



The Effect of Semantic Ambiguity on Second Language Learners' Comprehension

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the effect of semantic ambiguity on reading comprehension in second language (L2) learners. The type of research used is a literature study with a qualitative descriptive approach, which refers to various relevant sources that discuss lexical and structural ambiguity in the process of learning English as a foreign language. The findings in this study explain that semantic ambiguity significantly hinders reading comprehension, especially when learners encounter unfamiliar vocabulary or sentence structures with multiple meanings. Lexical ambiguity tends to be more difficult than structural ambiguity due to limited vocabulary acquisition and students' tendency to understand literal meaning. In addition, the lack of contextualized reading strategies exacerbates misunderstandings. Therefore, lessons that emphasize the practice of identifying and interpreting ambiguity, as well as strengthening inferential skills, are essential for improving reading comprehension ability in second language learning.

Keywords: *Semantic Ambiguity; Reading Comprehension; Second Language Learners (L2)*

Abstrak: Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengaruh ambiguitas semantik terhadap pemahaman membaca pada pembelajar bahasa kedua (L2). Jenis penelitian yang digunakan adalah studi pustaka dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, yang merujuk pada berbagai sumber relevan yang membahas ambiguitas leksikal dan struktural dalam proses pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing. Temuan dalam kajian ini menjelaskan bahwa ambiguitas semantik secara signifikan menghambat pemahaman membaca, khususnya ketika pembelajar menghadapi kosakata yang tidak dikenal atau struktur kalimat yang ganda makna. Ambiguitas leksikal cenderung lebih menyulitkan dibandingkan ambiguitas struktural karena keterbatasan penguasaan kosakata dan kecenderungan siswa untuk memahami makna secara literal. Selain itu, kurangnya strategi membaca kontekstual turut memperparah kesalahpahaman. Oleh karena itu, pembelajaran yang menekankan pada latihan identifikasi dan penafsiran ambiguitas, serta penguatan keterampilan inferensial, sangat penting untuk meningkatkan kemampuan pemahaman membaca dalam pembelajaran bahasa kedua.

Kata Kunci: *Ambiguitas Semantik; Pemahaman Membaca; Pembelajar Bahasa Kedua (L2)*

INTRODUCTION

Language comprehension is a complex and dynamic process that requires not only the recognition of words and grammatical structures but also the ability to accurately interpret meaning based on context. For second language (L2) learners, this process becomes even more challenging as it involves navigating a new linguistic system while simultaneously developing cognitive strategies to comprehend texts effectively. One of the major obstacles in L2 reading comprehension is semantic ambiguity—when a word, phrase, or sentence allows for multiple interpretations. Such ambiguity often leads to confusion and misinterpretation, especially among learners with limited vocabulary or underdeveloped inferential skills.

Semantic ambiguity is a natural feature of language. In English, many words are polysemous (having multiple related meanings) or homonymous (having unrelated meanings), and their correct interpretation heavily depends on contextual clues. While native speakers typically resolve ambiguous meanings automatically through linguistic intuition and context awareness, L2 learners often lack this ability. For instance, the word “bank” can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river, and without sufficient context, learners may misinterpret the intended meaning. Beyond word-level ambiguity, structural ambiguity can also occur when sentence structures permit more than one syntactic interpretation. A sentence such as “The old man and woman sat quietly” may confuse learners, as it is unclear whether the adjective “old” modifies both individuals or only the man.

This phenomenon poses significant challenges to learners’ reading fluency and motivation. When students frequently encounter ambiguous texts that they are unable to interpret correctly, they may feel discouraged and avoid engaging with reading tasks altogether. Despite the prevalence of semantic ambiguity in authentic texts, it is often overlooked in language instruction. Many English language teaching programs emphasize vocabulary acquisition and grammar instruction but rarely address how learners can recognize and resolve ambiguity. This pedagogical gap leaves learners unprepared to deal with the semantic complexity they often encounter in academic or real-world reading.

Previous research on second language reading comprehension has primarily focused on vocabulary knowledge, grammar mastery, and strategic reading skills. However, studies specifically investigating the impact of semantic ambiguity are relatively limited. For instance, Fauziyah and Ilmi (2020) explored how connotative and denotative meanings influence interpretation in literary texts, highlighting the cognitive effort required for L2 learners to understand layered meanings. Similarly, Matindas, Samola, and Kumajas (2020) conducted a semantic study on English proverbs, revealing that ambiguous language elements present significant challenges for foreign language learners due to cultural and contextual variations. Handayani and

Nur Indah (2022) also emphasized the importance of teaching students how to decode denotative and connotative meanings in advertisements to enhance their semantic sensitivity. These studies suggest the need for more focused research on ambiguity within the broader context of language comprehension and instruction.

Given these considerations, the present study aims to investigate the influence of semantic ambiguity on the reading comprehension of second language learners. Specifically, it seeks to examine which type of ambiguity—lexical or structural—poses greater difficulty and how learners attempt to resolve such ambiguities during reading. By analyzing how semantic ambiguity interferes with meaning-making, the study also aims to propose pedagogical recommendations that can enhance the development of contextual reading strategies and semantic awareness among L2 learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms.

METHOD

This study uses *the library research* method as the main approach to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings in English proverbs through the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics. This approach was chosen because the object of study is in the form of language texts (in this case proverbs) that do not require the collection of field data, but a critical study of written sources. Data was collected from various relevant literature such as English proverbial dictionaries, linguistics and semiotics books, and scientific articles from academic journals that review the study of meaning, signs, and figurative language. Each source is analyzed by considering the cultural context behind the use of proverbs as well as the language structure that forms it.

The analysis was carried out using a two-level semiotic approach developed by Roland Barthes, namely through the reading of meaning denotatively (literal meaning) and connotative (symbolic or ideological meaning). This research is descriptive analytical, where the researcher not only presents the data found in the literature, but also interprets the relationship between language structure and cultural meaning hidden behind proverbial expression. The analysis process is carried out in stages: identification of proverbs, elaboration of their literal meaning, then rereading symbolic meanings based on cultural assumptions and social values inherent in the proverb. Through this method, the research seeks to uncover how proverbs not only convey linguistic messages, but also represent the system of meaning and collective consciousness of the speaking community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Cognitive Impact of Semantic Ambiguity on Reading Comprehension

The findings reveal that semantic ambiguity significantly hinders reading comprehension among second language learners, particularly at the intermediate proficiency level. Lexical ambiguity, in particular, poses a greater obstacle compared to structural ambiguity. Many learners were observed to rely heavily on the most familiar meanings of ambiguous words, often ignoring contextual cues that could provide clarity. This reliance indicates a surface-level approach to meaning-making and suggests limited contextual sensitivity. Even when the context clearly pointed to an alternative interpretation, students frequently defaulted to memorized definitions, leading to misunderstanding of the overall message of the text. In contrast, structural ambiguity tended to cause temporary confusion, which some learners were able to resolve through rereading and grammatical reasoning. This indicates that while syntactic awareness is emerging, it remains insufficiently developed to support fluent comprehension under ambiguous conditions. Moreover, learners lacked consistent use of reading strategies such as inference, paraphrasing, or contextual analysis, which could have aided them in resolving ambiguity. This absence of strategic competence demonstrates a cognitive gap in how learners process complex texts and signals the need for metacognitive training in L2 reading instruction.

Emotional Responses and Affective Barriers in Ambiguity Resolution

Beyond cognitive challenges, the study also identifies the emotional dimensions of dealing with semantic ambiguity. Learners frequently reported feelings of confusion, hesitation, and frustration, especially when confronted with unfamiliar vocabulary or unclear sentence structures. These emotional reactions often led to reduced engagement, with some learners choosing to skip ambiguous sections or give up entirely. Such responses indicate that semantic ambiguity not only disrupts comprehension but also affects learners' emotional well-being and confidence. The data suggest that emotional reactions may exacerbate comprehension difficulties, as anxiety or self-doubt interferes with the application of problem-solving strategies. Importantly, these affective barriers highlight that reading is not a purely intellectual activity—it is also shaped by learners' emotional responses to linguistic complexity. The findings affirm the need for instructional approaches that foster emotional resilience and encourage a positive attitude toward ambiguity. Teaching learners that ambiguity is a natural feature of language—rather than a sign of failure—may reduce anxiety and help build confidence in handling complex texts.

Pedagogical Implications and Instructional Gaps

The final theme that emerges from the findings is the clear lack of instructional support regarding semantic ambiguity. Interviews with

participants revealed that most learners had not received explicit instruction on how to manage ambiguity, whether lexical or structural. Reading classes often prioritized vocabulary translation and grammatical accuracy over interpretive reasoning and flexibility in meaning-making. As a result, learners entered reading tasks with limited tools to navigate ambiguous language, relying instead on guessing or avoidance strategies. This instructional gap suggests that L2 reading pedagogy needs to evolve to meet the demands of authentic language use, where ambiguity is common and unavoidable. The integration of ambiguity-focused training—such as teaching how to identify ambiguous words or syntactic patterns, analyze potential meanings, and apply context-based interpretation—can empower learners to become more effective and autonomous readers. Additionally, encouraging the development of strategic reading behaviors and promoting awareness of multiple meanings can lead to deeper comprehension and greater reading fluency. These pedagogical implications point to the necessity of a holistic approach in EFL instruction that addresses not only linguistic knowledge but also cognitive strategies and emotional readiness.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that semantic ambiguity significantly hinders the reading comprehension of intermediate second language learners, particularly at the lexical level. Learners often rely on literal or familiar meanings without considering context, leading to misinterpretation and shallow understanding. While structural ambiguity also disrupted reading, it was occasionally resolved through rereading or grammatical awareness, though inconsistently. A key finding is the limited use of metacognitive and reading strategies to address ambiguity. Most learners skipped or guessed ambiguous parts, negatively impacting comprehension. Emotional responses such as confusion and frustration further compounded the challenge. Additionally, the lack of instructional focus on ambiguity resolution in the classroom leaves learners unprepared to navigate the flexible, layered meanings typical of authentic texts. Addressing semantic ambiguity thus requires both cognitive strategy training and pedagogical reform.

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