

The Importance of Contextual Situation in Language Teaching

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1. Introduction

Every single meaningful oral or written statement is made in a particular situation or context for a particular purpose in order to understand its purpose and respond to it, therefore , it is necessary to know about the situation in which the statement is made . Knowing about the situation is what is meant by contextual orientation. Contextual orientation cannot be escaped in foreign language teaching and learning. Wilkins (1972:144) says that situation could be applied to circumstances where observable features are recognizable even without reference to the language that is produced, Situation is important because it has possible applications to language teaching. Language is used in situations like buying a railway ticket, ordering a meal or making introductions. The context of situation is used as a technical term to mean the situation which serves as an appropriate environment for a given piece of language (Widdowson, 1988:98).

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There are certain ways of using language which are appropriate to one situation than another. People feel embarrassed when language is used inappropriately. On the other hand, some humours are based on the deliberate borrowing of language features from one context to another which shows the relationship between language and situation. Certain situations lead us to expect a certain kind of language and when language does not meet our expectation we may be surprised, offended, amused or puzzled.

The term "Context of situation"⁽¹⁾ is associated with Firth (1957) who thought of meaning in terms of the situation in which language is used. The " Context of situation" consists of the actual events as well as a part of the social process , whereas s for Firth (1957) " context is a linguistic apparatus that can be applied to language and includes :

- a. The relevant objects.
- b.The Participants
- c.The effects of the verbal action

Every spoken utterance occurs in a particular situation which includes the speaker and hearer, the actions they are performing at the time and various external objects and events.

Firth (1957) proposed a rather abstract formulation based on three major categories in terms of which language events could be

described. First, there is the verbal and non-verbal action of the participants in the event, then what he called the relevant objects and finally the observable effect of the verbal action.

Any utterance can be understood in numerous ways, and that people make decisions about how to interpret a given utterance based on their definition of what is happening at the time of interaction. They define the interaction in terms of a form or schema which is identifiable and familiar (Gumperz, 1988:131).

"Linguistic form may fulfil a variety of rhetorical functions and one rhetorical function may be fulfilled through a variety of Linguistic forms." (Yalden,!, 1979:26).

Context is the interlevel between form and situation. In general, it is used to refer to specific parts on an utterance (or text) near or adjacent to a unit which is the focus of attention (Prakasam, 1993:98).

The term " context " is used in a non-technical sense to mean "environment" in general. In its technical sense, "context refers only to non-linguistic environment, The environment of a sound is the environment of a sound in a sequence of sounds. The context of a word is the environment of a word in a structure. The Grammatical context is the internal relations of language items with each other at the level of form (Widdowson, 1988:98)

"Situation refers to the contexts in which language and behaviour occur in the real world , outside the classroom (White, 1988:62)/^f It is not a factor in speech ⁽⁵⁾ but is the setting in which speech becomes effective" (AL-Hamash, 1980:10).

2- The Aim of the Research:

The research investigates the importance of contextual situation specially in language teaching . The research aims to study the elements of situation, the meaning of context, discusses the types of contextual meaning and studies the use of appropriate and inappropriate context. The research also attempts to show how a teacher can design a meaningful situation in the classroom and the implication of that to the situational syllabus.

3- The Contextual Meaning

Firth (1957) says that the complete meaning of a word is always contextual and no study of meaning independent of complete context can be taken seriously. He adds that each word when used in a new context is a new word. He emphasizes that the disciplines assist us in making statements of meaning. Firth says that meaning has to be regarded as a complex of contextual relations. Phonetics, grammar, lexicography and semantics each handles its own components of the complex in its appropriate context. (See Firth, 1957:19-26).

The contextual meaning of a piece of language is its meaning with respect to the correspondence that can be set up between its internal patterns and the relevant patterns in its general situation (Dixon, 1964).

"The contextual meaning is not that particular to the language community, it extends up to the social and cultural communities. Here again the "content" of a statement might be "universal" or "particular" to a religious, social or cultural community .

For example "he ate his food" is a universal utterance where "his engagement was announced" is particular to a cultural community (Parkasam, 1986:85).

4- The Elements of Situation

Situation includes not only the relevant objects and actions taking place at the time, but also the knowledge shared by the speaker and hearer, it also includes the implicit acceptance by the speaker and hearer of all relevant conventions, beliefs and suppositions of members of the speech-community to which the speaker and hearer belong, (Lyons, 3 981; 413) The elements of situation are:

The setting (Where ?) at a bank

The Participants (Who ?) bank clerk, customer

Relevant objects (What ?) Passport, bank forms

Currency, Traveler's cheques .

