

## **A Theoretical Foundation Study on the Use of Context in Second Language Comprehension for EFL Learners and its Implications for Second Language Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

*Second-language learners struggle to understand the meaning of a given discourse, whether it is spoken or written, without context. Learners of a second language can infer meaning and gain comprehension with the help of context. This paper focuses on the theory of context and its implications for second language comprehension and learning, as well as its significance in the field of second language teaching. The article highlights the role of context in the comprehension of listening and reading, as well as the meaning of written and spoken discourses.*

**Keywords:** *Comprehension, discourse, second language teaching, visual context, contextual knowledge.*

### **Introduction**

Using context in second language comprehension and learning is very important in English language teaching and learning. Studying any language without using context is useless because context is the way most teachers study the language. Thus, this paper will emphasize the theory of context in second language learning and comprehension, along with its implications and significance for second language teaching.

#### Definition of context in second language learning

Lee and Van Patten (1995) define context as making or creating meaning from the information content in the input. It is not surprising then that most second language teachers, regardless of their specific teaching methodology, agree that presenting new items in context is a good idea. There has been a growing awareness on the part of educators that contextualizing lesson presentations has become a widely accepted rule of good language teaching. This stems from the belief that context plays a major role in language comprehension and second language learning.

#### The role of context in listening comprehension

Context plays a crucial role in both listening and reading. It is only through context that we can infer the correct meaning, both in reading and listening, because of the multiplicity of meanings inherent in any stretch of speech. Brown (1980, p. 189) says "a single sentence can seldom be fully analyzed without considering its context." He also

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claims that context is one of the essential elements that allow people to communicate unambiguously with one another. Second-language students will find comprehending the meaning of a given discourse, whether it is written or spoken, exceedingly challenging without context. Context allows second-language learners to infer meaning and achieve comprehension. The whole-language approach to language learning tightly connects context with the ability to infer meaning and achieve comprehension. According to this approach, language should always be meaningful and authentic. Learning takes place when people engage in meaningful and purposeful social interactions. This means that reducing language to fragments of correct grammatical structures or vocabulary lists will not aid the students in their comprehension. Unfortunately, many second language teachers believe that the explanation of vocabulary will lead to comprehension since it will compensate for the absence of context. However, the use of context has proven to be more effective. Vacca & Vacca (1998) assert that context reinforcement is valuable because it reinforces and extends an important skill: using context to get meaning. Moreover, students who construct and utilize contextual knowledge can discern subtle nuances in word usage (Vacca & Vacca, 1998). Kramsh (1993) argues that shaping context through a foreign language determines the types of meanings students can explore and discover. According to him, encouraging students to discover more meaning leads to richer learning opportunities. This means that, thanks to context, it is possible to achieve comprehension and increase the amount of second language learning. Research supports the important role that context plays.

Omaggio (1993) reports that studies related to listening comprehension showed clearly that relevant contextual knowledge is a prerequisite for comprehending prose passages. Bransford and Johnson (1972) conducted some studies. These two researchers gave a group of students learning French as a second language an ambiguous listening passage without any context. Then, the researchers provided the second group with pictorial contexts used by advanced organizers while giving them the same listening passage. The results showed that pictorial contexts had a significant effect. Students who were given a context for the passage made significantly fewer comprehension errors than the first group. Furthermore, the number of facts and legitimate inferences they recalled from the text passage was significantly higher.

#### Role of context in visual context

Bransford and Johnson (1972) believe that visual context allowed the second group of students to retrieve relevant schema for their cognitive structure to aid in the comprehension process. Omaggio (1993) stresses the importance of visual context. She notices that the visual context for subjects at relatively low proficiency levels in the second language provides enough background information to aid them in finding an appropriate overall schema for comprehension. People use the word schema to describe how they organize and store information in their heads. Vacca & Vacca (2005) say that when context activates schema, learners will be able to access what they know and match it to the information in a text.

#### Role of context in reading comprehension

Hudson (1982) explored the effects of context on reading comprehension. He conducted an experimental study on a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) students and found that the provision of contextual cues greatly aided the students' comprehension of a reading passage. Hudson (1982) concluded that inducted schemata could override language proficiency as a factor in the second language.

Johnson (1982) found that background knowledge significantly enhanced comprehension more than vocabulary knowledge in a study conducted with ESL readers (p. 114). Johnson's subjects were given a list of words before reading the text to help with comprehension. However, this list was not helpful compared to the background knowledge. Johnson (1982) concludes that students need to learn language in a logical

context through either authentic discourse or materials to improve their second language. Johnson's findings support the view that content-based instruction is important for comprehension and second language learning. Content-based instruction refers to the necessity of teaching language in contextualized use rather than teaching fragments of correct sentences. Brinton (1989) asserts that the contextual use of the language will make second language learners aware of the larger discourse-level features of the language and the social interaction patterns that are essential to effective language use, as well as the correct grammatical conventions. This means that the command of grammar does not guarantee comprehension. Second-language learners need to understand language beyond the sentence level to infer the meaning of the message.

Additionally, reading a novel resulted in the successful recognition of 75% of new words, according to a study by Saragi, Nation, and Meisler (1978). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that a significant number of unfamiliar L2 words can be effectively retained when encountered in context. However, the readers can infer correctly or remember the meaning of unknown words from reading them in context rather than in isolation (Hulstijn, 1993; Mondria & Wot-de-Boer, 1991).

#### Implications for teaching

The value of the context lies in its authenticity, whose benefits are of three different sorts. First, assessing the meaning of a word in context obliges the learner to develop strategies, such as anticipating and inferencing, which become increasingly profitable as learning progresses because they instill an attitude of self-reliance that is the hallmark of proficiency. Second, systematically encountering new words in context highlights their use in discourse for communication purposes. Lastly, the context reveals how the words are utilized. All of these factors may contribute to a learner's L2 autonomy and facilitate the transfer of knowledge that accompanies it. They also point to the fact that the mental representation of a word's meaning develops with successive encounters in different contexts.

Therefore, second language teachers must carefully teach language in context while incorporating schema to activate and make the student's background knowledge relevant throughout the learning process. Teachers need to exercise caution when doing this. Teachers need to make sure that they do not introduce too much context that is beyond the students' backgrounds. Students may become confused and lose track if too much context beyond their backgrounds is introduced. Second, to teach context effectively, instructors should engage students in productive practice activities that extend beyond the boundaries of a single sentence and encompass a wide range of communicative contexts where language is used.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, context plays a crucial role in comprehension and second language learning. Second language teachers need to teach language in context to make their students enjoy learning how to communicate in a second language.

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