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## The Situational Context Effect in Non-Language-Majoring EFL Students' Meaning Comprehension

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### Abstract

The article aims to explore the importance of the situational context for enhancing students' comprehension of particular phrases of the English language in their native-like use. This case study particularly focuses on situation-bound utterances and opportunities for creating relevant learning environment in the process of teaching. The authors present the results involving Russian EFL non-language-majoring students to rely on their comprehension of such phrases depending on the context. It analyses to what extent the situational context helps students comprehend and infer the meaning of SBUs in two organized ways – within and outside of the socio-cultural situation.

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### 1. Introduction

It is commonly known that context is a common ground that brings together a speaker and a listener, and, more specifically, it reflects some aspects of this ground that a listener needs to know in order to understand a given utterance. The situational context implies that a speaker and a listener share physically some common knowledge in their present communication. Another type of context, the linguistic context, refers to the common ground created on the basis of the speaker's and the listener's previous linguistic experience. According to Kecskes (2008), in addition to the situational and linguistic context a speaker and listener may have common experiences or culturally shared knowledge. This common knowledge can be conceptualized as an intrinsic context, again to the extent that

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this is common knowledge necessary for the listener to understand a linguistic input.

The intrinsic context depends on the listener's background knowledge, the knowledge stored in memory representations often referred to as scripts, schemata, mental models, etc. However, to understand the meaning of vocabulary items, using linguistic context may involve syntactic and morphological interpretation of the elements within a text. In other words, to determine the meaning of an item, it is necessary to know whether the item is a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb, functioning as a subject, a predicate or a complement. This information gives important clues to the meaning of the text. But it is not sufficient to provide a full understanding of utterances.

Kecskes (2008) also emphasized that the dynamic nature of human speech communication requires the development of a model that recognizes both regularity and variability in meaning construction and comprehension, and takes into account both the selective and constitutive roles of context at the same time. From his work we can conclude that there are no meanings that are context-free because each lexical item is a repository of context (contexts) itself; that is to say, it is always implicitly indexed to a prior recurring context(s) of reference. Fauconnier (1997: 188) also wrote that when we deal with a single language the complexities of modeling meaning do not necessarily stand out. We have got another situation if we learn a foreign language, when we compare two or more languages, or translate something from one language to the other. In this case, one can realize that different languages have developed different ways of interpreting and understanding the required constructions. As a result, interlocutors face some difficulties in speech communication, because of their own socio-cultural experience with lexical items that leads to misunderstanding the appropriate meaning, and feel the difference in using lexical units without taking consideration of actual situational contexts.

In this case, we come to the definition of situation-bound utterance (SBU) which was proposed and developed by Kecskes. SBUs are determined as highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized (Kecskes, 2010). SBUs are frequently used in any language because these expressions serve as interactional patterns and rituals that usually mean the same to all speakers for a particular speech community (Kecskes, 2014). Consequently, misunderstanding of the real meaning of SBUs can significantly hinder the use of them in the process of communication for the learners of the second language. Since the conceptual system of the learner is based on his native language, the closest concept can be reached through the word of this language that denotes the concept in this language and these concepts are culture-specific. But when we have to deal with the second language acquisition, there can hardly be any direct route between the L2 word and the L2 concept at this stage of two-language system development (Kecskes, 2008).

In our opinion, the most adequate comprehension of the L2 word and a set of all possible connections of this word in phrases and set expressions can be reached through focusing on SBUs which contribute to the adjustment of the concepts in the native language with those of L2. For different languages which reflect different worldviews the associative connections will be different.

In this way, the research questions of our study are:

- *To what extent do Russian learners rely on situational context when inferring the meaning of situation-bound utterances?*
- *What are the instruments for the meaning inferring by the Russian learners? – translation of a separately taken utterance (without context) into learners' native tongue and translation of the same utterance exposed in context and interpretation of the meaning of the whole situation*

The results reported here can be considered a case study presenting the findings from a larger research project on SBU interpretation by Russian EFL learners. The present paper will focus on the strategies employed by Russian EFL non-linguistics students to interpret SBUs in authentic American English speech situations.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Research Design*

The experimental study was conducted at National Research Tomsk State University. The participants in our research were second year students of the Institute of Biology. Twenty-two students (7 male and 15 female students)

took part in the experimental study. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 20. According to a previously conducted placement test (Placement Test, Upstream, Enterprise), 9 students had an intermediate level of English and 13 students had a pre-intermediate level (B1-B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/>).

