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Contextualization or de-contextualization: student teachers’ perceptions about teaching a language in context
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Abstract

Language cannot be acquired or learned through de-contextualized practice as many studies emphasized, thus, this study aims at investigating student teachers’ views about teaching a language in context. To that end, 30 senior student teachers of Uludag University Faculty of Education ELT Department were given a five-point likert scale questionnaire besides conducting the structured interviews just after they had completed their practicum. As a result, the significance of contextualization was esteemed by most of the participants and they were able to use different techniques of creating context when teaching during their practicum. Moreover, the participants reported that more samples of different contexts for teaching different subjects should be provided to them to plan and teach more effective lessons.

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1. Introduction

The definition of context varies according to different researchers. It can be defined as the situation or body of information which provides the background for a lot of language use (Harmer, 1991); as a word or phrase placed in a meaningful language sequence (Brown, 1994); as the learning situation in which learners can get the meaning that makes sense (Van Oers, 1998). Language cannot be acquired or learned through de-contextualized practice by referring to students’ needs for deeper experience in language learning rather than pure rote learning (Harmer, 1991). Kapur (2009) also emphasizes the importance of seeing the language as a whole rather than in pieces through meaningful contexts which should foster rich input for language practice. Moreover, when forming a context, students’ immediate environment and some pedagogical principals when teaching a language such as moving from known to unknown, from local to global, from simple to complex and from concrete to abstract should be considered. Furthermore, language input cannot only be comprehensible but also memorable when the language is contextualized by using relevant topics for learners (Bourke, 2006).

With the onset of Communicative Approach in 1970s and several the other methods such as Cognitive approach and The Natural Approach, teachers tended to use the standards in their curricula and teaching which

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emphasized the importance of authentic language input in real-world contexts (Schrum and Glison, 2000; Tosun, 2008). Moreover, the notion of context as a background information for understanding comes from theories of reading, listening comprehension, and vocabulary building (Walz, 1989). The rationale for contextualizing language teaching can be based on Ausubel’s Subsumption Theory (1968) which emphasized the importance of already existing knowledge that can be activated via different opportunities to relate the new material with the existing schemata. Another theory that supports the use of context in language teaching is Schema Theory which was proposed by Bartlett who believed that preexisting knowledge with reference to the relevant information in memory promotes understanding and recall in language learning (Nassaji, 2007).

De-contextualized way of teaching grammar was mentioned as the main shortcoming of traditional grammar materials in which every rule is explained and followed by some exercises without placing the subject within a meaningful context (Petrovitz, 1997). Thus, Hinkel and Fotos (2002) focused particularly on a contextual grammar and referred to contextualized teaching as related elements and structures to be taught. Contextualization helps students gain the way of constructing meaning which changes depending on the context in which meaning occurs through different activity types such as writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

Yin Mee (2002) also emphasizes that language learning should not be considered by teachers and textbook producers as a linguistic activity through a grammatical syllabus which is deprived of stimulating content. Moreover, she advocates the importance of contextualizing language use for language learning by referring the idea of literacy which provides different text types to contextualize the teaching of grammar. Hence, the de-contextualized, sentence-level presentation of grammar that dominates many pedagogical materials by following a discrete-point approach should be redesigned as a contextualized language instruction (Schneider, 2005). The use of stories particularly authentic animated ones for children might provide not only rich, varied, and contextualized language but it might also provide opportunities to the language teacher for presenting and practicing language through tasks and activities derived from story themes which enable teachers to contextualize the whole lesson (Tosun, 2008).

The courses in ELT program do not include a course precisely aimed at educating student teachers in terms of contextualization but contextualizing language teaching has been emphasized in different methodology courses in the teacher education program. Therefore, this study aims to investigate student teachers’ perspectives about creating context to make language input more comprehensible for learners who are learning a new language.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

30 4th grade student teachers, 5 of whom were male, were involved in this study. When their teaching experiences were investigated, it was understood that most of the participants (17 student teachers) did not have teaching experience except for school experience micro lessons and some of them (9 of them) had short time private lesson experiences to the children of their neighbors to support their learning, to help them do homework, to prepare project works to their friends when learning English, and to prepare students for different exams such as written ones in their English courses, pilot tests in their training centers, and National Placement Tests (SBS) at different levels (6th, 7th, and 8th), and 4 of them had more formal teaching experiences in training centers at primary school level.

