

The hidden paradigm in contemporary ELT: Context, Analysis, Practice

Jason Anderson

IATEFL Voices 2017

The importance of context in helping language learners to understand new language (structural, functional or lexis) is acknowledged in most, if not all recent approaches to language teaching, including both weak and strong forms of communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based language teaching (TBLT), content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and text-based instruction (TBI). Whether the context be textual, situational or visual, it plays an important role in helping learners to decode the meaning, form and use of new language.

In view of this, it is curious that no explicit reference to context is provided in any of the most popular 3-stage models currently used in teacher education to support the lesson planning of trainee and novice teachers. This includes the often criticised, but enduring PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) model, more recent, flexible models, such as ESA (Engage-Study-Activate) and ARC (Authentic practice-Restricted practice-Clarification) and alternative models, such as TTT (Test-Teach-Test) or Willis's (1996) Framework for Task-based Learning. This lack of attention to context may serve to exacerbate a problem often noticed by teacher educators, that novice teachers sometimes devote little attention to it, or neglect it altogether. In light of this, I would like to share a simple three-stage model (Context-Analysis-Practice) that integrates context as a central component of new language lessons, one that I have found useful on preservice training courses such as the Cambridge CELTA and the Trinity CertTESOL, and also for the subsequent support and development of novice teachers. I describe it below not as an innovation, but as a reflection of shared notions of best practice – a 'social fact', as Freeman (2016: 16) would put it.

Before that, in order to document the existence and emergence of this social fact, I provide an overview of trends in the contextualisation of new language in global ELT coursebooks over the last 30 years, showing that, since the late 1990s, the dominance of text-based contextualisation reflects a small but significant paradigm shift in how new language is introduced in coursebooks, a shift that has gone largely unnoticed, and lends further support to the model proposed.

Changes in contextualisation trends in ELT coursebooks 1986-2016

I conducted an analysis of first editions of popular global coursebooks at intermediate (B1) level over the last 30 years, interested to find out what changes have occurred with regard to how new language is contextualised in such coursebooks. I chose first editions, working on the assumption that they are more likely to incorporate innovation than later editions. I analysed the first ten activities of three units within each coursebook for the introduction of new grammatical or functional language, firstly qualitatively, to find out what types of contexts were occurring, and then quantitatively, to count frequency. Four patterns of contextualisation were found, as follows:

1. Image-supported – learners use images alone or images and text to understand context (e.g. matching text to images, images with speech bubbles, ordering images, etc.).
2. Text-integrated – learners complete or manipulate text to raise awareness of new language (e.g. gapped text, sentence ordering activity, etc.).
3. Extensive text – learners read/listen to a complete texts (e.g. newspaper article, radio interview, etc. - usually over 100 words), after which the new language is noticed in, or extracted from the text and analysed.

4. No clear context – example sentences or very short dialogue (under 30 words) without supporting images or clear indication of where, when, why or by whom the text was produced.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of these four context types. The first notable observation (easily overlooked) is the frequency of context; rarely did the coursebooks examined fail to provide clear contexts for new language. However, perhaps the most striking observation concerns a clear change in the late 1990s, when image-supported and text-integrated contextualisation largely disappear and ‘extensive text’ contextualisation begins to dominate.

