

## **Decoding meaning in reading comprehension module/ EFL classes: Factors that cause difficulties and strategies that fulfill the purpose.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study is titled “Decoding the meaning in reading comprehension module/ EFL classes: Factors that cause difficulties and strategies that fulfill the purpose”. Although students may know the denotative meaning of all words and phrases within a sentence or a passage, they fail in catching the right interpretation of them. Therefore, this study aims at considering the problems that are associated with the decoding process of meaning, and recommending the strategies that help in deriving the accurate meaning of words and larger units in texts. Decoding meaning of words, and deriving the accurate theme of larger units in texts are very challenging tasks, especially for EFL learners. These challenges in Reading Comprehension module can be noticeably observed in EFL classes. To address this problem, this study considers the difficulties that EFL students face, and examines the factors that cause failure in decoding the accurate meaning. As a consequence, the indicated factors can function as a basis to recommend the most manipulated strategies that can contribute in the process of decoding meaning. This study will be a significant endeavor in developing the English language learners' reading comprehension skill in a way that can help both EFL teachers and students to get familiar with the factors that impede the process of decoding meaning, and gain insight into the strategies that engage in that process.

**Keywords:** Decoding Meaning, Decoding Strategies, Early experience strategy, Word Recognition strategy.

### **1. Introduction**

It is evident for language instructors that EFL learners' problem is most likely associated with their failure in indicating the contextual meaning of the lexical words although they know the denotative meaning(s) of the concerned words. Almost all the studies that examine the contextual meaning of words and larger units of text, such as Brown and Yule (1983); Shankweiler (1989); Lin (2002); and Hadley (2003) agree that deriving the actual meaning of the lexical words, sentences and the larger units of statements is a challenging process,

especially for learners in EFL classes, because they may fail in determining the precise meaning of words and sentences. As a consequence, they cannot understand what does the sentence mean and/or what is the passage about. Thus, decoding meaning is regarded as one of the most problematic issue in teaching Reading Comprehension Model.

Decoding is a very comprehensive word which may result in a kind of misunderstanding in terms of meaning and use. The academic studies, and the resources that have been consulted in this study have used the notion of decoding to stand for word recognition, word identification, and word interpretation. Although, to a different degree, all the above mentioned terms deal with the meaning of words, the notion of decoding is the most accurate one because it can represent both word recognition, and the meaning of word and larger linguistic units.

Precisely, there is no consensus among the linguists concerning the definition of decoding, because this term has been defined from different perspectives. For instance, Carreker (2011: 3) defines decoding as "the ability to recognize words in print without conscious effort". Carreker only concentrates on the form of the words as a symbol that represents a particular meaning in a way that she has ignored all the aspects that contribute in the process of decoding the accurate meaning of words. Moreover, Scarborough (2001) Snowling (2002), and Nation (2005) mainly associate the notion of decoding with reading performance accuracy, and pay less attention to the meaning derivation. However, correlation between meaning and decoding has been comprehensively considered in the works by Shankweiler. According to Shankweiler (1989: 38), decoding is the process of interpreting the meaning of the words, phrases and statements that the writer of a passage intends to convey. Shankweiler adds that "comprehending the meaning of sentences and the larger units of text depends on correct comprehension of the individual words" (Ibid). Although word recognition is essential to understand the meaning of a word, a sentence and a larger linguistic unit, it does not always work. In order to have the right interpretation of words, and be able to comprehend the actual meaning of the concerned sentences and texts, EFL students should first make distinction between the denotative meaning and the connotative meaning of words. Denotation is defined as the dictionary meaning of the word that shows the relationship between "a linguistic unit (especially a lexical item) and the non-linguistic entities to which it refers" (Crystal, 2003: 129). Whereas connotation is defined as a type of lexical meaning in which "its main application is with reference to the emotional associations (personal or communal) which are suggested by, or are part of the meaning of, a linguistic unit, especially a lexical item" (Ibid: 97). Precisely, the accuracy in decoding the meaning of words requires some information about the word such as, the linguistic correlation, the context and/or the personal skills and experience.

