# On Context Theory and Interactive Language Teaching

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## Abstract

*In this paper, the author explores the importance of context in interactive language teaching and how to make the classroom activities interactive through the application of context theory from the perspective of comprehension (listening, reading) and production (speaking and writing) and how to build context in foreign language classroom in accordance with the linguistic rules of English to promote the students' communicative competence in the context.*

**Key words:** context; interactive language teaching; context theory; comprehension; production；context building; communicative competence

## 1. Context theory

The idea of context of situation first appeared in Wegener's work, **Untersuchungen u¨ ber die Grundfragen des Sprachlebens**, in which he demonstrates that verbal expressions are best described not in isolation but as part of the totality of a person's Lebensa¨ußerungen and as embedded in the 'context of situation.' The central concept of 'context of situation' consists, inter alia, of the 'situation of perception,' the 'situation of remembrance or consciousness,' and the 'situation of culture,' which have a great impact on the linguistic form of a speech event and ultimately on its comprehension.

The concept of context was first put forward obviously by Malinowski (cited in Zhang, Miao and Li, 2006) in 1923 (context of situation) and 1935 (context of culture) respectively. He defined context of situation ethnographically as the larger sociocultural frameworks that surround language and speech events. He suggests that language is closely related to the culture and social convention of the nation of which the language is spoken when he studied the language of the aboriginals.

Inspired by Malinowski's use of context of situation and by Wittgenstein's conception of word meaning, Firth (1957, cited in Zhang, Miao and Li, 2006) further developed the context theory. He thought that contexts of situation and speech function types could be generalized into the essential constituents which could be applied to various kinds of speech events. Thus, the inner relationship of the contexts of situation can described as:

⑴ The properties of participants: people, character

  (a) the speech activities of the participants
  (b) the nonlinguistic activities of the participants

⑵ relative events

⑶ the impact of the speech activities

On the basis of accepting the basic ideas of Malinowski and Firth, Halliday explored the context theory further. He thought that context could be divided into context of culture and context of situation. Context of culture refers to the context in which the whole linguistic system exists and determines the semantic system of the language. Context of situation is the context in which the language is used and the embodiment of the context of culture. Context of situation is a very general term which can be further divided into field, tenor and mode. Field refers to the nature of the social action: what it is the interactants are about. Tenor refers to the statuses

and role relationships: who is taking part in the interaction. Mode refers to the rhetorical channel and function of the discourse: what part the text is playing.

According to Claire Kramsch (1993, cited in Zhou, 2006), context consists of six parts: linguistic context, immediate situational context, interactional context, cultural context and contextual context. In this paper, the author adopts this classification that seems more comprehensive.

## 2. Interactive language teaching

 According to Rivers (1997), interactive language teaching is the teaching method in which language comprehension and production are considered as an interactive duo. Students can use all they possess of the language – all they have learned casually absorbed – in real-life exchanges where expressing their real meaning is important to them. What teachers need to do is to create an ambience and relations among individuals that can promote a desire for interaction. Students achieve facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages. Well (1981, cited in Rivers, 1997) also suggests that "exchange is the basic unit of discourse…linguistic interaction is a collaborative activity" involving "the establishment of a triangular relationship between the sender, the receiver and the context of situation", whether the communication be in speech or in writing.

## 3. The importance of context in ILT in FLT in China

 A TV program about the students in Beijing Language and Culture University have a better mastery of communicative strategies rather than knowledge of language itself than the students in many other universities disclosed the essence of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), that is the engagement of learners in communication to allow them to develop their communicative competence. Beijing Language and Culture University provides the students with the opportunities to communicate with people from all kinds of countries and cultures in various kinds of authentic contexts, such as classroom activities, sports activities, recreation activities, etc. However, the chance for the students in many other universities to communicate in authentic contexts is rare. As a matter of fact, most of the students in China are learning a foreign language or several languages without the target language context at all.  As a result, the classroom interaction is of crucial importance to their language learning.

According to Rivers (1997), interaction in the context is the key to teaching language for communication. She suggests that interaction means that students achieve facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying (speaking and writing) and receiving (listening and reading) authentic messages (that is, messages that contain information of interest to speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both). Interactive language teaching is the teaching method that emphasizes comprehension and production as an interactive duo to cultivate the students' communicative competence. The important part of the teacher's art is to create, or stimulate the student creation of, the type of context in which interaction naturally blossoms and in which students can use for actual communication what they have been learning in a more formal fashion.

## 4. Context building in ILT

Zhang (2006) suggests that the objective of language learning is language system in contextual system. However, the contextual system is enormous and cannot be exhaustive. All we can do is to let them learn the typical examples of the all kinds of sub-systems that language usually takes place and infer the actual use of the other. In the classroom context, the teachers just help simulate the 'authentic' context (examples mentioned above) to help students learn to infer and cultivate the communicative strategies form which they extrapolate the use in other speech events that they would confront in the future. The author will explore the possible ways

to build the typical contexts to help them cultivate their communicative competence from the perspective of comprehension (listening and reading), production (speaking and writing) and analyze the implication for language testing.

