A Pragmatic Approach to the Study of Context

Gabriele Pallotti

University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

1. **Finding Context, Making Context**

The notion of context has been studied and problematised countless times in language and communication research (for reviews, see e.g. Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Fetzer, 2022; Siegel, 2003; van Dijk, 2008, 2015). In this chapter I will attempt to review different meanings of context, how they are treated in various theoretical approaches and discuss the implications for SLA research and teaching.

A traditional and common-sense view sees context as a container or background allowing communicative acts to be interpreted. The Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d.) gives for example these two definitions of context [emphasis added]: ‘1) the parts of a discourse that *surround* a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning; 2) the interrelated conditions *in which* something exists or occurs’. One often reads that an expression should be understood ‘*in* context’ and that it might be misunderstood if taken ‘*out of* context’. Several authors also refer to Gestalt psychology to describe context as the (back)ground on which the ‘figure’ of the communicative event stands out (Bateson, 1972; Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Kendon, 1992). From this point of view, the context is given before the communicative act, which is inserted into it in a more or less appropriate way and which can be interpreted by referring to the context itself. According to this perspective, one might thus say that the participants ‘find the context’ already there. The SPEAKING model proposed by Hymes (1972) was one of the first, and probably most influential, attempts to identify some standard dimensions for describing the contexts in which communicative actions take place. These are Setting, Participants, Ends and goals of the communicative event, Actions performed, Key (how text is delivered; in this chapter ‘text’ will refer to any coherent piece of oral or written discourse), Instrumentalities (channels of communication), social and cultural Norms evoked in a particular setting, and Genre (or text type). Several subsequent approaches have proposed other lists of contextual dimensions, more or less overlapping with Hymes’ proposal, but sharing the view of context as a set of situational features making the discourse contained therein more or less appropriate (for a review, see Fetzer, 2017). Even in research on linguistic pragmatics and the philosophy of language, context is often invoked as an essential element for interpreting communicative acts, their truth value and felicitous conditions, the reference of deictic expressions (Kaplan, 1989; Sbisà, 2002).

Context can include physical-spatial aspects, such as the location, but also linguistic (the discourse up to that moment), social (roles, institutional dynamics, cultural values), psycho-social (identity, attitudes), cognitive (what is relevant for the participants, how they perceive the situation) and even neuro-biological features. These different dimensions of context are often depicted as concentric layers, with figures resembling an onion (e.g. The Douglas Fir Group, 2016) or as flow diagrams from macro to micro levels (e.g. Kersten, 2023). These different dimensions are intertwined with the temporal dimension, whereby different timescales act on different levels: for instance, relationships between two people may change within minutes, but under certain respects (intimacy, friendship, professional collaboration) this may involve days and months; changing social institutions, such as promoting an educational reform or establishing certain ideologies and values, may take years, even centuries.

This way of seeing context as something static, given and pre-existing communication, which in this chapter will be called the ‘finding context’ approach, has been criticised, for example by Goodwin and Heritage (1990), who deem it a ‘bucket theory of context’. Bateson (1972) already noted that communication is both context-creating and context-dependent, and this point has been taken up several times since, especially in fields such as interactionist sociolinguistics, conversational and discourse analysis, the ethnography of communication. van Dijk (2008: x) for instance writes: ‘It is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) discourse, but the way the participants define such a situation. Contexts are thus not some kind of objective condition or direct cause, but rather (inter)subjective constructs designed and continuously updated in interaction by participants as members of groups and communities’. For Schegloff (1992: 197), too, ‘it seems at least as appropriate, and perhaps more so, to speak of talk or other conduct invoking its contexts than it is to speak of context impacting on talk or other conduct’. Especially as regards aspects such as identity and social roles, several studies have shown that they are not static, given once and for all, but that they are confirmed, negotiated, perhaps challenged and contrasted (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). This ability to negotiate identities in contexts is increasingly conceptualised in terms of agency, defined by The Douglas Fir Group (2016: 26) as the ability of participants to ‘negotiate some impact on their local contexts and on the improvement of their material and social worlds’ (see also Deters et al., 2014; Duff, 2012). In short, roles and identities are not just imposed by the context, but are ‘acted out’ by individuals. As Sacks (1984) noted in a famous essay entitled ‘On doing being ordinary’, even the social role of being an ordinary person involves a number of specific actions. ‘Being someone’ thus always amounts to ‘doing something’.