This study is designed to figure out the factors that prevent EFL learners in catching the intended meanings of sentences and texts on the one hand, and to determine the strategies that can orient EFL students in this process. Moreover, this study also helps EFL instructors who teach Reading Comprehension Module get a deep insight into the nature of problems, and be familiar with the implementation of the strategies in the process of decoding meaning as a consequence, they know how to manage such a kind of class well.

## **2. Strategies for decoding meaning**

There are many strategies that can be engaged in the process of determining the right intended meaning of words. However, this study considers three essential strategies in connection to decoding the meaning of words which are word recognition strategy, linguistic strategy, and contextual strategy. In addition to these strategies, early knowledge and skills strikingly contribute in the decoding process of meaning. Sometimes, EFL students need to consider all these strategies and contributions at a time to determine the meaning of words or larger units of context, whereas sometimes one of the aforementioned strategies can fulfill this purpose. This study basically examines all these strategies in terms of their degree of use by the students, and their significances, and ignorance consequences in meaning derivation.

### **2.1. Word recognition strategy**

The first attempt towards decoding the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, and/or larger contexts is word recognition. According to Harris & Hodges (1995: 283), word recognition is "the process of determining the pronunciation and some degree of meaning of a word in written or printed form." It is very common that the first attempt of EFL students starts with recognizing the form and the pronunciation of a word in order to catch its meaning.

Indeed, word recognition is not always helpful to decode the accurate meaning of a word, as Nagy (1998:7) states that the "lack of adequate vocabulary knowledge is already an obvious and serious obstacle for many students". The first step to derive accurate meaning of the words and/or larger units starts with the recognition of the form, denotative meaning and position of the words. Although the form and the position of words in context sometimes help to determine the meaning of words, these contributions do not always bring about accurate meaning.

Moreover, for Aarnoutse et al. (2001: 63), "vocabulary refers to the knowledge of lexical meanings of words and the concepts connected to these meanings". The notion of knowledge that is given in his definition to vocabulary is a very comprehensive word. Knowledge involves

information about the form, the function, the part of speech, the denotative meaning of the words, and the position of the word, as well as the impact of linguistic and contextual factors. Here, at the level of word recognition, the form, the denotative meaning, and the parts of the speech of the words are considered. For instance, the common meaning of the word court is a (tribunal presided over by a judge, judges, or a magistrate in civil and criminal cases), where it can be used in different contexts to stand for different meanings such as, playground, session, large building, and some others. Moreover, the word court has both the verb and the noun form. Thus, the accurate meaning of the word court cannot be achieved by word recognition strategy. This diversity in the meaning of the same word cause confusion to the EFL students.

Another problem that faces EFL students in the process of word recognition is associated with confusable words and expressions. According to Swan, Michael (2005), confusable words such as, altogether and all together; beat and win; beside and besides; born and borne; fit and suit; principal and principle, and many more other pair of words cause confusion in the process of reading comprehension. For instance, all the dictionaries states that altogether means "completely" or "considering everything" (see example 1), whereas all together means "everyone" or "everything" (see example 2).

(1) His new apartment is not altogether finished.

(2) They went to the party all together.

Although word recognition sometimes helps the EFL student to identify the meaning of words, the process of word recognition by itself is a big challenge. Thus, a part from all the problems that are associated with the word recognition, still students may fail in identifying the precise meaning of words.

### **3.2. Linguistic approach**

It is evident that the elements and components of phrases, sentences and texts should be linguistically organized to fulfill their function, because having the right grammatical formulae is an inevitable condition to bring about meaningful sentences. Simultaneously, any failure in determining the grammatical functions and forms of the elements of sentences causes failure in the process of decoding the meaning. Therefore, linguistic elements and the nature of relationship among them play a great role in the process of meaning decoding.

The recognition of words in terms of their linguistic functions sometimes can help to catch their accurate meaning. For instance, the position of the word friendly in the sentences (3.a, and 3.b), affects the function and the meaning of it. The word friendly in (3.a) functions as an adjective to present that friendliness is one of the characteristics that Sara is recognized

by, whereas the word friendly in (3.b) functions as an adverb to describe how Sara behaved in a particular context.

3. a. Sara is friendly

3. b. Sara behaved friendly

The structure of English sentences is sometimes so complex that even EFL language teachers face difficulty in determining the precise meaning of such kind of sentences. For example, the sentence (number 4) that is taken from a passage titled "Thames waters" by Roger Pilkington in a second year module book "fluency in English" demonstrates how difficult is that sentence to comprehend, especially for EFL students.

*1- That this has not happened may be the fault of the university, for at both Oxford and Cambridge the colleges tend to live in an era which is certainly not of the twentieth century, and upon a planet which bears little resemblance to the war-torn Earth.*

In order to comprehend complex sentences, EFL students should first get familiar with the issues that make sentences complex, because students cannot understand the precise meaning of words, phrases, and larger units unless they recognize the elements and the factors that result in such complexity. According to Scott and Balthazar (2013), noun phrase expansion, subordinated clause embedment, movements, ellipsis, and many other issues are behind complexity.

*(5) The tall girl standing in the corner who became angry because you knocked over her glass after you waved to her when you entered is Mary Smith.* (Quirk et al., 1985: 1238)

*(6) The suspect admits stealing a car from a garage, but he cannot remember which.* (Ibid, 885)

EFL students definitely face difficulties in highlighting the noun phrases, the clauses, the types of clauses, the subject, the main verb, the object, and the other elements in independent clause and in subordinate clause(s) as in the example (5). This ignorance to the function and the form of these elements in that sentence prevents the students from understanding it. Due to the elliptical process, the example (6) becomes an ambiguous sentence, because what is elliptic after the word "which", at the end of the sentence, is confusing in a way that the word which can mean (which car) or (which garage). In such cases, drawing on a sentence out of the context can cause misapprehension. In other words, even if an EFL student recognizes the meaning and the form of all elements in that sentence, and also s/he is fully aware that there are elliptic words in it stills/he cannot make the right interpretation of the sentence.

### **3.3. Contextual approach**

Context is one of the most essential strategies that contribute in the process of decoding the precise meaning of words and larger linguistic units in texts. The other aforementioned strategies sometimes fail to provide the accurate interpretation of text and language components; therefore it is the context that can be depended on to fulfill the purpose.

Context is defined as "a frame that surrounds the event being examined and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation" (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992: 3). The notion of context is a very comprehensive word that covers all the aspects that engage in the process of decoding meaning. According to Hymes, 1967, cited by Lindstorm (1992: 103), "context is often further sorted and broken down into various component elements such as settings, scenes, participants, ends, topic, tones, channels, codes, norms, genres, and so on". Although contextual components of spoken language differ from those of texts, the elements that are recommended by Hymes represent all the issues that affect the meaning in texts. However, this study focuses on identifying the contextual elements that exclusively affect texts in general, and reading comprehension texts in particular. These contextual components are the setting, the topic, the linguistic aspects, genres, cultural background of the writer, and cultural background and experience of the readers. All these aspects at a time or separately affect the comprehending effort of the EFL learners to a particular word, sentence or text.

Basically, there is always a noticeable interrelation between text and context as it is stated by Lindstorm (1992: 102) that "if context informs the text, so can a text inform its context". This statement clearly shows the process of text composition and its elements interpretation. The original function and the authentic uses of car horn sound as a very simple example to support that statement. Car horn sound is originated to be used by driver as a means of warning passersby, whereas on the ground it is used to mean high, open the way, come on, fuck, and many more meanings. This means that the same car horn sound in different contexts and settings can have different meanings. The meaning of words and the larger linguistic units is just like the meaning of the car horn sound that cannot be precisely interpreted unless the reader observes the impact of contextual components. Thus, this study examines the extent to which EFL learners familiar with the contextual impact on the decoding meaning.