2.2. Data collection tools and procedure

A 25 item five-likert scale questionnaire with 3 categories such as the general points regarding contextualization, the techniques of contextualization, and the requirements of contextualization regarding
language learning components was administered to the participants. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants to have triangulation.

2.3. Data analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed through SPSS to have simple statistical results such as the means, standard deviations and frequency of each item. Cronbach’s Alfa was used through SPSS as a tool for gauging the reliability of the study. The results of Cronbach’s Alfa regarding the questionnaire indicated that the answers of the questionnaire were reliable; 0.925. For the qualitative aspect of the study, the data obtained from the interviews were transcribed, content-analyzed and grouped to get deeper understanding of the participants’ views as to contextualization.

3. Findings

Based on the results related to the general points regarding contextualization, it is seen that most of the participants thought that creating context helped them understand how to take learners’ attention to the lesson (Item 6; 100%), it was necessary to teach language effectively (Item 1; 93.3%), contextualization enabled them to prepare more effective lessons via using different techniques (Item 4; 90%). All of the participants (Item 25; 100%) held with the idea that each student teacher should be educated to create context when teaching and also most of them (Item 7; 90%) agreed that being educated as to teaching a language through contextualization motivated them to make use of contextualization in the practice school. Regarding the item investigating their feelings about being educated about contextualization during their practicum, the results indicated that they were happy to be trained particularly on contextualization during their practicum (Item 8; 86.6%). Regarding the necessity of being creative when planning context, some of the students were neutral. Although all of the participants agreed on the necessity of being educated, the results became varied when they were expected to compare whether creating effective context depends on being creative rather than being educated (Item 20; Neutral: 23.3%; Agree:50%). With regard to the way of being educated, 93.4% of the participants agreed that variety of contextualized activities from different coursebooks rather than theoretical information about contextualization enabled them to create context when teaching a language (Item 9) and to teach their lessons more effectively (Item 27; 83.3%). Although some of the students agreed (Item 5; 56.6%) on the idea that contextualization can be taught in one of the methodology courses rather than in a lesson of school experience, the presence of a few students who were neutral (23.3%) about the issue indicated that teaching a language through contextualization needs to be emphasized during their school experiences.

Another group in the questionnaire was related to the techniques of creating context in language teaching. Based on the results (frequency and mean of each item), it can be said that the participants could contextualize their lessons by using the following techniques from the most frequently used to the least one successively.

Table 1. The results indicating the techniques of creating context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Techniques of contextualization</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Frequency (Agree)</th>
<th>Frequency (Strongly Agree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Using features of life in Turkey</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Personalization by appealing to individuals’ interests/ hobbies</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Using features of life in Bursa</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Using audi-visual materials for personalization</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Relating language points to students’ lives by telling a story</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Using the immediate context</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Using Turkish culture / tradition</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Individualization by addressing to different learning styles</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Using personalization by eliciting a story from students</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As is seen in the above table, the student teachers gave importance mostly to cultural context and personalization in language teaching. Due to the minimal differences among mean scores, it can be concluded in general that the participants were able to use the necessary techniques to create context when teaching a language.

Another category in the questionnaire was concerned about the components of a language. The results with regard to the participants’ views on the necessity of creating context when teaching different components of language learning revealed the following order successively; grammar (mean; 4,63); reading (mean; 4,60); vocabulary (mean; 4,57); listening (mean; 4,53); speaking (mean; 4,47); writing (mean; 4,47). The order of the language components in terms of creating context was consistent with what literature says about contextualizing language teaching in that creating context when teaching a language firstly mentioned as an important point with the theories of reading, listening comprehension, and vocabulary building (Walz, 1989). However, different from the literature, grammar was placed at the first rank in this study. That is to say, the participants mostly believed that they should create context when teaching grammar. The fact that contextualizing grammar teaching was focused after 1990s and the fact that grammar teaching was still the dominant aspect of language learning and teaching in Turkey (Çelik Korkmaz, 2010) might explain why the participants consider this issue more than the others.