This way of looking at context has been well established since the 1980s, when an increasing number of authors started replacing the term ‘context’ with verbs or action nouns. Goffman (1974), again echoing Bateson (1972), introduced the notion of ‘framing’, which was then extended in his discussion of ‘footing’ (Goffman, 1981), to denote the activities by which speakers dynamically manage and construct their roles in interaction, that may change very rapidly, sometimes in a matter of seconds. Gumperz’s ‘contextualisation cues’ (1982; see also Auer, 1996; Auer & Di Luzio, 1992) also point in this direction. They are a series of signals, often non-linguistic or paralinguistic, such as prosody and intonation, guiding receivers in their interpretation of messages. These signals, which participants are normally unaware of and that are seldom the subject of explicit reflection (Gumperz, 1992; Levinson, 2003), may have different values in different socio-cultural groups, possibly generating misunderstandings and conflicts in intercultural encounters.

The active role of participants in making contextmay be described in two main ways. On the one hand, one may consider the manifest behaviour of social actors and how it contributes to shaping the context at hand: this is an external, socio-interactionist, anti-mentalistic perspective, which interprets human conduct exclusively in terms of observable phenomena. A prime example is conversational analysis, which categorically excludes the use of psychological notions such as intentions and cognitive representations and describes the ways in which participants ‘make context’ solely on the basis of their publicly observable social actions (Schegloff, 1992; 1997).

On the other hand, or perhaps one might say, adding a further level of interpretation, the construction of context may be seen as a cognitive phenomenon, which takes place in the participants’ minds in communicative exchanges. This is the approach followed, for example, by van Dijk (2015: 4), according to whom ‘the interface between discourse and the communicative situation is necessarily cognitive. There is no direct relation between social or other structures of the environment and discourse structures, which are structures of a very different nature. Context, thus, is how language users dynamically define the communicative situation’. For van Dijk (2008, 2015, 2024), ‘context models’ are a particular type of mental models that participants use to make sense of communicative exchanges. Givón (2005: 91) also supports a similar cognitive view of context when he states that ‘context is not an objective entity but rather a mental construct, the construed relevant ground vis-à-vis which tokens of experience achieve relatively stable mental representations as salient figures’. However, as remarked by Sbisà (2002) with cogent philosophical arguments, the notion of context cannot be totally exhausted in terms of mental models. For instance, if a speaker orders someone to ‘close the door’, but the door is already closed, the linguistic act turns out to be objectively unfelicitous, regardless of whether the speaker may believe that, in that physical context, the door is open.

The cognitive perspective on contexts also makes it possible to combine the two fundamental approaches of ‘finding context’ and ‘making context’. In fact, in most cases speakers activate some contextual representations from the outset, even before communicative action begins, on the basis of information available prior to the encounter. Then, as the interaction unfolds, the contextual representations (including identities, roles, information that is accessible, shared or believed to be so) may change to some extent, may be questioned, contested and negotiated. Thus, ‘contexts develop “ongoingly” and “on line,” that is, in parallel with interaction and (other) thoughts’ (van Dijk, 2008: 18). From this point of view, the notion of context relates to that of ‘common ground’ (Clark, 1996; Pickering & Garrod, 2004), that is, the pool of knowledge shared by the participants in an interaction, which is partly given prior to the interaction itself, and partly constructed and negotiated in the course of the communicative exchange.

1. **Delimiting Context**

The different views of ‘finding context’ and ‘making context’ also interact with the proximal/distal dimension (closer contexts, such as the participants’ cognitive orientations and the setting’s physical arragement vs more distant contexts, such as socio-cultural institutions) and the temporal dimension (the seconds, minutes, days and years taken as the event’s context). In fact, the ‘making context’ approach may be seen to be more appropriate to relatively ‘small contexts’ – for instance, participants may rather easily change local physical arrangements or their interlocutors’ cognitive dispositions – while it is is hard to see how a single event may ‘make’ a wide context such as a set of cultural norms or social institutions. Nonetheless, it is also true that a large number of local exchanges can, in the long run, give rise to macro changes in institutions, roles, and power relations among groups. Thus, the notion of context can extend indefinitely in space, time, social and cognitive dimensions, with the possibility of different contexts influencing one another, in a ‘polycontextuality’ (Leander, 2002) that may be cumulative but also conflictual, taken for granted or negotiated. This perspective of extreme complexity can cause some sense of vertigo, as evoked by this quote from The Douglas Fir Group (2016: 39): ‘a new, rethought SLA begins with the social-local worlds of L2 learners and then poses the full range of relevant questions, from the neurobiological and cognitive micro levels to the macro levels of the sociocultural, educational, ideological, and socioemotional. This new SLA addresses all these levels, from cell to society, as it were, without losing sight of the local multilingual contexts from which the questions arise and of the emic meanings of those questions for people in the flesh’. Delimiting context is difficult not only because it can extend indefinitely beyond the local communicative situation, but also because, at least in constructivist approaches, it is difficult to separate context from the text itself. If the text constructs the context, where does one end and the other begin? The distinction between text and co-text, often evoked, is simple on a terminological level, but notoriously hard to operationalise: is the sentence immediately preceding the one we are examining still part of the text or is it already part of its context?