Such a combination of elements will be associated with language, in lexical, structural and functional / interactional terms, e.g.: A-Good afternoon. Could I cash some travelers cheques, Please ? B-Yes. What currency are they ? A-Sterling . They are Thomas Cook cheques. B-Will You fill in this form, please ? And can I have your passport?

Any communication, therefore involves the following situational factors:

- 1- Setting or location : The type of place and occasion in which the interaction occurs. A setting can be a street or a public place in an urban environment.
- 2- The participants : the roles they play , e.g foreign stranger, or a passer- by.
- 3- A topic of discourse : Such as location or movement.
- 4- A Function : such as giving directions .
- 5- Other Language activities such as preceding conversation
- 6- Medium : speaking or writing .

The complex interaction of situational factors will influence stylistic features, and if we change one factor, there will be

consequent changes in language social relationships and the type of occasion will also have stylistic effects.

In order to react meaningfully to an utterance, the hearer or reader must know three things:

- 1 -The meanings of individual words in the utterance .
- 2- The meanings derived from the forms and order of words in the utterance
- 3- The context in which the utterance is made, for example, in the sentence:

"the teacher is in the class" the reader should know the situation, i.e facts about the teacher, the class and the school to understand the meaning of the utterance .

- a. The teacher has been absent for a week and the students were happy without assignments and now the students must return to serious work .
- b. The students didn't see the teacher thinking that there was no teacher in class, the students misbehaved. Suddenly one of them noticed the teacher and said" the teacher is in the class". This made everybody quiet down.

The sentence "It's half past seven" is equivalent to "We must go to school now" although the individual words and grammatical

structures of both sentences have nothing in common. (Nasr, 1963: 138).

The speaker, the listener, the subject matter and the language must occur within a context. Some language forms are supposed to have the same meaning but the situations in which they are used differ greatly. For example the expressions "Hi" and "How do you do ?" are both forms of greeting a person . However, the situation where the first one is used is limited to friends and equals. The Second one is appropriate when you greet a person of a higher social standing or a complete stranger . Each of the two expressions is appropriate in a certain situation (AlrHamash, 1980:13). Words are important not only in themselves but also in their distribution (Use and association with other words in different contexts.) The meaning of an utterance is often decided by the situation in which it is said. "Lack of experience of the appropriate context may make understanding the meaning of the words used in it extremely difficult" It is difficult to understand the meaning of mist or fog in places where these words are unknown. "There are even more dangerous traps when the overseas context that appears to correspond to the native speaker's context in fact differs."(Bright, 1976:16).

The Course of the river is different from the Course of the argument and a Course fish . The word say is different from tell in the following sentences .

What did he say to you ?

I can't tell you about it now.

The same difference is found between glimpse and glance in "He took a glance at the newspaper headline" (take a quick look at) and, "He caught a glimpse of a tree from the window of a train (quick imperfect view) Damp is not thoroughly dry (have some moisture) while wet is covered or soaked with water or liquid. The word fit has different meanings in the following contexts.

The enemy is no longer fit for prolonged battle. I can't fit all these clothes into this suitcase. Does that coat fit you? He may win the race today . He's extremely fit and in good form. He wrote that book in a sudden fit of energy.

It is a good idea , but it doesn't fit in with our plans.

A building plot is a piece of land usually small, "Plot aircraft movements

by radar" (mark the position of an aircraft on a diagram:" "Plot to

overthrow the government" is a conspiracy , while a plot of events of a

novel or drama is a plan or outline of events of the novel.

5. Types of Situational Features

Context establishes relationship between the situational features and formal items or categories (lexico-grammatical items).

The situational features may be said to be of three types:

1-The Cognitive (Psychological)

2-The environmental (Sociological)

3-The institutional.

1- The cognitive level gives us information about the speaker's and the hearer's conceptualization of the real world phenomena (participants, processes, circumstantial, logical relations, informational and discoursal features).

2- The environmental level is related to the cultural representation of the world phenomena It includes a given speaker's attitude, temperament, mood and the presence of the physical objects at the time of speech act. The cognitive level material gets reflected to a large extent in the semantic layer of the contextual interval. The environmental level material gets reflected in the pragmatic

layer of the contextual interval. The semantic and pragmatic layer are like Siamese twins.

- 3- The institutional level is a paralinguistic or extra-Linguistic level which accounts for language variation at the interlevels and the level of form.

Actions and reactions in different situations are determined by people's cultural background which includes people's heritage, customs, traditions, ways of thinking and behavioral mannerisms.

