TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH CONTEXT – A HIGHLY COMPLEX ENDEAVOUR

Laura IONICĂ
Universitatea din Piteşti

Abstract: *Teaching English through context can be a very challenging activity both for the teachers and the students. The aim of the article is to emphasize the efficiency of learning through context in order to get a better understanding of the topic. The warm-ups, the analysis of the lexical chunks as well as the suitable feedback are as many useful stages in the learning process.*

Keywords: *warm-up activitity, nuisance-words, gist, lexical chunk.*

English is a language that is very much in demand around the world. Technologically and economically, English achieves its global status because if its dominating role in technology and commerce that is organized all over the world. "English, which is the native language of the nation, emerged as a first-rank language in technology that affected all aspects of society. (Crystal, 1997).

Academically, with the progressive increase of intercultural communications and commercial globalization, English is widely exploited to cater for a variety of specific purposes and needs. Being a native speaker is not enough to guarantee that you will be able to help other people learn your language. You have to know something about your language, especially about the teaching and learning methods in order to cope with any kind of situation. Broading horizons, insights into other languages and cultures are among the main objectives a teacher has to take into consideration.

The article in question aims at reflecting a few teaching techniques as well as the difficulty the teacher encounters when explaining English through context and content. Starting from the usage of the new structures in a *Journalism Course*, for instance, the very abstract character of the notions and the students' little knowledge in the field usually create obstacles on the communicative level. Apart from the new vocabulary which is generally taught in context, another aim of the lesson is to incorporate as many other skills as possible.

Students will have to read for gist as well as for comprehension. Further practice with reading skills will be necessary when they determine the meaning of words from context. The teacher's oral summary of the text will provide listening practice. Considering the students' familiarity with the semantic content, they will be asked to listen to those lexical structures containing the new words they have learnt. Practice with the new lexis will be checked in a writing activity where students put the target language into questions. In their spoken answers to these questions, they will get accuracy and fluency practice.

Although the students choose the words they are to focus on, the teacher has to determine in advance the exact number of words they are going to deal with. The size of the class has also a determining role, because each of the students has to cooperate efficiently when establishing the meanings of the newly-used words. Using strips of paper for each word is a manageable way of coping with the new text. Words' meanings

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can be extended to different contexts so that the students should get a better understanding and improve their vocabulary.

For instance, a word like *evergreen* is registered as "a tree or bush that has green leaves throughout the year." (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 1995, p. 396), whereas in journalistic terms, it acquires a figurative meaning, designating a story that is perpetually relevant. Monolingual dictionaries and, if possible, a collocations dictionary are also necessary tools during the class, as they ease up both the teacher and the students' work.

The need of a warm-up

An English warm-up is the ideal remedy to shift the group into easily using language, and it also promotes socialization. This can be seen as a student-centred activity which provides an introduction to the text and make the students thinking and talking about the topic. A warm-up creates mental and physical alert helping the students to fully participate in later activities.

Actions in which the students ask each other for their opinions as regards the topic prove their efficiency and the feedback offers a useful movement to the next stage. Given the text *The image of the modern politician*, the teacher invites the students to converse in pairs using the topic in question. Helpful expressions such as: *Tell me about the building-up of a politician's image, If you were a politician where would you start your image building campaign from*?, *How important is for a politician to be charismatic*? facilitate communication between pairs.

The introductory section illustrates the new vocabulary both linguistically and visually. The new words are drilled with the help of other exercises, objective as well as communicative ones. Activities become efficient only if the students are involved both intellectually and emotionally in the interaction and participate actively.

One of the most important aims of this stage is to help the students to internalize the new topic by activating their prior knowledge of the world and of society. This prior knowledge helps the decoding and interpreting of the new material and it also has a great bearing on the way the learner perceives the new text. While focusing on the information provided by the new text, the students must also express opinions, participate in group discussions, expand the text or sustain it with arguments.

Warm-up activities help the teacher notice his students' reactions, gestures, eagerness or reluctance as regards certain topics. It's a challenge to come up with a variety of warm-up and yet students are wonderful resources for suggesting alternative activities. The warm-up stage is followed by the comprehension stage. After giving a first quick reading of the text, the students will need to answer a set of comprehension questions so that the teacher should realize whether they drew out the real message of the topic.

The target vocabulary

In this stage the student will have to find out unfamiliar words in the text and discover their meaning. This is a team-work activity which implies their going through the text and selecting the words whose meaning they are unsure of. In case of multiple definitions in the dictionary, they will have to consider the context in determining which meaning to choose. When consulting a dictionary, the learner should extract the three levels of meaning: lexical meaning (the semantic implications of the words and phrases), grammatical meaning (interrelationships among words), social-cultural

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meaning (the evaluative dimension which English speaking people give to words because of their common experiences with language).

