Semantic Context Cues

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Definition

Semantic Context Cues – evidence from the general sense or meaning of a written or spoken communication that aids in the identification of an unknown word (book). There are a total of five different semantic context clues – definition clue, appositive clue, comparison clue, contrast clue, and common expression clue.

Semantic Context Clues – refers to the meaning of language – the words and parts of words that convey meaning as well as the way sentences, paragraphs, and whole text are interpreted by listeners and readers.

Special Note: There is some controversy regarding the appropriateness of specifically teaching context cueing systems. See Reutzel and Cooter, p. 235 and p. 249 for some information regarding this debate. Although they maintain the utility of use of context cues as a strategy for reading, they also caution that teaching cues can become an end for students rather than a means for helping them read.
Assessment Tool Listing Page

1. Individually administered device for assessing competency in identifying words in isolation and in context

2. Checklist in word identification techniques

Note that running records and Cloze passages (described in the syntactic cue section) are excellent assessments for semantic cues also!
Informal Assessment #1

Individually administered device for assessing competency in identifying words in isolation and in context

This worksheet is an individually administered device to assess a student’s ability to identify a list of words, administered without any context, and the same words presented in the context of a sentence. The list of words should be sufficiently difficult that the student would be expected to miss a substantial number of words when presented in isolation. The context hints could use a variety of semantic cues, such as definition, appositive, comparison, and contrast cues. A student who can successfully apply knowledge of semantic cueing systems would be expected to identify more words presented in context than in isolation. The following is an example of this technique at approximately a fifth-grade level. (Miller, 1993, p.169)

Pronounce each of these words out loud
1. compass
2. indicate
3. ferry
4. prey
5. clench
6. petunia
7. release
8. prowl
9. solution
10. skeleton
11. phantom
12. aisle
13. glacier
14. oxygen
15. international
16. prairie
17. knowledge
18. delicate
19. adopt
20. capable
21. enormous
22. coax
23. jog
24. perch
25. urgent

Words in context
Read each of these sentences out loud trying to pronounce each of the underlined words correctly.

1. A **compass** can be very useful in the forest in case a person becomes lost.
2. My teacher did not **indicate** whether I did well on the arithmetic test that I took last week.
3. A **ferry** is a boat that carries people, animals, or goods back and forth, from one landing place to another.
4. Mice and birds often are **prey** of cats.
5. I should not try to **clench** my teeth when I become really angry.
6. A **petunia** is a very small, beautiful flower.
7. Unfortunately, I was not able to **release** the rabbit from its cruel trap.
8. A fox must **prowl** around to search for food.
9. Before you try to solve an arithmetic problem, you should try to estimate the solution.
10. A few children like to portray a **skeleton** for Halloween.
11. A **phantom** is a dim or shadowy appearance that may frighten a person.
12. The bride and her father walked down the **aisle** before the wedding.
13. I will be able to see a huge **glacier** when I travel to Alaska next summer.
14. A person needs to breathe **oxygen** in order to survive.
15. The word **international** can be defined as having to do with more than one country.
16. The **prairie** in our country had tall grass and few trees.
17. Although Maria’s parents speak Spanish very well, she has no knowledge of it at all.
18. Pink is a pretty, **delicate** color.
19. Sandy would very much like to adopt a golden retriever puppy.
20. I think my mother is a **capable**, efficient person.
21. A whale is an **enormous** sea mammal.
22. Jay could not **coax** his father into taking him along on a trip to Walt Disney World.
23. Since I hurt my knee, I cannot **jog** anymore.
24. An owl will never fall off its **perch** in a tree.
25. My father received an **urgent** telegram from my older sister in the Marines.
Informal Assessment #2

Checklist in word identification techniques

This assessment is simply a checklist for teachers to complete based on their observations of a student’s oral reading. It is a systematic method of structuring teacher observations in assessing use of semantic cues (and other reading skills). Presented in Miller (1993), there are several versions of this checklist based on the age of the child, for first, second, third, and intermediate-grade level. The checklist can be modified or specific sections selected based on the skill in question. The following is an excerpt of this checklist from the second-grade level.

**Semantic Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substitutes words for unknown words</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that make sense in sentence and that are grammatically correct while reading silently and orally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can pronounce words correctly in context that cannot be pronounced correctly in word lists</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is able to complete about 80% or more of deleted words correctly or with an appropriate synonym from a cloze procedure provided with graphophonic clues at second grade reading level</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is able to complete a semantic analysis inventory correctly at the second-reader level, such as the following: Barry saw a mother d_______ with twin fawns crossing the road one summer day. draw  deer   duck</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seems to use semantic cues when meeting an unknown word while reading.

Recommendations/Instructional Strategies

1) Contextual Redefinition

This activity occurs mainly at the chalkboard or overhead. The first step involves selecting five or six terms unfamiliar to most of the class. Introduce the words by writing them on the chalkboard, and asking students to predict definitions for the words. The idea of the predictions is for the students to generate logical possibilities without worrying about being right. The teacher should then explain why the students were unable to do much more than guess at the word’s meaning when presented in isolation. Then, the teacher should give the students the same words presented in sentences or paragraphs, encouraging them to read the passage and see if their definitions need revising. The word should be presented in a contextually rich sentence. Record the students’ various revised suggestions. If they do not agree on a definition, have the students find a definition in a glossary or dictionary. This allows students to exercise using context cues and gives the teacher an opportunity to pretest each term to be used in subsequent lessons. The teacher should emphasize that the context cues should usually be the first tool used to understand new words rather than a dictionary or glossary.


2) Fill in the blanks

The teacher presents a number of sentences to the class on a chalkboard or transparency. Each sentence should have an omitted word that could be replaced with a number of reasonable alternatives. The teacher should have a child read the sentence out
loud completing it with one option, while the other children in the group suggest alternatives. This strategy is basically a short variation of the cloze procedure. These are examples provided in Miller 1993 (p. 322):

I would like to receive a ____________ for my birthday.
My favorite food is ____________.
My mother’s favorite color is ____________.
I would like to play ____________ after school today.


3) Crossword Puzzles

The teacher can help students learn semantic cueing systems by presenting them with simple crossword puzzles. The clues should be presented as sentences that contain a blank and a context cue. The teacher has the option to present the omitted words in a list or let students try to use only the context cue. The letters filled in on the puzzle can serve as graphophonic cues for students as well as the semantic cues provided in the puzzle clues.


4) Analogies

A useful strategy that can be used in intermediate grades is teaching and using analogies. Analogies require students to extract semantic information from a group of words to complete the analogy. This gives students practice in the kind of processing that
is required when using comparison and contrast semantic cues. Here are some examples as provided in Miller 1993 (p. 324).

- Pride: lion  gaggle: _______
- Men are to women as boys are to _________.


5) Listen for miscues

Children can be helped to learn cueing systems by teaching them to detect when miscues occur in a reading. Teachers present them with a passage read orally or tape-recorded in which there is a semantic miscue. Students should identify when a miscue occurs and state why it was inappropriate. They should then be able to identify the correct word. This strategy can be adapted when taking a running record for a student. Following a student’s completion of a passage, the teacher can test the limits by reading to the child a sentence with an uncorrected, semantically incorrect error as the child read it to the examiner. The child should then explain why the word did not make sense in the context of the sentence, and the teacher should demonstrate use of semantic cues in the sentence that could have helped the child correctly identify the word.