What is accepted in a particular situation in a particular culture may not be done or accepted in a similar situation in a different culture . For example, in the Arab culture, it is customary to invite a friend to whatever meal the host is having if he drops at a meal time even if he is unexpected. In England if a person is not invited to a certain meal in advance, he would not expect an invitation on the spot. He may appreciate it if it comes, but he would not feel insulted if it did not.

Students should know enough about the culture of the native speakers of the foreign language in order to understand it fully and attach meaning to its features when they are heard or read. The provision of English names and settings in English texts for foreign students is recommend. This helps the students to understand the language better by connecting its features with the significant

cultural features of the native speakers of that language and promote intercultural understanding (Nasr, 1964:142).

In Arab culture, a sign of hospitality is the repetition of the greeting and the question "How are you?" during the visit. If this were done in English with English speaking people, the reaction would be one of surprise. "Language symbols are best understood in their cultural contexts. To understand terms like "High tea" and the difference between "supper" and "dinner", one has to present them in meaningful situations where the English eating habits are portrayed- (Al-Hamash,1980:30)

6. Communication is appropriate

The form of utterances must take into account the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, and the constraints imposed by setting and circumstances in which the act of communication is taking place "What's your name?" is a conversational utterance but it is not an appropriate way of asking the identity of a telephone caller. The expression "May I know who is calling?" is more appropriate. (Jack, C. Richards, 1983: 115).

Different communication styles can be used according to the situation for example, a person wants to get a match from another person may use one of the following expressions:

- 1- I need a match. (Statement about his need).
- 2- Give me a match, (imperative).
- 3- Could you give me a match ?(embedded imperative).
- 4- May I have a match? (permission).
- 5- Do you a have a match? (Question).
- 6- The matches are all gone. (Give a hint).

The choice of an appropriate strategy for performing a communicative task or speech act depends on factors as age, sex, familiarity , and roles of speaker and hearer which will determine whether a speaker adopts conversational strategies implying either affiliation or dominance . This has some implications for language learners who have only mastered basic vocabulary and syntax in their new language but have not developed skills in the domain of linguistic variability . The hearer has to discover the meaning that is intended to convey in any particular utterance. The speaker / writer, on the other hand, has to choose something that is appropriate. It is the combination of skills in these two aspects of communication that we may refer to as "communicative competence" (YaIden, J., 1979:26).

A Teacher was trying a situational unit in an English village. The situation is "finding your way". He asked an aged villager one

of the standard questions, "How can I get to the post office?", expecting a reply involving instructions in terms of space and time. Instead of the expected response, she offered "Follow the old tram lines", which shows that there is always an element of the unexpected in spontaneous conversation.

We can also talk of human communication as channeled and constrained by a multilevel system of learned, automatically produced and closely coordinated verbal and nonverbal signs. Gumperz (1988:14) demonstrated that in the act of talking, eyes, face, limbs and all emit automatically produced signs which tend to go unnoticed yet they convey information. These nonverbal signs are language like in the sense that they are carried through. Interaction, culturally specific and analyzable in terms of underlying processes. They provide information about the speaker's emotional state.

In the following dialogue from Gumperz (1988: 136), the student „ fails to identify himself and to give the customary greeting. The student has borrowed some money which he was promising to return soon. The topic then shifts to a paper which has not yet been returned in. When the instructor refused to give the student a grade without seeing the finished paper, the student seemed annoyed. One may argue that greeting is not necessary

because the speakers can recognize each other's voices, but the lack of greeting evokes different responses.

Instructor: Hello

Student : How is the family ? (Pause).

Instructor: Fine

Student: I'll get back to you **next** month about that thing .

Instructor: That's OK I can wait.

Student: I'm finished with that paper. It's being typed.

Instructor: Come to the office and we'll talk about it.

It is also inappropriate to say "I am happy to hear that" to a one who says to you that he is not feeling well.

7. Contextual Situation and Language Teaching

The teacher can demonstrate meaning by reference to objects or events in the classroom. These objects and events present the situation. The teacher in the early stages of the course might hold up a pen, point to it and says:

This is a pen.

The sentence makes reference to something in the situation devised by the teacher. Pupils do not know what this object is called in English. This sentence functions as an identification but the

pupils need to have it named as a "pen" The teacher is not just demonstrating a structure, he is using the language for a required communication purpose. The teacher can devise a situation to make the meaning clear. He can demonstrate the present continuous tense by situation presentation and performs an activity like walking to the door.

I am walking to the door.

If I leave the room during a dinner party I don't say: I am walking to the door. ,

"The exercises we devise should aim at developing natural language behavior. The presentation of sentences as a random set of separate units not only does not encourage but is also likely to actually inhibit this development (Widdowson : 1988: 118) .