There were two stages in the undertaken research: preparatory and experimental. The preparatory stage aimed at selection of language units for input, design of teaching materials and experimental procedures, and learners' familiarization with the target language items, engagement them into practice exercises and pre-experimental training activities. The selection of relevant formulaic language units was done with the help of dictionaries, Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) ([www.americancorpus.org](http://www.americancorpus.org)), and consultations with native speakers of American English. In designing this study, we focused on investigating the learners' procedures for comprehension of SBUs and the context in which they were employed. During the preparatory part of our research the students got acquainted with the aim of the research, the basic definition of situation-bound utterances and with some examples of the discourses illustrating the use of situation-bound utterances in communication. The participants were asked for their consent to participate in an experiment as well as informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Then the participants were given a number of tasks to practice with SBUs and to determine the interpretation strategies use. In these tasks the students were supposed to comprehend the meaning of different dialogues with the aid of illustration, to match phrases in order to create proper dialogues and to choose among 4 options of phrases the only one that can be used in the given situation. We also distinguished three strategies or instruments on the basis of which the subjects could infer the meaning of situation-bound utterances: COM, meaning compositionality; CLO, meaning closeness to native culture; and SIT, meaning situation. It took us 1 lesson to introduce this material and fulfill all the necessary tasks.

A special pre-experimental training task, which preceded the experimental part, included 20 formulaic items (idioms (IDs), fixed expressions (FEs) and situation-bound utterances (SBUs)), presented to the participants in written form in micro situations. In this task the learners were introduced to three strategies mentioned above which help comprehension when dealing with language units in actual context.

In the experimental part of our study, the students were given two tasks relating to the comprehension of 10 selected SBUs typical in everyday oral communication. In the first task they were asked to identify the meaning of a situation-bound utterance presented as a separate word string without any situational context. These SBUs were given to students recorded and the participants first listened to them and then responded in the printed forms, where they could see the list of SBUs used. Additionally, the participants were supposed to specify what made them understand the meanings by choosing one or more relevant instruments they had applied to infer the meaning of the utterance. In the second part, they were asked to do a similar task with the same SBUs but the exposure of the utterances was context-based. After listening to 10 short dialogues in which those utterances were used in the authentic context of contemporary American English, the subjects had to translate the SBU's meaning and interpret the situation. After listening to the dialogues, recorded by native speakers, and presented twice, the students had to identify once more the meaning of the SBU(s), to describe the general meaning of the situations and to give the examples of using the similar utterances in the Russian language and culture. After that, the participants had to point out the instruments they had used to identify the meaning of utterances. Those two tasks were done in a week after the preparatory stage of the experiment. We devoted 1 lesson to the experimental part of the study, which finalized the completion of the research framework.

It is noteworthy of mentioning that while treating the design of our study we foresaw some research instruments for the fixation of the students' thoughts when they identify the meaning of the utterances. We stopped at the way of SBUs verbalization in the written form. As a data source, we used the written responses of the participants, which also served a way to thoughts' verbalization by means of the learners' mother tongue, and gave us evidence of their individual comprehension and strategy reliance.

It should be mentioned that our study had a cross-cultural character since the investigated material refers to the authentic language of American native speakers, but the learners of this language are the students of a Russian university who learn this language as a foreign one outside its natural language environment. We chose the translation of relevant utterances to the Russian language as an instrument of verbalization and material for analysis in order to study the way in which L2 socio-cultural and situation-determined lexical units correspond to the system

of L1 for Russian students. Another useful instrument was the description of the general meaning of the situations and giving the examples of using the similar utterances in Russian culture. These instruments allowed the students to penetrate deeper in comprehension of SBUs meanings in the process of comparing them with specific cultural aspects and norms of generally accepted in the Russian language.

## 2.2. Data Collection and Results

Data for this study came from special Pre-experimental training and two tasks of the Experimental part. The results of the learners' identification of different types of formulaic language at the pre-experimental stage and the strategies they used in this process are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Identification of various types of formulaic language based on written context

Formulaic Language items	Category	Number of guesses		Instruments to infer the meaning of SBUs		
		Right	Wrong	CLO	COM	SIT
Can I help you?	SBU	12	10	7	2	11
I am just looking	SBU	14	8	4	4	13
Get out of here!	SBU	16	6	3	4	13
Can I help you?	SBU	12	10	2	5	11
Don't mention it!	SBU	13	9	2	6	9
Be my guest	SBU	14	8	2	8	8
Welcome aboard	SBU	18	4	4	6	11
What can I do for you?	SBU	17	5	5	4	8
How do you do?	SBU	11	11	2	9	8
Come on	SBU	15	7	3	6	9
Piece of cake!	SBU	4	18	4	1	9
<i>Total</i>		<i>146</i>	<i>96</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>110</i>

Table 2 shows the results of SBUs identification by the subjects when the utterances were given to them without the situational context and in the situational context in a native-like presentation, i.e. orally.

