Abstract

It is widely accepted that putting language into context has a significant impact on learning. There may also be a strong relationship between language contextualisation and culture. In many Middle-Eastern countries, for instance, there may be many cultural barriers for English language learners. This paper attempts to explain the impact of culture in its broad sense on contextualising vocabulary and sentences in the English language. It discusses the cultural difficulties that many individuals face whilst learning English.

This paper begins by outlining some definitions of culture and language contextualisation and goes on to explain the barriers individuals may confront while learning English. Examples used here are from Middle-Eastern learners who have tried to learn English as a foreign language. Finally, it has been concluded that culture does have a key role in identifying different contexts for the same linguistic term.

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with the influence of culture in identifying contexts for linguistic terms and expressions with a focus on learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in academic environments such as schools and universities. The paper is divided into three major parts. First, it explains the relationship between language contextualisation and culture. It then discusses the effect of culture on contextualising ‘vocabulary’ and the difficulties learners may face. Finally, it deals with cultural differences when expressing certain types of sentences, such as making polite requests and greetings.
2. The relationship between language contextualisation and culture

Many linguists and researchers agree that ‘culture must be integrated with language teaching’ (Paige et al., 2003). In addition, Burns & Coffin (2001) argue that acceptable contexts vary according to culture. Goode et al. (2000) define culture as an ‘integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs [...] and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations’ (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003:1). It can be understood that language in itself is part of culture. The relationship between language and culture, therefore, is inevitable.

Concerning language teaching, Scrivener (2011) insists on the importance of finding contexts for the linguistic items that are being taught. Language contextualisation has become the new trend of language teaching in many places. Language contextualisation is ‘putting language items into a meaningful and real context rather than being treated as isolated items of language for language manipulation practice only’ (British Council & BBC: 2010). To emphasise the role of context in language teaching, Thornbury (1999) suggests a ‘Situational Language Teaching’ method in which the main focus is on providing a context to facilitate learning a language in a class. In addition, Bax (2003) considers contextualisation of language as the most important thing in the process of teaching languages. Appreciating the right context for using the language properly is considered more important than sticking to the grammar and rules of a language (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003).

By the time the learner faces formal instructional learning at school or university; s/he has learned many norms of society and has some knowledge about the culture (Saville-Troike, 2010). Therefore, the learner already has some background knowledge or what is called ‘schema’. This ‘schema’ facilitates the comprehension of the right context in which to use a certain word or expression (Saville-Troike, 2010). Consequently, the context that already exists in his/her culture can be easily recognised: respecting the learners’ culture is essential for any EFL teacher (Lindsay, 2000).

Taking English language learning as an example, the learner may face cross-cultural differences (Swan & Smith, 2001). Obviously, English language is seen as a western language and as part of the western culture. It is worth noting here that there are fundamental differences between western and eastern cultures (Sheedy, 2011). As context is part of culture, the contexts in which English language is used will be affected. Therefore, it can be said that language contextualisation is closely related to the culture of a certain society. In addition, successful teachers should find a culturally appropriate context for any linguistic item they teach (Lindsay, 2000).

3. Difficulties in contextualising English vocabulary

In most eastern countries, religion plays a pivotal role in the life of individuals (Swan & Smith, 2001). Therefore, there are social and religious boundaries to finding an acceptable context for some English vocabulary.
Learners may face difficulties finding suitable contexts for words and vocabulary that are alien to their culture. For a western student, the concept of ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ is quite familiar. However, in Middle-Eastern countries such concepts are not common. Therefore, a teacher can explain such terms, but learners, especially those who are young, certainly have difficulty grasping such concepts.

Another concept which is not very common in eastern countries is ‘adoption’. When a learner cannot find an equivalent word or term for such a word in their society, it is not easy for them to properly understand the word (Harmer, 2007).

A third example is the concept of ‘gay marriage’ or ‘homosexuality’. This phenomenon is hardly seen in eastern countries. Therefore, it may not be easy for a Middle-Eastern learner to find a context for such words or concepts. Another word which could be quite confusing for an eastern learner is ‘dowry’. The literal meaning of this word, according to the Oxford Online Dictionary (2013), is ‘an amount of property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage’. However, in almost all eastern countries this is quite different as it relates to the amount of money or property that the bride gives to the family of the groom (BBC: 2008). Words such as these, which have opposite meanings depending on the culture, could create even more confusion for an English learner.

4. Difficulties in contextualising English sentences

Often, contextualisation of sentences is even more difficult than vocabulary. Finding the appropriate context for how sentences are used is not an easy task when the culture of the language is different from the people who learn it. In this paper, the difficulties learners face whilst learning how to make a polite request and greetings will be discussed for two main reasons. First, they are seen as the areas where English learners most commonly make mistakes. Secondly, the impact of culture on language will be very clear in requests and greetings.

English language is considered to be an ‘indirect’ language, whereas, most if not all, eastern languages are considered ‘direct’ languages (Swan & Smith, 2001). This will have a great impact on the way an eastern learner uses the language, even if it is a western language such as English.

In relation to the English language, it is common to make polite requests by using expressions such as ‘would you like’, ‘would you mind’, ‘could you’, ‘can I’ or ‘may I’ (Parrot, 2010). This is part of the nature of the language in conversation. It would seem very impolite for an English speaker to go to a restaurant and say ‘I want a bottle of water’. Such directness would be considered rude and inappropriate.

On the other hand, in most Middle-Eastern countries, it is normal for someone to go to a restaurant and use the expression ‘I want a sandwich’. Nobody is offended, probably because most languages in the Middle-East are considered to be direct languages (Swan & Smith, 2001). Another example is when people ask for favours,
English speakers tend to say ‘would you do me a favour?’ (Thornbury, 1999), but in the Middle-East most people are more direct saying ‘do me a favour’. Therefore, due to the differences in culture and language, contextualising the English sense of making polite requests would be a serious challenge for both language teachers and learners.

English speaking people have different ways of greeting each other depending on the relationship. Friends, for instance, greet each other by saying ‘Hi’, ‘Hey’ or ‘Hiya’. The formality of the relationship has a direct impact on the manner of greeting. In English language, if an employee greets his/her boss, they tend to use a formal structure like ‘Good morning, Sir’ or ‘Good afternoon’ depending on the time of day. Therefore, the relationship affects the greeting.

In contrast, in Middle-Eastern countries, as religion has a great impact on the individual’s life, people tend to use the same structure for greetings (Swan & Smith, 2001). In most Middle-Eastern countries, the word ‘Salam u Alaik’, Arabic in origin, meaning ‘peace be upon you’ in English, is very commonly used due to its religious connotations. Consequently, English language learners may face difficulties using various structures of greetings in English.

**Conclusions**

Based on the discussions outlined in this paper, it can be said that contextualising certain words or concepts such as ‘boyfriend’, ‘girlfriend’ and ‘homosexuality’, which are socially and culturally unacceptable in Middle-Eastern countries may be very challenging for EFL learners. Other words, like ‘dowry’, have a totally different meaning and sense in the Middle-East and so, at vocabulary level, culture seems to be a barrier to contextualising language.

At sentence level, the way English people make requests and greet one another is different to Middle-Eastern people due to the difference in culture. In contextualising such types of sentences, English learners again may face difficulties. Therefore, it can be concluded that culture does affect the way English can be contextualised in Middle-Eastern countries.
References