Students, for example, can be asked to infer the meaning of "faint" from context in the following sentences :

1- I must go outside. I feel faint

2- He drew a faint line on a piece of paper.

3- I haven't the faintest idea how that happened.

4- Now, slowly and faintly an opposite tendency is showing itself.

7.1. The situational syllabus:

In a situationally based syllabus a series of situations will form the main organizing principle often the situation will be closely linked with a practical activity or task. A restricted range of language will be covered, the emphasis is on getting things done rather than learning the language systems. Some attention is also given to grammar.

Once the situations have been selected a language syllabus can be devised, based on the language associated with the situations concerned. The situations can be ordered according to chronological sequence based on arriving, staying and departing.

A situational syllabus would be an alternative to the conventional grammatical syllabus in cases where a situational analysis of needs seems, profitable. It would not necessarily be of valuable alternative for the general language learner (Wilkins, 1975:144).

In Hornby's situational method, class room situations were used to demonstrate the meaning of a new language item . He used the classroom as a setting for presenting language and meaning using real objects and activities which can be performed within the classroom (White, 1988:62).

However, we do not want the pupil to concentrate on learning facts about words but the skills of .appropriate response and use, which can only be practiced in context, We want him to learn English not lexis. We also want him to run the grammatical pattern of the language through his mind at the same time as the collocations ."(Bright, 1976: 17).

The meanings of words can be inferred from context. The ability to deduce meaning from context is one of the most useful skills of the expert reader . The ability to infer is a skill that can only be acquired by practice. The emphasis should be on the actual use of language rather than on memorizing forms out of context. It is the job of the teacher to devise social contexts in which the language is meaningfully used. Unsimplified real situations faced by native speakers of the language are recommended.

It Is also meaningless to present sounds in isolation. They are presented in words, sentences and conversational situations. For example vowels and consonants are presented in pairs of words while supra-segmentals (stress, pitch and pause), as well as assimilation are best presented in sentences and dialogues.

"The realization of language as use involves two kinds of ability. One kind is the ability to select which form of sentence is appropriate for a particular linguistic context. The second is the

ability to recognize which function is fulfilled by a sentence in a particular communicative situation" (Widdowson, 1988: 6).

7.2. Conversational Situations

The language used in the dialogue should be the natural language of educated people in conversational situations. The style should not be too formal or artificial. It should include expressions like, "you know, oh, ah, I see, ok", and contracted forms like "don't" and "isn't". The interpretation we place on any utterance depends on the situation, the role of the participants, the various purposes of the speaker and the cultural knowledge and knowledge of the world. We use, for example, "Excuse me" to attract a person's attention. It is surprising if you used Hi, or You there because these expressions are inappropriate when uttered by a speaker looking for help from his addressee. Features of the speaker's idiolect and stylistic choices, age, sex and nationality are important. The term "my friend" is used between adults men, or to a fellow native speaker as to a foreigner. A foreigner, on the other hand, needs more specific and detailed directions than a native speaker.

8. Conclusions

Miscommunication caused by contextualization conventions reflects phenomena that are typically sociolinguistic in the sense

that their interpretive weight is much greater than their linguistic import as measured by the usual techniques of contrastive grammar. Whenever they occur, they have the effect of retrospectively changing the character of what has gone before and of reshaping the entire course of interaction. Difficulties may have no linguistic causes. The grammatical and semantic nature of the cues involved, especially at the level of discourse, differ. This is important for classroom interaction and for analysts seeking to derive generalizations concerning the historical origin of interpretive traditions.

The differences affect interpretation on several levels of generality. This includes the level of rhetorical principles governing such matters as how the student responds to a preceding teacher's move, how to elaborate a point and in what order to present information. It also includes more local conventions that determine how the stream of talk is divided into information units, how accentuation works to identify focused items, distinguish main points from qualifying structures. This affects students' ability to establish conversational synchrony, to affect smooth turn-taking and to cooperate in working out common themes in the classroom. To exchange what follows the teacher opener may be misunderstood. The meaning conveyed should be understood by both participants. The accent placement principles affect conversational synchrony

and leads to misunderstanding. It is primarily due to lexicon and to conventions for inferring non-verbalized information.

Students learn the clause level grammar of English but in using it they rely on their own native discourse conventions which are learned through face to face contact. Therefore, "We must teach the learner to be situationally appropriate , grammatically accurate, functionally correct We will teach the rules of use and the rules of grammar" (Yaldin, 1979:30).

It is also necessary to know about the situation and context in which the sounds, words, sentences and grammatical forms are used. A foreign Language should be taught in context.