Table 2. Identification of SBUs presented orally (without the situational context and in the situational context)

Phrase	Without the situational context		In the situational context	
	Right interpretation	Wrong interpretation	Right interpretation	Wrong interpretation
You bet	0	22	16	6
Here you go	4	18	20	2
Give me a break	1	21	19	3
Get out of here	4	18	21	1
Come again	8	14	16	6
Take a seat	18	4	17	5
How are you doing?	16	6	22	0
No problem	22	0	21	1
Be my guest	2	20	18	4
What's up?	20	2	21	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>95</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>191</i>	<i>29</i>

The results of SBUs meaning comprehension with the use of different instruments (COM, meaning compositionality; CLO, meaning closeness to native culture; and SIT, meaning situation) are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The distribution of comprehension strategies in context-based vs no context exposure (instruments) (the subjects used when inferring the meaning of SBUs without the) situational context and in the situational context

Phrase	Without the situational context			In the situational context		
	CLO	COM	SIT	CLO	COM	SIT
You bet	3	16	5	1	7	9
Here you go	1	12	9	6	4	16
Give me a break	6	13	5	4	6	9
Get out of here	6	10	7	3	6	18
Come again	3	17	4	8	7	11

Take a seat	3	13	7	3	5	16
How are you doing?	7	14	3	7	5	17
No problem	12	9	4	10	4	16
Be my guest	5	15	4	3	2	18
What's up?	9	7	9	5	3	19
<i>Total</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>116</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>149</i>

### 3. Discussion

We will begin by analyzing the data in Table 1, which presents the results of the pre-experimental part. After fulfilling this task the number of the right answers in categorizing various types of formulaic language items, including SBUs, was equal to 146 from 242 possible answers according to the ratio of students (22) and SBUs (11) in this task. The data showed that before dealing with the tasks of experimental part the subjects learned to identify SBUs and distinguish them from IDs and FEs (more than 60% of answers were correct). It should be also mentioned that 110 from these 146 right answers were given on the basis of situational context, which constitutes 75.3%. These data confirm that the context happened to be supportive in the comprehension process which helped students identify the meanings correctly. The students' performance demonstrated that they were aware of the meaning change depending on actual context and the role of SBUs in the efficacy of communication with native speakers of contemporary American English after the preparatory stage of our experiment and they were ready to fulfill the task of the experimental part in a proper way.

In the experimental part, the first task demonstrated that the absence of a situational context negatively influenced the correctness of SBUs translation as the number of the right answers was only 95 cases (43%), while that of the wrong answers was 125 (57%) from the total number of all given variants. It is natural to assume that when the situational context was absent the students basically inferred the meaning of SBUs on the basis of compositionality (COM) which comprised 116 (51%). Only 55 (24 %) and 57 (25%) of the answers were given by the students on the basis of closeness to the native culture (CLO) and as situation-based (SIT). Analyzing the data of Table 2, we can notice that such phrases as *Take a seat*, *How are you doing?*, *No problem*, *What's up?* were interpreted by students correctly even in the absence of a situational context. We connect these data, on the one hand, with the fact that those SBUs were familiar to them due to their previous experience (when these SBUs are familiar to the students because they have learnt them before), and, on the other hand, with the presence in modern Russian of similar phrases or utterances that are close in their meanings to the ones under consideration. It should be mentioned that these SBUs in particular are very often used in mass media and in different kinds of advertisements. They are also widespread in Russian colloquial language as a result of borrowing from English when using them in chatting through the Internet.

Most SBUs (6 utterances): *You bet*, *Here you go*, *Give me a break*, *Get out of here*, *Come again*, *Be my guest* were translated incorrectly in the majority of cases when they were given to the students without a situational context and all of them were interpreted into Russian based on their compositionality. We can suggest that the reliance on the word-for-word translation and determination of the SBUs meaning according to their linguistic context did not contribute to inferring the correct meaning of a definite phrase as it has larger dependence on the context and situation of communication.

