Context clues

Schatz, Elinore K., & Baldwin, R. Scott (1986). Context Clues are Unreliable Predictors of Word

These experiments were done to help the researchers and educators decide whether context clues help students with defining words. The two researchers were Elinore Kress Schatz and R. Scott Baldwin. Schatz is from the Greater Miami Hebrew Academy and R. Scott Baldwin was a former English teacher who became a professor of Teaching and Learning at the University of Miami. He is currently the Dean of Edinboro University's school of Graduate studies and research (http://www. edinboro. edu/departments/university_comm/President/pec-members/baldwin. dot).

There were three different experiments done during this particular study. In the first experiment, there were 53 tenth graders and 48 eleventh graders from a private school in Fort Lauderdale, Florida who were tested. The demographics of the school consisted of students from a middle class background who were mainly Caucasian. Before the testing began, researchers tested a group of college bound tenth graders to see if they knew the meanings of the words that were going to be used on the test. If 65% or more of those students knew the meaning a word, then the word was thrown out because the researchers saw this as the students' prior knowledge.

The students were given two tests with one test having the words-in-context and the other with the words used in isolation. The researchers did the two tests to determine which method helps the students more. The words- in-context came from twenty-five paragraphs from novels used at this school for the tenth and the eleventh grade students. Some examples of those

books include The Scarlet Letter and The Pearl. Paragraphs were chosen by their location in the book and by determining which words were low frequency words. Some examples of those words include imperious and inexorable. The words- in -context test was set up like a multiple choice test with a paragraph using the word and the students would have to identify which option shows how the word was used. The words in isolation test were a multiple choice vocabulary test. The students were then randomly assigned tests. The words in isolation testing took around ten to fifteen minutes to complete and the words-in-context testing took around thirty to forty minutes to complete. The results showed that " there was no statistically significant difference between the means of the no-context group (M= 9. 14, SD= 2. 08) and the context group (M= 8. 76, SD= 3. 72)" (Schatz & Baldwin 443).

These results were then tested in the second experiment to see if the results were accurate or based on the type of literary work. In the second experiment, there were 39 eleventh graders from a private school in Miami, Florida who were tested. The demographics of the school was the same as the previous school with most students being middle class. There were two tests once again but this time the words in the passages were from the four content areas. The mediums used included science textbooks (biology and physics), novel passages (same novels as other test), history textbooks, and magazines (Schatz & Baldwin 444). Both tests had the same words on them but one used the words- in-context and the other test had them in isolation. All students took the words in isolation test first. The students finished the first test in 45 minutes and the words-in-context testing took two days to

complete. The results of this test indicate that there was no real significant change whether the words were in isolation or in-context.

In the third experiment, the researchers used 84 tenth and eleventh graders from a private Hebrew school in Florida. The materials were the same as the first experiment except that the tests were not multiple choice anymore. The students had to write out the meaning of the words. The two researchers then graded the papers not knowing whether the one they were grading was the test with the words- in-context or the words in isolation. They determined that multiple choice testing did not hurt the testing.

The overall conclusion they came up with it that teachers need to look at a better way to help students understand the meanings of words.