While it is true, from a metaphysical point of view, that context is potentially infinite and impossible to delimit in all directions, it is also true that such a notion becomes practically unusable, since ‘a theory of context risks becoming a Theory of Everything’ (van Dijk, 2008: ix). It is obvious that any research can never consider all aspects of context, and it is a very easy game to remember that this or that aspect has not been considered. Equally, it is easy game to speculate that any aspect of the context, even the most remote, could have consequences for the phenomenon we are dealing with: it is the famous ‘butterfly effect’, according to which a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil *might* cause a tornado in Texas. If we took these warnings seriously, we would be in the grip of a paranoid obsession, constantly fearing that we have overlooked an indefinite number of potentially relevant contextual aspects, like people affected by a form of neurosis who think that they have never washed their hands well enough in order to prevent the risk of an infection. This condition, in the most severe cases, leads to a state of paralyis, which would also occur if we were constantly worried with having neglected this or that of the million aspects of context. If paranoid obsessions are to be avoided, the question must be asked of what is a ‘healthy’ dimension of context or, in other words, of when ‘enough is enough’ (Silverstein, 1992).

The problem of how to delimit context is a key theoretical and empirical issue. There’s hardly any dispute on the need to work with partial representations of context, and even The Douglas Fir Group itself (2016: 38) points out that ‘We do not envision that all researchers and research programmes will attempt to investigate the dimensions of language learning [we have] depicted, or will do so all at once or within the same study. This would be daunting’. Various solutions have thus been proposed to address the ‘radial indeterminacy’ of context (Silverstein, 1992).

Perhaps the most radical proposal is again that of conversational analysis. Given its strict anti-mentalism and the limitation of analysis to what is publicly observable, both to participants and to the researcher, its stance is to treat as analytically relevant context only the overt behaviours directly accessible to the participants and which they explicitly make relevant (Schegloff, 1992; 1997). Thus, the fact that a conversation takes place between a man and a woman does not automatically make gender identity relevant, but this must be evoked by the participants’ own behaviour. Similarly, what may have happened hours or days earlier, or the relationships among speakers and their changes over time, are contextual elements that cannot be invoked by the researcher unless the participants themselves have done so. However, according to many other approaches, including ethnography, sociology of interaction and discourse analysis, such a ‘theoretical asceticism’ (Levinson 1983: 295) is excessive and counterproductive: Cicourel (1992), in explicit polemic with conversational analysis, shows how some episodes in medical interaction cannot be interpreted except by referring to various sources of contextual information not explicitly mentioned in conversation but well present to the participants and the researcher alike.

A different stance from conversation analysis, albeit with a similar conclusion, is taken by mentalist approaches, such as those by Givón or Van Dijk, which address the issue of contextual delimitation from the perspective of cognitive processing. The computational capacities of the human mind are limited, so it is unthinkable that in interpreting an utterance or a turn at talk people activate all their encyclopaedic representations, including those only remotely associated with the situation at hand. As van Dijk (2024: 312) notes ‘given the necessity of processing the many indexical aspects of discourse in milliseconds, context models cannot feature hundreds of parameters’. His model (van Dijk, 2015) thus provides only four macro-dimensions of context, each of which can be further articulated into more specific categories.

1) spatiotemporal setting, i.e. the time interval and the place in which one finds oneself, which can also be institutionalised, such as a classroom or a courtroom;

2) participants, with their communicative (speaker, hearer, overheared...) and social (teacher, pupil, clerk...) roles, and their identities variously defined according to gender, membership to certain socio-cultural groups, etc.;

3) acts, which define a certain communicative genre, such as the lecture, the interview, the academic text, and in which the reflexivity between text and context is maximised (communicative acts are part of the context, but also contribute to constructing it);

4) knowledge, i.e. what the participants know, their encyclopaedia, which determines what is to be included or what may be excluded from the discourse.

This is a more parsimonious framework than that of Hymes (1972) in terms of number of categories, but at the same time it is also more comprehensive, since it includes an aspect such as shared knowledge that was not included in the SPEAKING original model.

