



THE ROLE OF GIVEN INFORMATION ON THE SPEED OF THE COMPREHENSION OF CONTEXT AND NON-CONTEXT BASED INFORMATION IN EFL LEARNERS

Lida Ketabi* & Saeed Ketabi**

Abstract

The significance of comprehension in the process of second language learning/ acquisition seems to be admitted in almost all current theories. The present research studies the impact of given information on comprehension, suggesting its important role in sentence understanding. In order to achieve this goal, a group of 80 Persian-speaking university learners of English (as a foreign language) were selected. 'Direct Antecedent' pairs sentences and 'Indirect Antecedent' pairs sentences were used in two lists, each containing 20 sentences - 10 Direct and 10 Indirect Antecedent pairs. The subjects were divided randomly into two groups of 40. Each group was presented with one list. For presenting the sentences, a computer program was used. In order to investigate the effect of each presentation, through using the computer, we measured the taken time for comprehending the pairs. The analysis of data suggests that the presence of given information has a powerful effect on subjects' faster comprehension of new information.

Key words: Given information, new information, context, reading comprehension, Persian learners of English

Özet

Kavramanın ikinci dil öğrenimi ve edinimi sürecindeki önemi neredeyse tüm güncel kuramlarda Kabul edilmiştir. Bu araştırma, eski bilginin kavrama üzerindeki etkisini cümleleri anlama üzerindeki önemli rolünü vurgulayarak sunmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, ana dili Farsça olan 80 İngilizce (yabancı dil olarak) öğrencisi seçilmiştir. Her biri 20 tane cümle içeren (10 öncül ve 10 dolaylı öncül) iki liste kullanılmıştır. Öğrenciler kırkar kişilik rastgele seçilmiş iki gruba ayrılmıştır. Her bir gruba birer liste gösterilmiştir, ve cümleleri gösterilen bir bilgisayar program kullanılmıştır. Her birinin etkisini sorgulayabilmek için, bilgisayar vasıtası ile cümle ikililerinin kavranma zamanı ölçülmüştür. Veri çözümü göstermektedir ki verilmiş bilginin varlığı, yeni bilginin daha hızlı kavranmasında güçlü bir etkiye sahiptir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Verilmiş bilgi, yeni bilgi, bağlam, okuduğunu kavrama, ana dili Farsça olan İngilizce öğrencileri

1. INTRODUCTION

In the literature, "new and given" commonly are referred to as: new-old, rhyme-theme, focus-presupposition, comment-topic and context independent-context dependent – all of them refer to new and given, respectively. The concepts of old and new information explain such phenomena in language like word order, the use of anaphoric devices, intonation and stress. Halliday (1985) first indicated the ideas of new-given in a linguistic journal. In his primary definition, given information was a concept that was either previously mentioned, i.e. contextually given, or physically present at the time of the discourse. New information is logically everything else. In the given-new strategy, given information refers to information the listener/reader has already available in memory, conceivably facts that have just been mentioned. If the necessary facts have not been stated or have

* Instructor, Islamic Azad University, Bardsir Branch, Bardsir, Iran, lyddaketabi@yahoo.com

** Assistant Professor, Department of English and Literature, University of Isfahan

been stated too long ago, then integration by the given-new strategy must become more difficult. To demonstrate this, Carpenter and Just (1980), Halliday and Hasan (1985), Kintsch, (1998), Welts (2002), Ouafeu (2007), JIA Li-ping (2007) and many other researchers conducted different studies in different places with a variety of subjects. The purpose of the present study is to experimentally investigate the role of given information, mentioned in the context, in the comprehension of new information by Persian EFL learners.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Subjects

80 subjects were selected from among 200 female and male students of English as a foreign language, whose scores on the MELAB test were between 1 and 2 standard deviations above the mean. They were selected in such a way that they did not differ in terms of general language ability. The number of the students was sufficient to permit statistical analysis.

2.2. Materials

40 context-target pairs sentences, 20 direct antecedent pairs and 20 indirect antecedent pairs, were improved. Each direct antecedent pair was matched with an indirect antecedent pair containing the same target sentence and a slightly changed context sentence. These context-target pairs were made up to be as natural as possible, and they covered a large number of different topics. The 40 pairs were then divided up into two lists of 20 pairs. Each list included both Direct and Indirect Antecedent pairs, with the constraint that if a Direct Antecedent pair occurred on one list, its matched Indirect Antecedent pair occurred on the other. The Split-half method was used for dividing the sentences into two equal halves. Half of the subjects were presented with one list, and the rest with the second list. It was therefore possible to compare the comprehension time of the same sentence in both a Direct Antecedent and Indirect Antecedent context.

2.3. Procedure

To present the sentences, a computer-based program was used and the context and target sentences were presented sequentially. First, the subjects were asked to click the *start* button to see the context sentence, and then they were asked to click the *next* button when they felt that they had fully comprehended it. On clicking the button, the context sentence disappeared and the target sentence appeared and the timer of the computer started to measure the taken time for comprehending this sentence (the target sentence). In this stage, the subjects were asked to click the *next* button immediately when they felt they had fully comprehended the sentence, and so the timer stopped measuring. On clicking this button, the target sentence disappeared and three true/false sentences on each pair appeared. The subjects were asked to answer them, considering the context and the target sentences and on the basis of their comprehension. In addition, the subjects were asked to produce orally what they understood from the sentences and at the end of each project, they were interviewed.