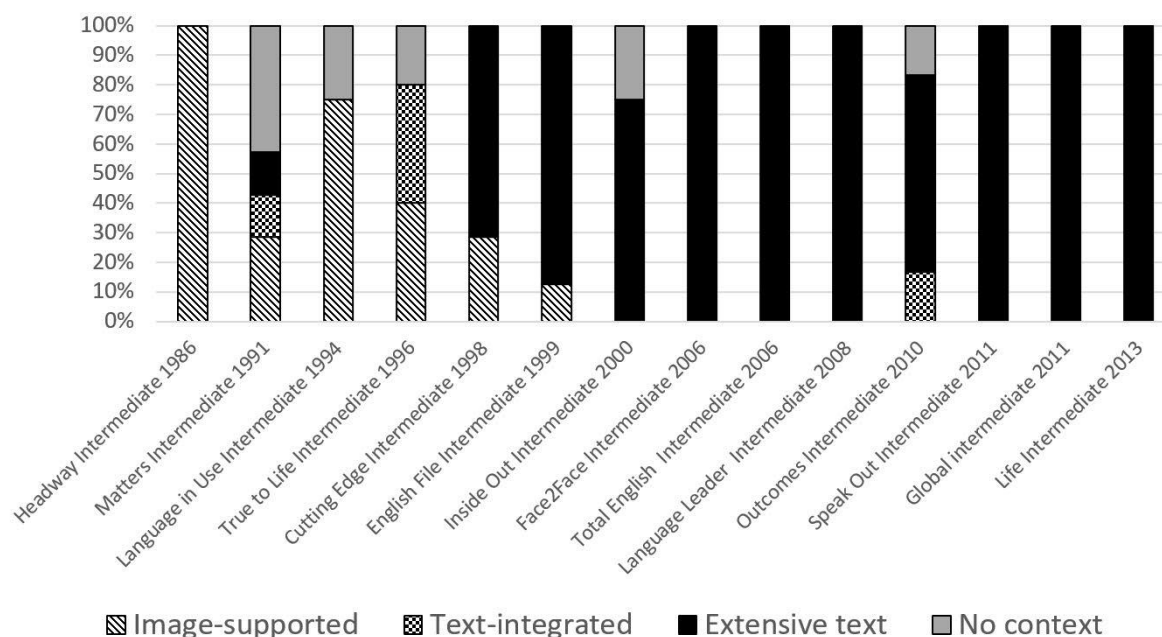


Figure 1: Contexts for the introduction of new language in first editions of global ELT coursebooks

Footnote: The intention of the study was to uncover long-term trends, rather than the balance of context types in specific coursebook. As a result, only 30 activities from three units were sampled from each title, meaning that individual columns are not necessarily reflective of the coursebook as a whole.

Since 2000, almost all the coursebooks examined have followed the same pattern: Reading or listening skills are first practised through texts that integrate the new language features, after which these features are extracted, analysed and (almost always) practised, usually using both controlled (e.g. cloze exercises) and freer (e.g. communicative tasks) practice activities. This contrasts markedly with early editions of Headway, for example, when context was predominantly image-supported and receptive skills practice followed, typically providing consolidation of new language rather than context.

Thus, while context has always been an important part of the introduction of new language in global coursebooks, the most recent trend has been towards more extensive, receptive skills contexts, possibly under the influences of text-based instruction (Burns 2012), and the increasing number of learners needing English for academic purposes in order to access and complete higher education. These changes lend support to the use of a 'context-oriented' model for lesson structuring, both in preservice education and early in-service education for novice teachers as they are socialised into the practices of their respective teaching communities.

CAP as a model for structuring new language lessons

The model I propose includes three core stages; Context, Analysis and Practice, with an optional fourth stage; Evaluation, depending on the lesson type. The stages can be remembered using the mnemonics 'CAP' and 'CAPE'. Table 1 describes what may happen during each of the stages. It is described here as inclusively as possible of different approaches, recognising the importance of all types of context, allowing for both deductive and inductive analysis, and both controlled and freer practice (as in PPP) as deemed appropriate.

Table 1: The CAP/CAPE model

| | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Context | The context for learning is established through a text (listening, reading or video), a presented 'situation' (in the classroom or through use of audio-visual resources), or the involvement of learners. May be accompanied by activities that raise background schemata, check comprehension, or engage learners meaningfully in the text. |
| Analysis | Language features are noticed and analysed explicitly for meaning, form, pronunciation and use as appropriate. This may include grammatical, functional, lexical or textual aspects of the language. |
| Practice | Learners practise using the language. This may include controlled and freer practice of the language analysed, scaffolded and independent text construction or a communicative task. |
| Evaluation (optional) | When practice involves text construction, self-, peer and teacher evaluation of the text are possible. |

Used as shown above CAP describes the typical order of stages in new language lessons, reflecting the dominant trend in global ELT coursebooks (see above). As such, it provides clear guidance for trainee and novice teachers when planning lessons. However, as indicated by the arrow, contingency for the reversal of the practice and analysis stages (CPA) has been included to reflect the order promoted in some models of TBLT (e.g. Willis 1996) or emergent approaches to language teaching. It is acknowledged that such approaches would not normally endorse the pre-emptive selection of specific language features, and that the focus of the analysis would depend on challenges that emerge during the practice phase. Slight modifications to the model can allow for other lesson shapes. Task-supported language teaching can be described using a CAT model (Context, Analysis, Task) and the test-teach-test structure can be described using a ChAP model (Check,

Analysis, Practice). See Figure 2 for a diagrammatic representation of these alternative lesson shapes.