Language forms should be used in the appropriate situation The use of language in inappropriate situations creates misunderstanding, surprise offence or amusement. It is, therefore, the job of the teacher to explain to his pupils the situation , its setting, participants, relevant objects , the topic , functions and language activities .

The teacher should make the language of the dialogue as real and natural as possible. He can also make use of the objects and events in the classroom. A meaningful situation can be devised to clarify the meaning. . The exercises should develop natural language communication. Language activities can be performed or acted in

the classroom and used in meaningful situations. Students are encouraged to respond to these situations. Students are also taught how to deduce meaning from context. Unsimplified real situations faced by native speakers are difficult for the Students but they worth the trouble. Simplification spoils the language and makes it unnatural. Students therefore are taught to realize language as use not as usage. They should not only have knowledge about language but they should be able to use it in meaningful situations.

It is necessary for teachers to explain the cultural context which influences different people with different cultural backgrounds.

Language forms are meaningless when stripped of the situation in which they are said . Only appropriate forms should be used . The use of inappropriate forms hinders communication.

The teacher can make his pupils understand the semantic content and how each sentence relates to what precedes and follows. They should be studied in context rather than in the abstract. The signaling value depends on the participants tacit awareness of their meaningfulness. When the student does not react to a cue or is unaware of misunderstanding may occur. Miscommunication leads to misjudgments of the speaker's intent, it is identified as a mere

linguistic error. Shift in context is always a matter of social convention.

Dialogues should be presented with their cultural content. Otherwise, the student will assume that they are the same as in his own culture and he may misunderstand what is said and done . The cultural content can be explained briefly preferably in the target language.

Dialogues can be dramatized to add motivation and make them as real as possible. Students are also asked to memorize dialogues. The chief value in memorizing is that it gives the student authentic sentences that he can vary and expand and eventually use in many situations. A connected dialogue makes a contextual sense. Careful selection of contextual areas for dialogue and reading material permits full use of the language in limited areas early in the course. Pictures, slides or films may help to provide cultural content for observation by the students. Observation alone, may mislead. Explain or clarify the cultural content of the material presented. Cultural items can be used to teach the language. The teacher can teach language at a higher level where the language is used to acquire information which deals with the target culture. Food, holidays , specific heroes or customs may be taken up as the context in the target language .

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ملخص

أهمية الوضع السياقي اللغوي في تدريس اللغة

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ان كل عبارة مكتوبة أو منطوقة ذات معنى تقال في سياق لغوي معين لغرض معين. لذلك فانه من الضروري أن نفهم السياق اللغوي الذي تقال فيه العبارة. والسياس مهم لأن من تطبيقاته اللغة وتدريس اللغة ؛ ثمة طرق معينة لاستخدام اللغة تناسب سياقاً دون آخر ؛ وعندما لا تلبى اللغة توقعاتنا فإننا قد نندهش أو نغضب أو نرتبك . ان عدم التفاهم الذي يسببه السياق يعكس ظواهر لغوية واجتماعية مختلفة وهذه الاختلافات تؤثر على تفسير المبادئ البلاغية التي تحكم هذه المسائل فكيف يستجيب الطالب للمدرس وبأي تسلسل تعرض المعلومات وكيف يقسم الكلام إلى وحدات معلوماتية ومعرفة الفقرات التي يتم التوكيد عليها وهذا يؤثر على قابلية الطلبة على المحادثة ولعب الأدوار والتعاون في الصف. وكذلك يؤثر التنغيم والتشديد على فهم المعنى فلا بد من تدريس المتعلم في سياقات مناسبة صحيحة من الناحية النحوية والوظيفية. ومن الضروري ان نعرف الوضع السياقي الذي تستخدم فيه الأصوات والكلمات والجمل والأشكال النحوية وان استخدام اللغة في أوضاع سياقية غير مناسبة يؤدي إلى عدم التواصل. لذلك فانه من واجب المدرس ان يشرح الوضع السياقي ويجعل لغة الحوار طبيعية وواقعية قدر الإمكان والاستفادة من الأشياء المحيطة والأحداث التي تجري في الصف. أما التمارين فيجب ان تعبر عن تواصل لغوي طبيعي حيث يتم تمثيل النشاطات والمهارات اللغوية في الصف وفي سياقات ذات معنى كذلك يتم تدريس الطلبة على استخلاص المعنى من السياق . أما السياق الحضاري الاجتماعي فيؤثر على مختلف الناس بخلفياتهم الحضارية الثقافية المختلفة ، وتكون الأشكال اللغوية دون معنى عندما تجرد من السياق اللغوي الذي تقال فيه فلا بد من استخدام التراكم المناسبة لغرض التواصل اللغوي.

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