### **3. 4. Early Decoding Experience**

Early experience plays a great role in the process of decoding. The significance of the early experience role can be observed in the findings of many studies. It has been approved that



it helps EFL students to have right interpretation of the meaning of words and sentences. As a consequence, it assists to derive the intended meaning of the text as a whole. The notion of the early experience is comprehensive, because it covers both students' early skills and students' early knowledge.

### **3.4.1 Early Decoding Skills**

The students' early skills significantly contribute in the process of decoding the right meaning of words, phrases and sentences. According to Beck and Juel (1995: 10), "early attainment of decoding skill is important because this early skill accurately predicts later skill in reading comprehension". A successful reading comprehension attempt is associated with the EFL students' competence that is built in the previous academic stages. The competence can be achieved through students' constant practice and their familiarity with approaches to reading comprehension.

Wide reading is one of the factors that help EFL students to improve their comprehending skill to words and concepts (Ibid). It helps EFL students to grow in vocabularies and how to catch their meaning in various contexts. According to Pikulski and Templeton (2004: 9), "through wide independent reading, students come in contact with vocabulary that rarely occurs in spoken language but that is much more likely to be encountered in printed language

### **3.4.2 Prior Knowledge**

There are many factors that engage in the process of text interpretation. Lin (2002) and Eskey (1986: 18) believe that readers' prior knowledge plays a crucial role in reading comprehension to bring about a successful interpretation/comprehension process. Eskey (1986: 18) categorizes reading knowledge into 'knowledge of form' and 'knowledge of substance'. The knowledge of form is concerned with the reader's knowledge about the language of the text which embraces the recognition of "graphophonic, lexical, syntactic/semantic and rhetorical patterns of language" (Ibid). Knowledge of substance beholds "cultural, pragmatic and subject-specific information" to fill the readers in with certain expectations about the larger conceptual structure of the text (Ibid). Orasanu (1986: 32) adds that "the knowledge a reader brings to a text is a principal determiner of how that text will be comprehended, and what may be learned and remembered".

Moreover, the "general knowledge about the world underpins our interpretation not only of discourse, but of virtually every aspect of our experience" (Brown and Yule, 1983: 233). General knowledge that the language learners have usually plays a great contribution in the process of decoding the meaning of words, sentences and the larger units of paragraph. For example, before making the last decision concerning conducting this study we ( the

researchers of this study) decided to attend two different EFL classes and asked the attended students about the meaning of the 'court' in this sentence 'there was a struggle between the court and the peasants', some of the students directly gave the most common denotative meaning of the word court which is 'an authority having power to adjudicate in civil and criminal matters', due to their ignorance to the rest denotative meaning of that word, and their restricted general knowledge about the problem between monarchical authorities and peasants about land ownership in the past, whereas some other students were fully aware that the word 'court' in the above mentioned sentence does not stand for its most common meaning 'an authority having power to adjudicate in civil and criminal matters'; however, they failed derive the accurate meaning of 'court' in this sentence. This ensured us that the experience, prior general knowledge highly contributes in the process of meaning decoding.

#### **4. The Methodology**

The current paper aims at exploring students' ability to guess the correct meaning of words and larger linguistic units in reading comprehension module. To fulfill this aim, this study diagnoses the factors that prevent the students from deriving the accurate meaning of words, phrases and as a consequence the concerned text on the one hand, and recommends the strategies that contribute in the process of meaning decoding. Therefore, this study works on two research questions which are: determining the factors that cause misinterpretation, and identifying the strategies that can help students to bring about accurate interpretations. In order to find answers for the research questions, this paper adopts both quantitative and qualitative studies. For the quantitative study a reading comprehension test was conducted, and for the qualitative study some of the participants were administered a questionnaire.

##### **4.1. The Participants**

The participants of this study are third year students of English department/Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Koya University in Kurdistan Region-Iraq. Third year students have been taught Reading Comprehension module for two years ( in the first and second year), which means that they are to some extent familiar with the factors and strategies.

Twenty-six students (15 males and 11 females) were tested and answered all the questions. When the students completed the test, they were asked to participate in the second phase which was the questionnaire. Fortunately, they all volunteered to participate in the second phase as well. Then, they are given enough time to answer all the questions.



#### **4.2. The Instruments**

This study uses two different instruments. The first instrument is a reading comprehension test (see appendix 1). To understand the students competence in decoding the meaning of words and larger units in a reading comprehension text the students were tested in. The test consisted of two sections: a reading comprehension passage and three sentences. Several words were bolded in the sentences and in the text; and the students were asked to provide the appropriate meaning of the bolded words. Further, there were other types of reading comprehension test such as multiple choice and pronoun-reference question. The words were formulated in accordance with the strategies and approaches of decoding meaning. The second instrument was a questionnaire (see appendix 2). It consists of two parts: the first part is a closed-ended questionnaire, and the second part is an open-ended questionnaire. The questions are prepared to explore the strategies that the students use to derive the accurate meaning of words. Besides, other questions are designed for the questionnaire to discover the factors that impede the students from decoding the precise meaning of words and larger linguistic units.

#### **5. The results**

After the process of data collection and the data analysis, this study has brought about the results below:

##### **5.1. The test-results: section one**

In this section, the students were asked to provide the accurate synonym or precise explanation of some underlined words in four different sentences. To begin with, the majority of the students (18 out of 26) have provided the correct meaning of the first underlined word (account), whereas the majority of the participants (i.e. 17 out of 26) failed to provide the synonym or the right explanation for the second underlined word (courting). Concerned the third underlined word (book), all the students could give the right synonym or a suitable explanation. Finally, most of the participants (21 out of 26) could accurately guess the meaning of the underlined word (sickle) of the fourth sentence.

##### **5.2. The test-results: section two**

The second section of the test involves a text and three related questions to the text. The first question requests the students to guess the meaning of several underlined words in the text which are offenders, tried, peers, and enshrined. The statistics of the students' responses vary. Firstly, More than half (14 out of 26) could tell the meaning of the first word (offenders), and the third word (peers) while the rest (12 of them - less than half) could not know the precise meaning of these two words. Moreover, among these four words, the

second word (tried) seems to be the easiest to comprehend among the underlined words, whereas the fourth one (enshrined) seems to be the most difficult one to guess its meaning. All the participants correctly provided the meaning of the third word (tried), whereas only (6 out of 26) provided the accurate meaning of the fourth word (enshrined).

In addition, the second question was a reference question. The students were asked to find out a word to which an underlined pronoun (their) refers. Surprisingly, half of the students (13 of them) chose a wrong word or phrase in the text. Finally, the third question asked the students to fill in a blank, in the text, with the most appropriate word (from four given words - a multiple choice question). The majority of the participants (19 of them) were successful in choosing the correct answer. However, seven of them had difficulty in determining the grammatical form of the sentence in which the required word was deliberately removed.

### 5.3. The closed-ended questionnaire-results

After the collection of the respondents' answers in the questionnaire and checking their answers to make sure about the number of the answered questions; fortunately, all the questions have been answered. As mentioned in the methodology, the questionnaire consisted of two parts: a closed-ended questionnaire and an open-ended questionnaire. In the closed-ended questionnaire, the participants' replies to the question items are different. The first item asks the participants about the significance degree of realizing the denotative meaning of words or using dictionary in deriving the accurate meaning of a sentence or a text. The following table shows the results:

**Table 1: Students' responses to question item one**

1. To what extent do you agree with this statement?				
Realizing the denotative meaning of words or using a dictionary is always enough to catch the precise meaning of any sentences or texts.				
1. Totally agree	2. Agree	3. Neutral	4. Disagree	5. Totally disagree
(No one)	(16 students)	(3 students)	(7 students)	(No one)

Table 1 shows that the majority of the participants believe that realizing the denotative meaning of words and using a dictionary is always enough to catch the precise meaning of any sentences or texts, whereas only seven students disagreed with the statement. Unlike to these two groups, there were three students who are not sure about the statement. Additionally, the second question item of this part asks the students about any reasons that helped them to provide an accurate synonym for the given words in the test-section. They had four options to choose. Table 2 better explains their responses:

**Table 2: Students' responses to the question item two**

What helped you in providing a precise synonym/meaning of a word during the test? Circle one (or more) of the following options:	Number of students
I have already known the denotative meaning of the word.	19
The grammatical position and the form of the word helped me to provide each synonym.	13
The context helped me to make that decision.	14
My early experience and cultural background helped me to make that decision.	17

Since the students had the chance to circle more than one option, they mostly chose more than one reason behind their decision in providing the correct synonym/ meaning of a word. As can be seen in Table 2, most of the participants (19 of them) reported that they already knew the denotative meaning of the word. Besides, half of them said that the grammatical position and the form of the word helped them to provide each synonym during the test. Moreover, more than half of the students (14 of them) informed that the context helped them to make that decision.

Furthermore, the majority (17 of them) acknowledged that their early experience and cultural background helped them to make that decision.

#### **5.4 The open-ended questionnaire-results**

The open-ended questionnaire is formulated to determine the students' difficulties while decoding the meaning of a word in a sentence or in a text. Further, it attempted to explore their strategies to overcome any obstacle they confront while decoding the meaning of difficult words or larger linguistic units. Thus, the participants were asked two questions.

The first question asks the students about the difficulties and problems they face in guessing the meaning of words within sentences and texts, whereas the second question asked the participants about their strategies to master the difficulties that they may face in the process of meaning decoding. Despite the fact that some of them had similar difficulties, they sometimes used similar strategies to overcome those difficulties. Thus, their answers revealed some worth mentioning points. Nevertheless, there were students who did not answer these two question items. Table 3 and Table 4 below present a list of difficulties that cause hindrance in deriving the accurate meaning of words and larger linguistic units, and strategies that they made use of them to overcome those difficulties. Similar answers are combined and written together. Further, uncompleted answers and irrelevant parts of

Table 3: Difficulties that the students face while decoding meaning

- Phrasal verbs, collocations, idioms, slang words, literary words, old fashioned words, science-related words are the most challenging ones to determine their meanings.
- The form of the word (especially difficult words) is confusing. If one doesn't know the form of a word, it will be difficult to comprehend its meaning.
- Comprehending a sentence with more than one unfamiliar word is challenging.
- Coming across to a word that is very similar to another word that one already knows. For example, *rogue* and *rouge* in which their spellings are quiet similar.
- English words can stand for many different meanings. When one checks a dictionary for a word meaning, s/he comes across to many different meanings (sometimes more than 15 meanings). So, it is not easy to decide which one to choose.
- Grammatical forms and rules sometimes are problematic, especially exceptions and irregular rules.

Table 3 shows that it is not that much easy to decide the meaning of a word in a sentence or in a text. The students reported several difficulties that challenge them when they try to decode meaning of words.

Table 4: Strategies they use to overcome difficulties in decoding meaning

- Having many different dictionaries will be very helpful. For example, there are useful dictionaries for phrasal verbs, collocations and slangs. However, during exams, dictionaries are not allowed.
- The function, the form and the position of the words, as well as considering the coherence, the cohesion, the anaphora, and grammatical rules and tenses of the text can help in determining the meaning of words or larger linguistic units.
- Driving the precise meaning of a word in a text can be sometimes fulfilled by reading the whole sentence, or even the whole paragraph.
- Recalling the personal experience and the general knowledge are sometimes helpful.

As it is seen in Table 4, the students declared some strategies to overcome those difficulties they face while decoding meaning. These strategies are very helpful for many situations to decode meaning of a word in a sentence or in a text. Sometimes one strategy can fulfill the purpose, whereas sometimes else one can make use of more than one strategy at a time to derive the meaning of a word. However, it does not always work. To illustrate, one of the students said "I use many strategies and I have achieved good results, but my strategies cannot guarantee me for every situation".

## **6. Discussion of the results**

Based on the abovementioned analysis of the collected data, the results of the current study presents some interesting points to be discussed. Since they are the main concern of this study, the factors that cause difficulties in decoding meaning and strategies to overcome those difficulties are discussed and explained a little bit detailed in this section.