In addition to the results of the questionnaire, the participants’ views about contextualized language teaching were obtained through interviews. Below are the excerpts of the interviewees’ statements about contextualization. “I” stands for the interviewee:

I2: “Contextualization is very important in language teaching to give a reason when teaching especially to children to take their attention. I became more aware of it when it was emphasized during the school experience period…..”.

I4: “…It is certainly a very important point when teaching a language, as children understand the lesson more easily. We can take their attention when we design our lessons by relating their lives and by considering their environments….”.

I5: “…Before going to real schools, I had never realized how important creating context was when teaching. Now I plan each of my lessons within the context and I observe its positive results…..”.

I10: “I understand now that we have lots of deficiencies regarding contextualization. We could have never learnt if we had not practiced. In fact we were using contextualized teaching in our presentation in some courses, but we did not have opportunity to practice our planned lessons in reality. Therefore, being educated about contextualization was so efficient for me to understand why I should teach within a context and whether it would be effective or not in reality”.

I6: “…each of us had different practical problems when designing our lessons depending on contextualization, so we could not do what we actually had to do. We need to learn how to create context in detail and we need to keep it in our mind when planning our lessons during school experience and teaching practice”.

I8: “…I am happy to be able to teach my lessons in a meaningful way, as I could take students’ attention by considering their own lives, interests and hobbies to create context. When I compare what I did and what my friends who did not care about creating context when teaching from the other school experience groups did, I can say that I will be a good teacher, as I noticed the power of contextualizing a language in learning a new subject…..”.

As it is understood from the above statements, the interview results regarding contextualized language teaching indicated mostly positive ideas as well. When they were asked to evaluate their theoretical courses in which contextualization was emphasized as an important point for teaching a language, the participants felt that they needed more practical tasks as it is seen in the below statements.

I3: “Samples given in the courses were so supportive for me to understand how contextualized units were more efficient. However, more samples could have been included to create different ideas when planning a lesson and using different techniques when teaching a language…..”.

I1: “It could have been designed in a more detailed and comprehensive way. For example, I could not see any examples appropriate for Turkish culture within the samples; thus it was difficult for me to make use of Turkish culture when teaching a language”.

To sum up, based on the interview results, it could be said that the participants were exposed to contextualization first in ‘Approaches in ELT’ course, but without being aware of its name. Later in ‘Teaching
Young Learners’ courses, the importance of creating context when teaching a language was frequently emphasized and finally in ‘Teaching Language Skills’ course, they were given feedback about the issue of teaching within a context after their micro teaching lessons. Most of the participants stated that they understand what it really means and how to create context by using different techniques during teaching experience. The participants thought that being educated about the issue was necessary and useful for them to prepare an effective lesson plan and to create context for their teaching subjects in school experience. Although they mentioned that they were motivated to teach a language in context by the input given in theoretical courses of their teacher education program, they added they would have gotten more benefit from it if they had found more opportunity to examine more samples of different contexts for teaching different subjects. Therefore, we, as teacher educators, can provide student teachers different tasks to make them understand better how to create context when teaching a language such as redesigning the de-contextualized lessons within the coursebooks used in our school experience classes in a contextualized way, which enables them to compare the results of contextualized and de-contextualized lessons.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study justified the significance of contextualizing language teaching, as it was esteemed by most of the participants. Examining the student teachers’ perceptions about the issues in the field of ELT is so crucial that effective language teaching depends on well-educated teachers. The study indicated that most of the student teachers agreed on the positive effects of creating context when introducing a new subject not only to take learners’ attention but also to have long term learning. Therefore, it is suggested that all student teachers should be educated about the ways of creating context to teach language in a more well-organized and systematic way during their teaching education program.

References