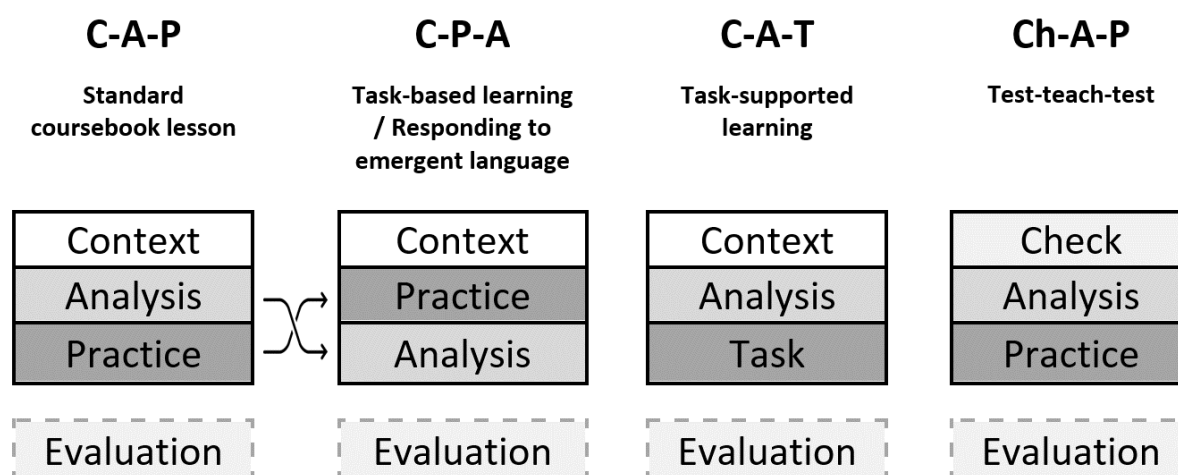


Figure 2: Variations on the CAP model

On preservice courses, CAP can be introduced first as a 3-stage model in the C-A-P order described above. Like PPP, it follows the familiar logic of skill-learning theory that is common to many different types of learning (Anderson 2016), and is therefore easily assimilated into trainees' practice. It may then be gradually complexified through the addition of Evaluation (useful in lessons where learners produce a complete written or spoken text), and through other modifications, such as CAT, CHAP and CPA. Viewed from a sociocultural perspective, CAP serves as a scaffolding artefact, a guiding model in the early stages of training that can be gradually deconstructed, reworked and experimented with as trainees develop their own theories of learning and build their understanding of potential new language lesson shapes (see: Anderson 2017).

A cautious coda

In offering this model my primary intention is *not* to prescribe how either novice or experienced teachers should teach. I make no claims that this is necessarily the best way to structure new language lessons, nor do I intend to suggest that it is appropriate for structuring all lesson types. I offer it simply as a reflection of what appears to be the currently

dominant paradigm for the introduction of new language, at least as expressed through global ELT coursebooks, the practices of those who use them, and the expectations of certain syllabi and educators in preservice teacher education, particularly on CertTESOL and CELTA courses. If we are to understand language teacher education as a social process in which novice teachers are introduced to the practices and social facts of their future discourse communities (Freeman, 2016), I offer CAP as a potentially useful tool in this process.

Biography

Jason Anderson is a teacher, teacher educator, consultant, researcher and award-winning author of books and materials for language teachers. He has supported teachers in a wide variety of teaching contexts worldwide. His interests including teaching methodology, multilingualism and teacher education.

References

- Anderson, J. 2016. 'Why practice makes perfect sense: the past, present and potential future of the PPP paradigm in language teacher education.' *ELT Education and Development* 19: 14-22.
- Anderson, J. 2017. *Trinity CertTESOL Companion*. Peaslake, Surrey: Delta Publishing.
- Burns, A. 2012. 'Text-based Teaching' in A. Burns and J.C. Richards (eds.), *The Cambridge Guide to Pedagogy and Practice in Language Teaching* (140-148). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freeman, D. 2016. *Educating Second Language Teachers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Willis, J. 1996. *A Framework for Task-based Learning*. Harlow: Longman.