The results of the tests show that the participants had difficulties in decoding meaning of a word in a sentence or in a text. As it was expected, they could perform better to guess the

meaning of those words that look more familiar to them. So, word recognition strategy and early decoding experience seem to play a great role in decoding meaning. To illustrate, most of the students were successful in providing the accurate meaning for words like (account, book, tried) whereas most of them failed in decoding the meaning of (enshrined). However, this is not always true. For example, the word (sickle) is a word that may not be familiar enough to the most of the participants, but most of them could easily guess its meaning. How? It can be easily understood how they interpreted the meaning of this word when one has a look at the whole sentence. "In the past, farmers used sickle to harvest and cut wheat, barley, chickpea and some other\ types of corps". The contextual meaning and the linguistic meaning also play a role in decoding meaning of words in texts and sentences.

Moreover, sometimes, general knowledge may negatively affect some students; they may decide on the meaning of a word (because they have seen the word before) without thinking about its linguistic form and/or discourse function. So, another problem that causes misinterpretation or confusion is associated with the ignorance of the role of the context in deducing the meaning of a word. For example, once, the students were asked to replace the word 'courting' by another word or phrase without affecting the meaning in this sentence 'John is courting the blue eyed girl in the class', but the majority of students failed to provide the accurate meaning of it. This example helped to discover that: to understand the meaning of a lexical word or a sentence, students usually either concentrate on the word that they do not know its meaning or directly go to the common denotative meaning of the word, then the sentence, but in fact the students are supposed to go to the sentence first to derive the meaning of the word occurs in. In the other words, students concentrate on the word that do not know it's accurate meaning to understand the sentence rather than concentrating on the rest words of the sentence to infer the meaning of the confusing word.

Furthermore, students sometimes may experience difficulties in pronoun reference. This is another issue that this research wanted to focus on. The findings showed that it is not easy to refer a pronoun to a word or phrase, especially when many different nouns are preceding that pronoun in the same sentence. Further, it sometimes happens that grammatical forms confuse students. In the test, a word was intentionally removed from the text, and the students had to find the correct word among four given words. The grammatical forms of the given words were different (complain, complaint, complains, complaints). To choose the correct option, the students had to first read the sentence and decide what parts of speech should be in that position. Then, they had to decide what grammatical forms should be in



In addition to those factors that are mentioned, the students reported several difficulties in the open-ended questionnaire. Chief among them, they stated that they mostly have difficulty in guessing the meaning of phrasal verbs, collocations, idioms, slangs, literary words, old-fashioned words and science-related words. If you take a word in a phrasal verb or in an idiom, it may have a meaning that is different from its ordinary meaning when it is alone. Further, slangs, old-fashioned words and science-related words are those words that students rarely face in their academic life. So, meanwhile the tests such as TOEFL and IELTS or reading a non-academic text, students often encounter difficulties in decoding meaning of such kind of words. Thus, teachers are encouraged to use authentic materials and help the students to read a lot. Moreover, word formation, grammatical structures, and spelling are other factors that cause troubles for the students to interpret the meaning of a word within a sentence or text. Sometimes, the form of the word or the grammatical form of the word is misleading. Sometimes, spelling leads them to confuse a word with another word which has a similar spelling. For example, the two words a student mentioned "rogue and rouge". Another difficulty can be the situation when more than one unknown word appears within the same sentence. Thus, it will not be that easy to understand the contextual meaning of a word. That is to say, it is not always easy to derive the meaning of a word through the meaning of the whole sentence or text, especially in sentences that beholds several unfamiliar words. Finally, the students revealed another problem while decoding meaning, especially when they check a dictionary for a word. Unlike their native language, there are many words in English language that have many different meanings. So, the decision to choose the most appropriate meaning is not easy.