The problem has also been posed in philosophical-pragmatic approaches to context. According to Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2006), the receiver of a communicative act first activates the standard, default interpretation, and only if this turns out to be inadequate, proceeds to activate others, from the most to the least relevant. Kaplan (1989: 591), too, in his philosophical reflection on demonstratives, states that ‘context is a package of whatever parameters are needed to determine the referent, and thus the content, of the directly referential expressions of the language’. In short, ‘from a construal-of-context perspective, this means that interlocutors make their contribution as explicit “as is required” and that they import the appropriate amount of context, which they consider to be required for felicitous communication’ (Fetzer 2022: 147).

There is thus a broad consensus that language users rely on partial representations of context, based on the relevance and usefulness of certain parameters over others. However, one of the major methodological challenges is demonstrating which representations are actually activated by the participants at a given time and in a given situation. It is not possible to directly access mental models, including context models, of the individuals observed, and even their introspective reports are a doubtful and limited tool, given the implicit, automatic nature of many contextual representations. Therefore, determining which dimensions and parameters are relevant for a given person at a given time remains essentially an act of interpretation by the analyst. Some dimensions are more objective, such as the physical place one is in (a classroom or home, a foreign country during study abroad), others are more internal to the observed individual, such as their representation of roles, identities or shared knowledge. In such cases, interpretation constantly runs the risk of becoming over-interpretation, in that the analyst might impose some of his or her analytical categories by assuming that they are relevant and active at that particular moment for the observed individuals, too. Conversation analysis’ suggestion to consider as relevant only what is manifested as such by the participants is intended to limit these over-interpretations, although it does not completely rule out the researcher’s interpretation, who must demonstrate that certain behaviours manifest the participants’ orientation towards certain social categories. Establishing exactly what is the ‘appropriate’ context for describing and interpreting a particular communicative event thus essentially remains a decision by the researcher, and as such it may be questioned and disputed. Thus, as Schegloff (1992: 215) concludes, ‘rethinking context is the omnipresent job of analysis’.

All this discussion about the scope and limits of context may seem to be very theoretical and with little practical import. However, the implications for teaching and other applied domains are not negligible. For instance, the issue of over-contextualization and over-interpretation of behaviour resonates with the long-standing concern of sensitive teachers about the danger of pigeonholing pupils based on some pre-existing categories, such as their sex, socio-cultural background, academic track etc. Assuming that a pupil is so and so or will behave so and so ‘because s/he is an X’ (that is, belongs to a pre-established category X) is a form of stereotyping, with the associated risk of self-fulfilling prophecies, that has been repeatedly documented in educational research. Conversation analysis’ theoretical asceticism may contribute to shaping a healthy, open attitude towards our interlocutors, making us more interested in ‘what they do’ than in ‘who they are’.

1. **Doing Research as Making Context**

Just as it is true that people ‘make contexts’ - that is, they actively construe social and cognitive representations of what is relevant for interpreting communicative actions - this is also true for researchers (and teachers, to the extent that they are also systematically engaged in making sense of their reality), who interpret linguistic phenomena against the backdrop of a range of explanatory factors. In fact, each independent variable can be considered an element of context, invoked to explain facts about the acquisition and use of certain linguistic forms. All research is thus ‘contextualising’, that is, contextualising data, evoking a context that makes them explicable, and arguing about the appropriateness of one’s contextualisation choices.

To give a few examples in the SLA domain, the word ‘context’ has been used often and explicitly in studies comparing language learning in ’study abroad’ with ‘at home’ experiences, showing how the two conditions may impact the development of certain language structures, certain patterns of sociolinguistic variation, or even certain attitudes and cognitive-affective dispositions (see e.g., Borràs & Llanes, 2021; Vidàl et al., 2018). Many other factors, reviewed in any textbook, have also been considered, as for instance learning conditions and inter-group contact, types of educational programmes (total or partial immersion, more or less intensive courses), classroom instruction versus spontaneous learning, explicit and implicit teaching, different levels of education, and so forth. The notion of context can also be used to explain changes in phenomena typically investigated by sociolinguistics and text linguistics, such as style, genre, register and various other forms of linguistic variation related to social situations. Usually, discussions on the role of context on language learning involve relatively large social contexts that remain constant over time, such as a several months’ stay in another country. However the notion of context may also be applied to conditions lasting for relatively short times, such as one type of task versus another, or different types and amounts of exposure to input, or a certain kind of instructional intervention. In these cases, researchers often intentionally manipulate contexts, which thus become experimental conditions. Other aspects of context are not easily manipulated, but can still be described and taken into account, e.g. widely studied independent variables such as age, previously learned languages, affective dispositions, cognitive endowments such as intelligence or working memory capacity. The term ