and comprehension ability in this study consisted of two fiction and two non-fiction passages that were read aloud to participants. Passages were created according to Leslie Holzhauser-Peters, M.S., CCC-SLP[2]. The passages were no more than 150 words. Each text was given a lexile score, which indicated what grade level, corresponded with each passage.

Procedure

The procedure involved reading aloud two fiction and two non-fiction passages to the participants. In order for the participants in experimental group to be differentiated from those in the control group, and to have them find appropriate contextual clues, the reader of the passages applied some intonational features (change of pitch, raisin and falling intonation, pause, topicalization) to the reading of both kinds of fiction and non-fiction passages.

Passages had seven predetermined stopping points where the examiner would stop reading and ask the participant in experimental group specific questions about experimental group. These questions were used to detect the participants' inferences pattern. As Table 1 shows, participants were given scores according to Lexile Score from zero to four based on their inference, logical thinking skills and their ability to determine what clues are the most important from the text.

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[2]- The fiction and non-fiction passages in the present study are taken from Lexile Site.

Table 1.
Explanation of Participants' Inference/logical Thinking of the Passages

Lexile's Score	Participant's Inference and Clue Selection
4	The logical inference or mental thinking that participant made most of the time
3	The logical inference or mental thinking that participant made some of the time
2	The logical inference or mental thinking that participant did Not some of the time
1	The logical inference or mental thinking that participant did Not most of the time
0	Participants did not attempt to guess or explain.

Data Analysis

Participants in control (CG) and experimental group (EX) were given scores based on their inference and logical thinking skills and their ability to determine what clues are most important in the inference and comprehension process of the text. The differences among two groups were examined and explained.

After scoring, the results were put under a series of statistical analyses selected from SPSS software package. Generally, the collected data were analyzed and tabulated as follows. In general, the tables show the relationship between scores of mean and contextual clue selection in two age groups of the present study.

Table 2.
Teenagers' Inference Testing of CG

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fiction	30	.00	4.00	2.7000	1.02217
Non-Fiction	30	.00	4.00	2.7667	.89763
Valid N (listwise)	30				

Table 3.
Young Adults' Inference Testing of Cg

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fiction	30	2.00	4.00	3.0333	.66868
Non-Fiction	30	.00	4.00	2.6667	.84418
Valid N (listwise)	30				

Table 4.
Teenagers' Inference Testing of EX

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fiction	30	2.00	4.00	3.3667	.57135
Non-Fiction	30	2.00	4.00	3.0333	.71840
Valid N (listwise)	30				

Table 5.
Young Adults Inference of EX

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fiction	30	2.00	4.00	3.1333	.61495
Non-Fiction	30	3.00	4.00	3.6333	.49013
Valid N (listwise)	30				

Tables show that the greatest mean score of non-fiction passages (M = 3.63) belonged to the young adults' comprehension in the experimental group, and the lowest mean score (2.66) belonged to the young adults' comprehension of non-fiction in the control group. On the other hands, the greatest mean score of fiction passages (M=3.36) belonged to the teenagers' comprehension in the experimental group.

The following table, by comparing significant score of different factors (gender, age, contextual clue selection) with basic significant level (0.05), reveals the conclusions of the study.

Table 6.
The Significant Result of Participants' Inference and Listening Comprehension

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	2220.417	1	2220.417	4005.728	.000
Gender	.017	1	.017	.030	.003
Age	4.267	1	4.267	7.697	.006
Clue selection	15.000	1	15.000	27.061	.000
Error	64.300	116	.554		

As Table 6 demonstrates, gender as a variable has meaningful impact on the participants' inference and listening comprehension ability. Significant level of this variable (0.003) was less than 0.05. It means that there are significant differences between male and females' inferences and listening comprehension ability. According to the collected data (.000‹0.05) females' contextual and intonational clue selection for inferencing the fiction passages were more than males. On the other hand, males' inferences and clue selection of fiction passages were more than females. Also, according to the Table 6, significant number of age, as another variable, is 0.006, which is less than 0.05.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the present study, background knowledge had an important role in using mental schematic references to inference and make comprehension. Different cognitive and social factors like personal experience, mental schematic, culture, gender, age and etc. influence inference skill.

As fiction texts are associated with feelings and are distinctive manifestation of cultural values and perceptions, when a listener listens to a fiction passage, due to the great importance of mental stated in narrative texts, s/he can use mental reference and emotional features to select correct contextual clues to make inference. In general, stories can offer a valuable way of contextualizing and introducing new language, making it meaningful and memorable (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Wright, 2000).

According to Wagner (2006) and the result of the inference testing of the present study, teenagers' clue selection, logical thinking and overall inferential thinking abilities are more developed in fiction passages than nonfiction passages. It means that teenagers' inferences and comprehending abilities are more text dependent and less based on their personal experience, background knowledge and real world.

On the other hand, in non-fictions, a reader or listener needs to comprehend the topic, learn new facts related to it, and be able to find and remember important information (Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons, & Fountas, 2005). Since young adults have more previous information and personal experience, they can make mental inferences more quickly by means of background knowledge, and are more successful in non-fiction inference ability. On the other hand, young adults' inferences and comprehending are more based on their personal experiences, background knowledge and real world and independent of the text.

The conclusion drawn by the present study is that considering contextual factors of the text does influence correct inference and subsequently good comprehension. Findings of this study also suggest that gender and the type of the passages (fiction or non-fiction) could affect readers' scores on an inference test.

Generally, showing significant differences between teenagers and young adults' inferences and listening comprehension ability, the current study suggests that teenagers' interpretation and inference is almost literally and exactly based on the passages and not based on their personal experiences and real world while young adults' inference and comprehension abilities are

completely based on their personal experiences and real world. In general, both teenager and young adults used their schematic knowledge and imaginary world, but they differed in using mental references.

Implications

According to the present study, teachers, during the first or second language teaching, by considering the influence of true contextual and intonational clues, students' age and gender, cultural, emotional and social factors on students interpretation, inference and comprehension ability, can increase teaching and learning efficiency.

This study indicated that using intonational contours in the speaker or teacher voice had positive impact on the students' contextual clue selection and subsequently their inference and comprehension. Therefore, instructors and educators can make use of these strategies in order to make comprehension easier for listeners. Teachers in different grades and especially in lower grades (e.g. preschool, primary and high-school), by considering to the age of the listeners and applying correct prosodic features of language (Farsi and English), can improve students' learning.

According to Durgunoglu (2008), natural comprehension of L1 and L2 involves a complex array of processes and requires sophisticated knowledge about content as well as language. Therefore, this study also concluded that oral language comprehension proficiencies of L1 (Farsi) can overlap language comprehension proficiencies of L2 (English) too.

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Appendices

*Appendix A: Score Explanation of Participants Inference and
Listening Comprehension Based on Lexile's Scores*

Lexile's Score	Participant's Inference and clue selection
4	The logical inference or mental thinking that participant made most of the time (75%-100% of the time).
3	The logical inference or mental thinking that participant made some of the time (50%-75% of the time).
2	The logical inference or mental thinking that participant did Not some of the time (25%-50%).
1	The logical inference or mental thinking that participant did Not most of the time (0-25%).
0	Participants did not attempt to guess or explain.

Fiction
Surprise Party

Read: Susan was invited to go out to dinner with her friends. She was excited, but disappointed at the same time.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: As Susan arrived at the restaurant she only saw one friend, Molly. "Where is everyone else," Susan asked? Molly replied, "They couldn't make it, sorry Susan." Susan tried to smile, but she was really feeling very sad.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: After Susan and Molly finished their meals, Susan asked Molly to go to a movie. Molly explained to Susan that she needed to go home and go to bed.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: Susan again, felt very disappointed and unhappy. "They have forgotten this special day," Susan thought.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: As Susan drove home she became more and more sad. She didn't even notice all the cars parked outside her house.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Read: As she pulled into her driveway Susan began to cry. How could all of my friends forgotten this day, it's not fair!

"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: Susan walked up to her front door and went inside. Her house was dark and empty. Suddenly the lights flickered on and she heard screams from all of her friends.

"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: Happy Birthday, all Susan's friends yelled. Susan was so excited and surprised. This was the best birthday ever!

Fiction
The First Day of First Grade

Read: There she was. I was finally going to meet her.

"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: I thought about this day for months. She didn't look anything like I expected. She had dark hair and squinty eyes.

"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: As I looked up at her from my seat it seemed like her face was far away. Her nose seemed long and pointy. My tummy was starting to feel upset.

"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: She was dressed in a long black skirt and black high heeled shoes with pointy toes. Now, my tummy was feeling worse.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Non-Fiction
Basketball

Read: Boys and girls can all play this popular game.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: It can be played during any month of the year. It can be played indoor or outdoor.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: It takes a lot of practice to be very good at this game. You can watch it on television, in a gym, or play it in your driveway.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: Many players are on each team, but only five can play at one time. Whichever team has the most points at the end of the game is the winner.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: Players use many strategies and plays to try and score.

"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: After five fouls players are not able to play anymore.
"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: The players try and score by putting an orange ball in a basket.
"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: Basketball is a fun and exciting game which, is played and enjoyed by many kids, teenagers, and adults.

Wind
Non-Fiction

Read: You can't see it but you can see what it does. It can do many things.
"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: It can be gentle or violent.
"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"
Answer:

Read: It's a powerful force that can damage and destroy things or it can be a source of fun.
"What do you think this is about?"
Answer:
"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: People often depend on it for their enjoyment. It can help people and some animals move from one place to another.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: New plants are helped to grow because it scatters seeds and pollen across the land.

"What do you think this is about?"

Answer:

"What clues make you think that?"

Answer:

Read: It's energy. Its power has been used for hundreds of works.