Moulton gives three practical suggestions for acquiring language. "First, never look a word up until you have read the whole context in which it occurs, second, don't be afraid of making intelligent guesses….third, make a special list of your *nuisance words*, the ones you find yourself looking up over and over again. Put them down on paper and memorize them" (Moulton, 1966: 254).

The dictionary, as an important classroom and personal resource has a legitimate place in a sequence of strategies but is best not used automatically as a first resort. Teachers should train the effective use of the dictionary as a number a skills are involved in it.

The teacher may use different methods in getting the right meanings of the words. First, he may ask his students to give a context-related definition, before looking up in the dictionary or he may simply create various sentences using the new words and let the students infer the right meaning. It is important that the teacher introduce the new vocabulary smoothly, in a contextualized way and facilitate comprehension of the new text. Learners, in their turn, must be urged to use the context to get to the message of the entire text, to use contextual clues to infer the meaning of unknown words that are important for the understanding of the text.

Starting form the given text, students are to explain words and phrases such as: *campaign, propaganda, slogan, poll, heavy poll, poller* etc. either by using the dictionary or being given hints by the teacher. The newly introduced words are to be used in separate sentences or the learners may utilise them to make up further dialogues or stories. Authors consider that learners are more likely to remember a word if they have worked on its meaning actively. Becoming aware of the nuances of the words is one of the learners' main objectives.

Analysing the lexical chuncks

This stage is generally used to think of ways to incorporate the selected words into lexical chunks, such as collocations or fixed expressions. We should be careful with the context when creating the lexical chunks, as we will be providing an oral summary of it later which will include them. If, for instance, the text abounds in phrasal verbs, the teacher may ask the students to make sentences using such verbs in suitable contexts.

A verb like *to take* can be used to create different lexical chunks (*to take back one's word, to take into consideration, to take something to heart, to take advantage of, to take place* etc.). All these involve various meanings. Similarly, any preposition attached to the same verb changes the meaning of the structure completely: *to break in* (a se băga în vorbă), *to break into* (a intra în casă prin efracție), *to break out* (a izbucni), *to break through* (a răzbate prin, a învinge).

The authors generally agree to the idea that words should not be perceived as isolated elements. Unless words are presented thematically, related to the text they are quickly forgotten despite the learners' considerable learning effort. As Beheydt (1987) states, "isolated words do not present a linguistic reality, as the meaning of a word is in most cases partly defined by the context."

When the students have finished matching the words with the definitions, the teacher explains the text in his own words. Then he continues with the spoken summary of the text using the lexical structures as a guide. The teacher should also remind the students that listening for lexical chunks is an important skill which they should always try to apply when using a language productively. When the teacher has finished

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summarizing the text, he should draw up the lexical chunks and write them on the board clearing up meaning, form and pronunciation, where necessary.

Practice with lexical chunks

Each student is given a sheet of paper and is assigned one of the lexical chunks from the board. Students work in pairs and are encouraged to write questions which promote a communicative exchange. Questions that ask for an opinion are the most efficient. For example, instead of *Do you take into consideration the cost when planning a campaign?*, they could ask *What should people take into consideration when planning a campaign?*

Once each student has written their question, they find a partner to ask the question to. The student who is going to answer should use the same chunk (*I think politicians planning a campaign should take into consideration the huge cost…*). The same phenomenon holds for all the new lexical chunks which are dealt with in the text. Such communicative activity is relevant for the teacher who, meanwhile, makes a note of any significant mistake and correct it. It is during practice stage that immediate corrections may be made. The teacher's task is to make learners conscious of possible errors and to familiarize them to such a degree with acceptable rule-governed sequences that they are able to monitor their own work toward its improvement in spontaneous interaction.

Feedback

The learners should be offered feedback at the end of an activity or a series of activities informing them of their strong and weak points and how they can improve. The lexical chunks met in a newspaper article or in other appropriate sources should be further used for a better understanding of the topic. In order to create an efficient communicative environment, the teacher is supposed to engage students in real thinking and performances and encourage them to approach different subjects.

The teacher's written comments not only indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the students' writing but they may also assist learners in monitoring their own progress and identifying specific language areas to develop further.

Conclusions

I used this method of learning through context with an upper-intermediate class. The topic was about *The image of the modern politician*. While the students were asking each other questions related to the topic, I read the text and came up with some comprehension questions. I wrote down the new lexical structures, and whenever I noticed my students' confusion as regards my explanations, I had to come up with concise definitions for an exact understanding of the words.

The students selected the words they were going to focus on, used a dictionary and inferred meaning based on context. Imagination was also explored especially as the learners should be aware of the fact that collocations were made up of separate words whose interpretation as a whole was different from that of its parts. The great advantage of this learning method is the interaction of the persons involved in the communicative activity.

Each participant in a group can potentially act in ways that assist the others, and all can learn from each other's contribution. Teachers, in their turn, are no longer a source of knowledge. They serve as observers and only monitor how students improve

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their skills and language proficiency. Learning through context can be both a challenging activity and a very efficient way in getting the desired outcomes.

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