Only when SBUs were given in the situational context the number of the correct answers increased significantly to 191 (87% vs 43% obtained after the first task) and the number of the wrong answers decreased to 29 (13% vs 57% in the first task). We consider such phrases as *You bet*, *Be my guest* to be the most difficult ones for the students to infer their real meaning, as the majority of incorrect answers in the subjects' responses fell on them. In our opinion, this fact is connected with a great difference in the meaning of these SBUs as utterances highly dependent on the situation. Students recognized familiar words which comprised those utterances and considered it enough for understanding. So they relied on compositionality support only, which misled them (and it makes very difficult for Russian non-linguistic students to recognize and identify them). We can notice from the data of Table 2 that some students could not cope with the meanings of some SBUs both in and without context-based exposure. But the phrase *No problem* did not cause any difficulty for the majority of students and its meaning was correctly understood by the subjects even when it was given without the situational context. We suggest that it is connected with the fact that there is a similar SBU in the Russian language where it has such meanings as "It's OK" or "Not at

all”. In our study this phrase participated in the following dialogue:

- *Thank you very much for joining us.*
- *Oh, no problem.*

There is only one case, when after listening to this phrase in the dialogue one of the students translated it in a wrong way, namely, “Of course, I’ll do it”, in spite of the fact that he interpreted it correctly in the first case, when the utterance was given without a context. Such an inclination to wrong understanding of this phrase, in our opinion, is connected with his desire to give a direct answer to the words “for joining us” in which he expressed his readiness to participate in what he had been offered. It is probably explained by the special way of thinking for a Russian man who considers himself as a part of a community and greatly values acknowledgement from the community. Another way of explanation of this misunderstanding is that the student did not know the proper translation of the words “for joining us” that led him to confusion.

When SBUs were given in the situational context most of the students (61%) distinguished namely SIT as the basis for inferring the meaning of utterances (149 answers). However from the data presented in table 3 we can see that closeness to native culture – 50 (20%) and compositionality – 49 (19%) also play an important role in the process of understanding the utterances.

In the course of the experimental part the students demonstrated their interest in the possibility of giving their own variants of using (the) similar phrases in modern Russian. Most of them used the slang of young people and, as a result, they were surprised with the performance of such lexical units as “ladno” and “davay” in their variants. These phrases are very popular in everyday communication. What is more, these phrases can express agreement, refusal, gratitude or even disbelief depending on the intonation with which they are said. Besides, these phrases are used for finishing communication and for saying “Goodbye” in the modern language environment which is influenced by globalization and co-opts the expressions of English and Anglo-Saxon culture being extrinsic for it before.

It should be also mentioned that the application of learning SBUs contribute to the realization of a communicative-cognitive approach in L2 acquisition because this approach pays due attention to the learners’ actual needs, advocates using the functionally appropriate language, focuses on the communicative skills, and enhances the learners’ communicative and cognitive abilities. The fundamental idea of the cognitive approach nowadays is that the learning process should be aimed at acquiring or rather inferring knowledge, structuring and systematically arranging its units, storing and applying them (Obdalova, 2014).

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has shown the importance of a situational context in the process of L2 acquisition in groups of Russian non-language-majoring students. From the data obtained we conclude that in order to infer the meaning of this type of utterances it is very important for the students to rely on content-based exposure and on the use of a combination of strategies. They applied this strategy while fulfilling all the tasks of pre-experimental training and the experimental part of the study. When a phrase is learnt in a situational context, its meaning becomes understandable for students and they apply this phrase correctly in different situations of communication. Reliance on compositionality and closeness to one’s own culture are helpful instruments for meaning comprehension but they seem to have lower significance than that of the actual situation. The difficulties in SBUs understanding appear when their compositionality and the meaning of separate words are very far from the real meaning of the phrases in actual context. Consequently, only through the situational context the students overcame the obstacles in understanding the meanings of SBUs and were able to comprehend the meaning of the situations in which they were used. According to the data of the experimental study most of the students used the situation-based strategy for inferring the meaning of SBUs. Although 2 other types of comprehension support instruments (closeness to native culture and compositionality of utterances) should also be taken into consideration while learning to infer the meanings of culture- and situation-specific language items.

In order to distinguish the correlation between words and expressions of L2 and the equivalents of them in L1 the most adequate ways are considered to be:

- a) a written translation that allows basing on the compositionality of a lexical unit;

- b) interpretation of the situation sense to interfere into the peculiarities of socio-cultural features of communication;
- c) suggestion of equivalents to these utterances in Russian culture in a similar situation that allows for the comparing and combining of culture-specific concepts.

The analysis of the obtained data contributes to the development of L2 acquisition methods and makes it possible to work out a set of exercises for teaching students to perceive not only separate lexical units, but the whole complex of their use in different verbal surrounding depending on the situation of communication. In this case we have dealt with the realization of a cognitive-communicative approach in EFL teaching because the method of teaching we suggest allows the inferring of knowledge, structuring and systematically arranging of L2 lexical units, along with storing and applying them.

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