The findings show that basing on the above mentioned difficulties the students suggest several strategies to overcome the difficulties that they face while decoding meaning. The first recommendation that is made by some of the students is that they need to have many different dictionaries to overcome the aforementioned difficulties. Nowadays, there are many useful dictionaries that include phrasal verbs, collocation, idioms and slangs. Those kinds of dictionaries may ease up the process of decoding meaning; however, this is not always helpful. One possible difficulty of this is –during the tests and exams the students are not allowed to use dictionary. Further, the results indicated that realizing the denotative meaning of a word or using a dictionary is very helpful to understand the precise meaning of a sentence or a text, but not always. Sometimes, even knowing the denotative meaning or dictionary meaning is not enough to decode a meaning. Moreover, to be able to understand the meaning of a word, students need to explore the grammatical form and function of the

be helpful: the form of the word; and the prefix and suffix (if any) of the word may help the students in decoding the meaning.

Additionally, the results of the closed-ended questionnaire showed that the students depend on some strategies and approaches to guess the meaning of an unknown word in a sentence and a text. Some of them are already mentioned in details such as the denotative meaning of the word, the grammatical position, the linguistic aspects, the form of a word, and the contextual meaning of the word. Further, the students' early experience, general knowledge and cultural background are sometimes helpful to decode the meaning of a word.

## **7. Conclusion**

The most concluding points that have been derived throughout conducting this study are:

1. The nature of morphological structure and the irregularity in the word formation are very big challenging for EFL students to recognize and determine the meaning of words in English.
2. Phrasal verbs, collocations, idioms, slang words, literary words, old fashioned words, science-related words are usually confusing in terms of meaning derivation .
3. The complexity of the sentence structure and the state of the text formation in terms of cohesion, coherence, movements, and anaphora are sometimes misleading.
4. Earlier experience is helpful to decode the meaning of a word or larger linguistic units although it sometimes causes misunderstanding for EFL students, especially when the experience is associated with recalling only one meaning out of a larger group of the meanings that a word can stand for.
5. Realizing the denotative meaning of a word is not always helpful to derive the accurate meaning of a word.
6. Although word recognition strategy, linguistic strategy, contextual strategies, and/or earlier experience strategy can sometimes work alone in providing the accurate meaning of a word, it does not always fulfill the purpose unless two or more different strategies are observed at a time.

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## Appendix 1: The Test

### Section One

**Provide either the right synonym or the precise explanation of the underlined words in the sentences below.**

1. John gave us an interesting account of his travel in China.
1. John is courting the blue eyed girl in the class.
2. You can book a room in Sara hotel online.
4. In the past, farmers used sickle to harvest and cut wheat, barley, chickpea and some Other\ types of corps.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Section Two

Read this passage below and answer the questions that follow.

In the small city of Odessa, western Texas, local judicial authorities have reinterpreted the old legal principle that offenders should be tried by a jury of their peers. Odessa's "Teen Court" is one of over a thousand such courts in the USA, where teens themselves are responsible for trying and sentencing teenage offenders. It is worth mentioning that, when Thomas Jefferson and others drew up the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, one of the \_\_\_\_\_ that they made was that the King of England had deprived Americans of their right to trial by jury. Twelve years later, this right was enshrined in Article III of the new Constitution of the United States, where it has remained ever since.

1. Write down the meaning of the underlined words.
2. What does the underlined "their" refer to?
3. Fill in the blank (line 6) with the most appropriate word.  
a. complain    b. complaint    c. complains    d. complaints

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Appendix 2: The questionnaires**

### **The closed-ended questionnaire:**

#### **1. Circle the option that best shows your agreement**

To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Realizing the denotative meaning of words or using a dictionary is always enough to catch the precise meaning of any sentence or text.

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1. Totally agree    2. Agree    3. Neutral    4. Disagree    5. Totally disagree

#### **2. What helped you in providing a precise synonym/meaning of a word during the test?**

**Circle one (or more) of the following options:**

- a. I have already known the denotative meaning of the word.
  - b. The grammatical position and the form of the word helped me to provide each synonym.
  - c. The context helped me to make that decision.
- 
- d. My early experience and cultural background helped me to make that decision.

### **The open-ended questionnaire:**

1- What difficulties and problems do you face in guessing the meaning of words within sentences and texts?

2- What strategies do you use to overcome those difficulties you face while decoding meaning of words?