

## Assessment of Sudanese Secondary Level Students' Comprehensibility of English Sentences Containing Polysemous Words

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### Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to assess the Sudanese secondary level students' comprehensibility of English sentences containing polysemous words. The study adopted the descriptive analytical approach and it was based on the data retrieved from Word Meaning Test. The test carried out on fifty (50) grade three secondary level students whom were randomly selected from two public secondary schools in Khartoum State during the school year 2019-2020. Data collected were quantitatively analyzed; relying on the statistical analysis method. The findings obtained from the study indicated that those students were unable to comprehend the different senses or denotations of polysemous vocabulary they are faced by through texts reading. Drawing on the findings and conclusions, the study has come out of some recommendations, most notably: it is a necessity to show the need for adding words study section at the end of each unit or chapter of the English syllabus with a large set of exercises in order to provide EFL students with an opportunity to learn about semantic features of a wide range of words and this would help in being familiar with the use of these words and their contextual meanings later.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Comprehensibility, Polysemous Words, Containing, Secondary Level

### المستخلص

الغرض الرئيس من هذه الدراسة هو تقييم فهم طلاب المرحلة الثانوية السودانيين للجمل الانجليزية التي تحتوي على كلمات ذات معاني متعددة. اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي، واستندت الي البيانات المستمدة من اختبار معاني الكلمات الذي تم اجراءه علي خمسون (50) طالباً في الصف الثالث الثانوي ليمثلوا عينة الدراسة. وقد تم اختيار هذه العينة عشوائياً من مدرستين ثانويتين حكوميتين في ولاية الخرطوم خلال العام الدراسي 2019-2020. تم تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها كمياً بالاعتماد علي طريقة التحليل الاحصائي. اشارت النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها من الدراسة الي ان هؤلاء الطلاب غير قادرين علي فهم الدلالات المختلفة للمفردات متعددة المعاني التي يواجهونها من خلال قراءة النصوص. اعتماداً علي النتائج والاستنتاجات، خرجت الدراسة بعدد من التوصيات، ابرزها: من الضروري اظهار الحاجة الي اضافة قسم لدراسة الكلمات في نهاية كل وحدة او فصل من منهج اللغة الانجليزية مع مجموعة كبيرة من التمارين المتنوعة من اجل تزويد الطلاب بفرصة للتعرف علي السمات الدلالية لمجموعة واسعة من الكلمات وهذا سيساعد في التعرف علي استخدام هذه الكلمات ومعانيها السياقية لاحقاً.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تقييم ، فهم ، كلمات متعددة المعاني ، يحتوى ، المرحلة الثانوية

### Introduction

In fact, vocabulary learning is a vital part of learning a language. No matter how perfect your grammar is, if you do not have the words to explain yourself and

comprehend others you will not get very far with your language skills. Yet, expending your vocabulary bank is like being in a diet; you need to put effort along the way.



Every learner has to figure out what works from them. As for English vocabulary learning, this specifically requires more time to be mastered thoroughly as it is the most comprehensive and most difficult aspect of the English. Multiple sense English words (polysemy) presents special difficulty for foreign learners since this semantic aspect is a complex lexical phenomenon which stands proof of richness of expression of certain languages where one word can have a number of meanings (Cruse,2000 , Ravin & Leacock 2000) . It is worth noting that, over 40% of English words are polysemous as reported by (Durkin & Manning, 1989).

Different definitions of polysemy have been stated by many scholars in the field and throughout this study some of these definitions will be reviewed in order to adopt an appropriate one for the study. Lyons (1981) defines the term polysemy as a property of single lexemes; where a single lexeme has several distinguishable meanings and these meanings should be synchronically related. Steiner (1975) from his side states that "polysemy means the capacity of the same word to mean different things" As for Harold (2000) "polysemy refers to the fact that a particular lexical item may have multiple meanings". Based on above mentioned, it can be said that the term polysemy refers to the quality of some words that have several related meanings and it is technically defined as a technique of vocabulary acquisition where the primary meaning is extended to receive other senses that are more or less deductible from the primary meaning and relying on the context, students can learn new words otherwise known. A word which has several related meanings or in other words

that they have different meanings deriving from a common origin is thus a polysemous word (polyseme). For instance, the word "head" is a polyseme because it has several related meanings like: 'My *head* hurts!.' He *heads* the news section'. 'We'll *head* them off' at the turning.' These can be compared to homonyms, which are words that have several completely different meanings.

Since the study of polysemy has often been associated with homonymy, it is necessary to draw a clear line between the two terms. Lyons (1995) clarifies the difference between the terms homonymy and polysemy by reporting that "homonymy (whether absolute or partial) is a relation that holds two or more distinct lexemes, polysemy (multiple meaning) is a property of single lexemes". Homonymy is regarded a lexical ambiguity type where the different unrelated meanings share the same orthography and phonology as in the example "*bank*" which means (i) financial institution and (ii) land at the river's edge. A lexicographer would draw two lexical entries for this noun (*bank*<sup>1</sup> , *bank*<sup>2</sup>), as both senses are semantically independent from one another. Polysemy on the other hand, accounts for the ambiguous words that, besides sharing the same orthography and phonology, also share some semantic connection, in other words, whose different senses are semantically related as in the word "head" mentioned before. According to Cruse (2000) different senses of the same word may have either a: linear (vertical) or a non-linear relation. Linear polysemy is found when one polyseme is specialization (hyponym or meronym) of the other, and it occurs as a) auto hyponymy – narrowing down to a sub-type (*dog* in general and *dog* vs.



*bitch*); b) auto meronymy – narrowing down to a sub-part in other words that means the specific sense could be defined as a subpart rather than a subtype of the general sense like the word "table", which could make reference to the whole piece of furniture like *legs, panel, screws ...etc.* and the word *window* with the fixing vs. *window – glass pane*; c) auto super ordination : (use of *man* to denote mankind and the same word as opposed to *women*); and d) auto holonymy : this kind is very difficult to distinguish it from automeronymy like the word *arm* with one of its senses including in the hand as in ( *He lost an arm in the accident*) and the other one not, as in (*scratch in her arm*) . Non-linear polysemy, the original sense of a word is used figuratively to provide a different way of looking at the new subject. Alan Cruse (2000) identifies two types of non-polysemy occurs either as a) metaphor, where there is a resemblance between senses from (a *good position to, what's your position on, have an excellent position, to position yourself...*) or from (*swallowing* (a pill) *to swallowing* (an argument) or b) metonymy, where one sense stands for another (from *hands* (body part) to *hands* (manual laborers) There are several tests for polysemy, but one of them is zeugma: if one word seems to exhibit zeugma when applied in different contexts, it is likely that the contexts bring out different polysemes of the same word. If the two senses of the same do not seem to fit, yet seem related, then it is likely that they are polysemous. The fact that this test again depends on speaker's judgment about relatedness, however means that this test for

polysemy is not infallible, but is rather merely a helpful conceptual aid.

After reviewing the literature related to polysemy, we must mention that, researchers in the field often assume that polysemous vocabulary has the potential to confuse students (e.g. Pearson, Hiebert & Kamil ; 2007) and there were a great deal of investigations have proven this claim . In sum, it can be said that, lexical semantic ambiguity resulting from using polysemes within sentences often impedes EFL students' comprehensibility and their interpretation of the intended meaning concealed beyond these words as referred to by Quioge-Clare (2003) when stating that" something is ambiguous when it can be understood in two or more possible senses or ways. If ambiguity is in a single word, it is called lexical ambiguity". In the context of the study, it should be noted that, this semantic phenomenon is awkward or difficult for a considerable number of Sudanese secondary level students as it has been observed. Therefore the focus of the study was on this problem which regarded as a virgin research area having not almost been addressed before in Sudan.

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research addressing English vocabulary learning especially polysemous words as an area of concern. Most of this work has been conducted in bilingual population, where English is used as a second or a foreign language. This concern for sure goes to prove that polysemy learning regarded as problematic meriting more study and coverage.



In a study conducted by Sulafa (2017), the researcher sought to measure the extent to which Arabic-speaking EFL learners are aware of polysemy in English and the findings obtained from the translation test adopted showing that the participants had little awareness of polysemy in English and their English proficiency level does not play a role in their ability to distinguish between the different meanings of English polysemous words. A similar study about polysemy by Mark (2016), investigated the factors affecting L2 learners' knowledge of polysemous meanings. In that study a test was created in which Arabic learners of English judged whether various meanings of polysemous words used acceptably in sentence length contexts. Analysis of results revealed that two key factors determined learners' responses. First, learners were more likely to respond that a polysemous sense was acceptable if it was more frequently used in English. Second, learners were more likely to judge a polysemous sense as acceptable if it was semantically closer to the core sense. The researcher thought the implications of the study findings should be considered for theories of lexical processing of polysemous words in the classroom. In a third prior study conducted by Xiaoxu & Yougen (2015), the study investigated the word meaning acquisition of polysemous words for English majors, in that study a questionnaire and two meaning tests were utilized for data collection and the findings revealed that the participants at different language proficiency level show similar acquisition effects in primary meaning but different acquisition effects in the extended meanings. Saeed (2014) from his part investigated the problems of recognizing

the suitable polysemous words to produce coherent texts while translating texts from English into Arabic faced by MA students. For data gathering, alongside a translation test the researcher used a questionnaire and the analysis results revealing that the participants faced difficulties in using the suitable equivalent in translating polysemous words. It is clear that all the previous related studies reviewed have proved that polysemy is problematic for EFL/ ESL learners; especially for Arabs. To be more specific about the purpose of the study, two precise objectives were set: (i) to obtain an assessment that provides valid information about the Sudanese secondary level students' comprehensibility of English sentences containing polysemes; and (ii) to recommend practical teaching tips help in developing students' comprehensibility of sentences or texts containing polysemes. In order to realize these objectives the study assumed that EFL students are not aware of the extended meanings of most of polysemous words they come across when reading. Thus, to measure this assumption, a specific question has been put forth for being tested, which is: To what extent are EFL students able to use sentence context to identify the extended meanings for certain words?

### 3- Methodology

#### 3.1 Study Design

Adopting the descriptive analytical method, the study relied on a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collection through the use of primary and secondary data sources such as the assessment test in addition to references and publications have been conducted in the same area.

### 3.2 Data Collection Instrument

The main tool developed to collect data needed was English Word Meaning Test which included six pair sentences well-chosen from Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary – 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. As shown in table (1) below the words: *light*, *face*, *hand*, *high*, *run* and *air* were selected as the test items to assess the participants' polysemy knowledge. Each

one of these words was embedded in two different contexts that gave two different denotations to each word. The reason for selecting these words was because they are familiar and commonly used in their English textbooks but as it has been observed unfortunately most of the students actually do not know the contextual meanings beyond the core senses of these words.

**Table (1): The Contextual Meanings of the Target Polysemes**

Target Polysemes	Contextual Meaning 1	Contextual Meaning 2
<b>Light</b>	Not heavy	Bright
<b>Face</b>	Meet	Front
<b>Hand</b>	Clap	Help
<b>High</b>	Important	Unpleasantly strong smelling
<b>Run</b>	Travel	Manage
<b>Air</b>	Broadcast	Have opinion

### 3.3 Participants

The present study is based on words meaning test which was administered to a sample of fifty (50) grade three secondary level students were whom randomly selected from two public schools in Khartoum state during the school year 2019-2020. These participants seemed to have a satisfactory command of English; especially the diversity and the richness of the reading texts in SPINE 4, 5 & 6 textbooks provide a good chance to assess aspects of students' vocabulary development and their ability to cope with lexical ambiguity.

### 4- Data Analysis and Results

The process of data analysis and discussion was carried out through the Word Meaning Test (WMT) which was purposely designed to test the study hypothesis. From the test statements

contexts, in Arabic the subjects were asked to write down the meaning of the words typed in bold in each pair. Then the data obtained were statistically analysed. After the primary data had been collected and analyzed, the findings were presented in a statistical graph as shown below to demonstrate the percentages of the correct answers obtained by the participants. Noting that, the two colours in the graph symbolize the two contextual meanings of each polysemous word.

With reference to the Word Meaning Test developed in this study, the test composed of six pairs of items. The first pair (sentences 1&2) contained the polysemous word (*light*), which carried two different denotations: *not heavy* and *bright*.

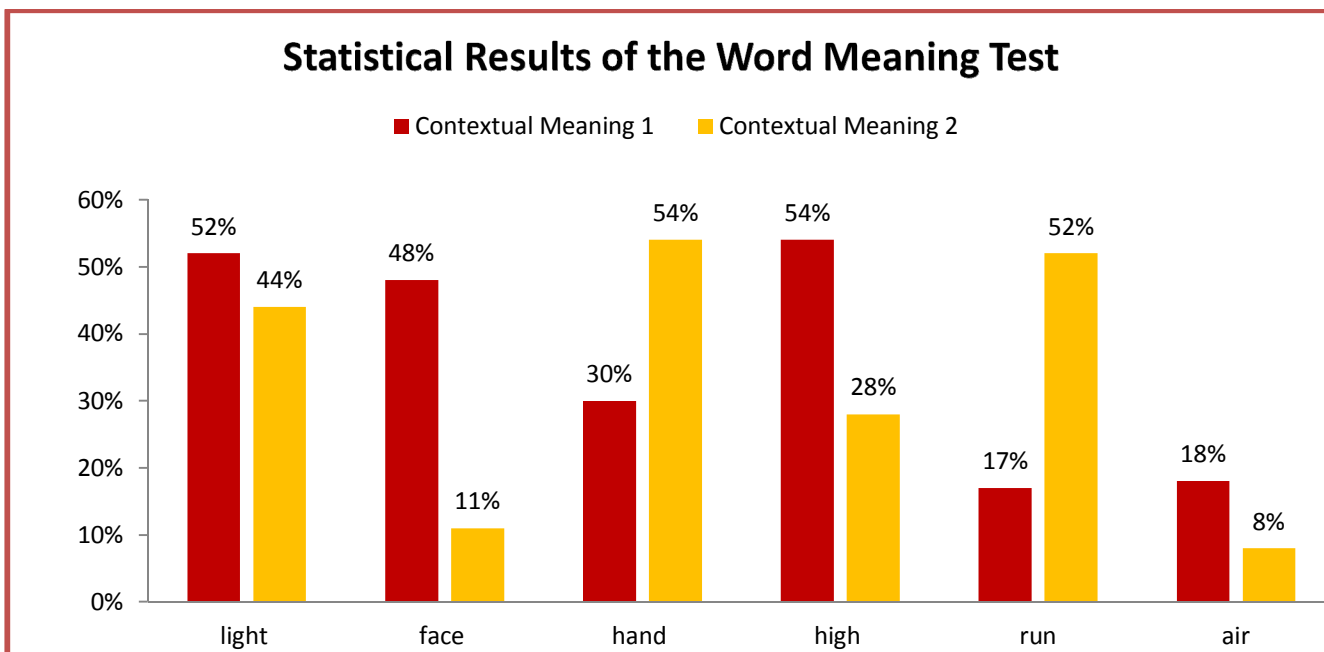
The percentages of the correct answers obtained were 52% for the contextual meaning (*not heavy*) and 44% for the contextual meaning (*bright*). Based on this result, it is obvious that the participants were to some extent aware of the first sense of the polyseme while they did not have knowledge of the other sense. As for the second test item, the shared word in the pair is the polysemous word (*face*) which gave the contextual meaning of (*meet*) in the first sentence and the meaning of (*front*) in the second. The statistics concerning the target polyseme in the two sentences mentioned show that the correct answers related to the first meaning was by 48% whilst the correct answers supported the second sense of the word (*face*) was by only 11%

Respecting the third pair of sentences sharing the same polysemous word (*hand*), the relevant statistics point out that 54% of the correct answers was in favour of the second meaning (*help*), and this of course is a positive result refuting what had been assumed by the study while the percentage of the correct responses related to the first sense of the target word was by 30%. As for, the two sentences making up the test item four, they both contain the same polyseme (*high*), but with different sense or denotation in each sentence. Based on the statistics shown in the figure (1) below, 54% of the correct answers sided

with the first contextual meaning (*important*) in contrast to only 28% for the second contextual meaning (*bad*). This result show that the participants were familiar to the first sense of the polyseme (*high*) but unaware of the second sense (*bad*).

In connection with the two last polysemous words (*run*) and (*air*) the results can be presented as follows: For the polysemous word (*run*) 17% of the correct answers sided with the contextual meaning (*travel*) while 52% of the correct answers supported the second contextual meaning which is (*manage*). On the subject of the contextual meanings of the polysemous word (*air*) the percentages of the correct answers relevant to the two senses (*broadcast & have opinion*) were very disappointed where 18% of the correct answers backed the first meaning whereas 8% of the correct answers biased to the favour of the second meaning (*have opinion*).

Generally, the obtained results which shown in the figure [1] below reveal that the Sudanese secondary level students encounter difficulties and intricacies in comprehending the different contextual meanings of English polysemous words within different sentences they come across throughout reading.



**Figure (1): The statistical Results Obtained from the Word Meaning Test**

#### 5- Conclusions

Drawing on the findings obtained, the study comes out of a concluding remark that, the Sudanese secondary level students are neither trained nor encouraged to practise using words in different contexts and comprehending the different senses or denotations of polysemous vocabulary they study. It must be admitted that learning vocabulary of a foreign language is complex as it had been said before; specifically polysemous vocabulary which needs an intensive practice for EFL learners to get used with this kind of words having different senses and contextual meanings which in turn can help them to comprehend the target texts easily and comfortably. Thus, through this study, it is hoped to show the need for inclusion polysemy and other semantic aspects in the English language curriculum in a "Words Study" section or the like with a large set of exercises at the end of each unit or chapter

for the purpose of providing EFL students with an opportunity to learn about different semantic features of different words they encounter through texts reading and thus, this can contribute to the students' semantic knowledge development. Also higher priority should be given to the lexical ambiguity resulting from polysemy and other semantic patterns, which represent a major vocabulary learning problem for Sudanese secondary level EFL students. In this respect, the focus should be on dealing with polysemes in isolation then coping with different sentences contexts. This way of learning makes the students memorize the polysemous words besides being aware of their different contextual meanings. This research paper has done with the hope that its findings of will be helpful to EFL teachers in both basic and secondary levels in Sudan in order to promote English vocabulary learning methods and techniques.



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