## 4.1 Listening

According to Rivers (1997), in an interactive classroom, there must be much listening to authentic materials with no prohibition or discouragement of spoken response or student-initiated contribution. The listening needs to be purposeful as students usually prepare to use what they have heard in some way. 'Authentic' materials include teacher talk when the instructor is fluent in the target language. When the teacher cannot provide the kind of input, they can rely on audio- and videotapes. TV program, film strips, the excerpts of the radio program can also be used to provide the authentic context. Where available, native speaker can be brought into the classroom to interact information with the students. Their discussion or debate can also be videotaped or audiotaped to be used exchangeably among the classes. With the help of the Internet, the students can also be guided to voice-chat with people from the target language speaking countries. Through all these ways mentioned above, students are able to interact with the target language culture, and they try to figure out the meaning, the communicative strategies and paralinguistic features in the immediate situational context. Meanwhile, it is worth a while to mention that the authentic materials need not to be too difficult. They need to be carefully selected and prepared before they are fine tuned to a level accessible to a particular group of students.

Besides, in the listening activities, the teachers are also required to provide the students with the necessary contextual information about immediate context, linguistic context, co-text, the context of culture, situational context (such as the participant, the environment, etc.). The information can help the students to stimulate and instantiate their schemata. Through the introduction of the contextual information, the students can get comprehensible input (it can better facilitate language acquisition in Krashen's Input Hypothesis) more easily.

## 4.2 Speaking

Speaking and listening activities are usually closely related. Some of the above authentic materials can also be used in some productive activity: as background for a research project to be discussed with others; for reenactment in a role playing situation with a problem-solving component; or as a dramatization or skit; or as input for a small group discussion or debate about controversial or unexpected elements, perhaps cultural, that need study in order to be understood or accepted in their context.

According to Swain (1985, cited in Jiang, 2006), besides the necessary comprehensible input, learners must have opportunities to produce the language if they are to become fluent, native-like speakers. Producing the language could provide the learner with the opportunity to notice the differences of the language forms between their interlanguage and the target language, test their hypotheses of language use, and then think about their own language, thus help his L2 acquisition. She also suggests "pushed output" is a necessary mechanism of acquisition in the classroom context. "Pushed output" here refers to the language production which intends to solicit for information or force the students to produce an utterance that requires specific morphology and syntax to convey its meaning in a specific simulated "authentic" context.

In order to create these contexts, students from the beginning can listen and speak in reacting to pictures and objects, in role plays, through acting out, and in discussion; later they can create radio talk shows, conduct class flee market with personally selected artifacts (buying, selling, negotiating, explaining, persuading, retracting, etc.). At advanced level, students can even simulate cocktail parties or job interviews, etc.

When the multimedia devices are available, the students can be provided with films and videotapes of native speakers interacting. Then they are required to provide their personal commentary from their own cultural and national viewpoints. The teachers can also guide the students to voice-chat or video-chat with students in other

places or with speakers from English speaking countries. In these processes, the students are required to observe non-verbal behavior, the types of exclamations, fill-in expressions that are used, how people initiate and sustain a conversational exchange, how they negotiate meaning and how they terminate an interactive episode (Keller and Warner, 1979, cited in Rivers, 1997).

### 4.3 Reading

To make reading activity alone interactive is very difficult. But combined with writing and speaking activity can also be an interactive process between the students, the author, the text and the teacher when the various contexts are available. Reading can lead to creative productive in speech and writing, as students are required to write reading reports, comment, summery of a story, novel and news report and to act it out, etc. In these activities, through the provision of the authentic materials and depiction of an event, the students can interact with the author, the text. The students can also interact with the teacher or other students through the dialogue journal, which will be mentioned in the writing part.

### 4.4 Writing

In order to make the writing activities interactive, the various authentic contexts should be simulated. That is to say, what is written should be something that will be read by somebody, as with a group composition or an item in a class newspaper or on a bulletin board. Besides, dialogue journals, which were mentioned in the reading activity, are also an excellent example of interactive writing activity. Students write to the teacher or to each other, and the reader responds with a further message, thus combining reading and writing in a purposeful activity. Instead of "correcting" directly, the teacher respondent rephrases awkward expressions while commenting on the content. As with phone conversations with an instructor or target language friend, students become bolder and bolder in expressing their feeling read in journals, where the interaction is not face-to-face. With the development of multimedia technology, the students are provisioned with the opportunity to communicate with the native speakers through QQ chat-room or e-mail. The teachers can also guide them to chat in language laboratory appropriately through these ways.

### 4.5 Language Testing

Because the teaching process is interactive, the assessment should also be interactive and proficiency-oriented rather a sterile, taxonomic process. Students should be put in situations where they hear and react to real uses of language or where what they read is to be incorporated into some further language using activity. Tests should replicate normal uses of language as much as is feasible. A first step is to make traditional tests reflect the reality with which the students are surrounded. The next step is to develop tests where there is genuine interaction as part of the test, not just in an oral interview but in other areas as well. As soon as the test becomes an interesting and absorbing activity, the student is mentally interacting with the test writer or administrator or with other students, and the test becomes an organic process of construction of meaning in comprehension and expression. Meanwhile, some tests, which attempt to test the listening and speaking proficiency on-line recently, are interactive oriented already. With the development of technology, students will probably communicate with machine naturally in the near future.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, the author analyses the importance of context in interactive language teaching and how to make listening, speaking, reading, writing and language testing interactive through the creation of "authentic" context.

But what we need to keep in mind is that the authentic context exists only when we interact with the target language community. Through the maintenance of the open-door policy, more and more foreigners will come to China to travel, do businesses or settle down. On the other hand, more and more Chinese will go outside. In the past, we partially concentrate on the contexts happening in the target language countries. While more and more contexts are happening and will happen in our own culture. That is to say, we need to learn to communicate with the foreigners about their cultural content, and we also need to learn to communicate with them about our own cultural content in the target language as well. Meanwhile, the systematic learning of grammatical rules of the language to enhance our grammatical competence is also very important. We interact better only if we can understand and express nuances of meaning that require careful syntactic choices.

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