A pilot study was carried out to identify the possible problems in conducting the experiment and necessary modifications. The examples are given below in order to give some idea of how the materials actually looked like:

Each Direct Antecedent pairs, such as:

- *We got some beer out of the trunk. The beer was warm.*
- *The beer was in the trunk.*
- *The beer in the trunk was cold enough.*
- *Some beer was taken out of the trunk.*

Each Indirect Antecedent pairs, such as:

- *We checked the picnic supplies. The beer was warm.*
- *The beer was in the picnic supplies.*
- *The beer in the picnic supplies was warm.*
- *The picnic supplies contained some cool beer.*

A statistical analysis (t-test) was conducted to compare means obtained from Direct and Indirect Antecedent pair sentences.

3. RESULTS

Means and standard errors of M (T/S) for both Direct Antecedent pair sentences and Indirect Antecedent pair sentences were calculated as presented in Table 1.

Table.1. Means and standard errors of Direct and Indirect Antecedent pair sentences

Presentation	Number of observation	Mean	Standard error
D.A.P ¹	80	6.93	0.15
I.A.P ²	80	9.55	0.27

¹ Direct Antecedent pairs

² Indirect Antecedent pairs

Statistical analysis (t-test) indicated that the mean of Indirect Antecedent pairs was significantly higher ($P < 0.01$) than that of Direct Antecedent pairs. It means that the null hypothesis was rejected and according to the result, the target sentences showed a tendency to be comprehended better and faster by participants when the related information is present in the context sentences but for Indirect Antecedent pairs such a tendency was not evident. This outcome confirmed the result obtained from the subject's oral production.

4. DISCUSSION

As Dooling and Christiaansen (1977) have concluded, there exist several different levels of comprehension. At a shallow level, people may judge how comprehensible a sentence is without really comprehending it fully. At a deeper level they may comprehend a sentence without relating it to context and at a deeper level they comprehend sentences with considering the context. Clearly, the interest here was in the deepest level. In this study the assumption is that most subjects were indeed using this criterion for their judgments on all sentences. If they had used either of the first two criteria, there should have been no significant differences between conditions. Therefore the differences found must be assigned to the subject comprehending the sentences at the deepest level.

In our study, we assume that subjects will consider the first sentence of such a pair as completely new and set up a separate structure in memory. But for processing the second, they will try to comprehend it with considering the information contained in the first. Therefore they will take the old information of the second and try to find a matching antecedent in the information mentioned in the first. If the antecedent is available directly, then the subjects will comprehend the second (target) sentence quickly; if not, they need more time, since they must construct a bridging structure. Consistent with the predictions, this experiment showed that comprehension of a sentence containing a definite noun phrase took less time when the context sentence had explicitly posited the existence of the definite noun phrase than when it had not. So the findings in this study suggested that the answer to the research question is "yes". The presence of given information mentioned in the context sentence has an important role in the speed of the comprehension of new information.

These findings are in agreement with what Clark and Haviland (1977) with respect to the effect of given information in the comprehension of new information in the English native speakers. Also an approach compatible with our result is what Sanford and Garrod (1981) proposed about given status. Given-New Strategy and its possible operation in SLA may be of some interest to language teachers. As this strategy is considered to be available and operational in second language acquisition, teachers do not need to be worried about learner's comprehension. Providing the learners with given

information is a good way to get them ready to read new information. It seems that supplying students with strategies to activate their prior knowledge or to build one is supported by the current research and this can be one way teachers can have a positive influence on comprehension in their classrooms. This research like any other research is not complete in itself. Further SLA research is needed to confirm/disconfirm the findings of this research and to examine the applicability of the methodology employed here to other contexts of language use.

REFERENCES

- Carpenter, P. A., & Just, M. A. (1980). A theory of reading – from eye fixation to comprehension. *Psychological Review*, 87, 329-354.
- Clark, H. H., & Haviland, S. E. (1977). Comprehension and the given-new contract. In R.O.Freedle (Ed.), *Discourse production and comprehension* (pp. 1-40). Norwood: Ablex.
- Dooling, D., & Christiaansen, R. (1977). Episodic and semantic aspects of memory for prose. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*, 3, 428-436.
- Haliday, M. A. K. (1985). *The linguistic sciences and language teaching*. London: Longman.
- Haliday, M. A. K. & Hasan, R. (1985). *Language, text and context*. Geelaond, Vic.: Deakin University Press.
- Jia, L. P. (2007). The given-new distinction and cognitive reading. *US-China Foreign Language*, 5, 58-61.
- Kintsch, W. (1998). *Comprehension: A paradigm for cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Ouafeu, Y. T. S. (2007). Intonational marking of new and given information in Cameroon English. *Journal of English World-Wide*, 28, 187-199.
- Sanford, A. J., & Garrod, S. C. (1981). *Understanding written language: Explorations of comprehension beyond the sentence*. New York: Wiley.
- Welts, D. R. (2002). *The new/given index: A measure to explore, evaluate, and monitor Discourse in educational conferencing applications*. University of Massachusetts Amherst.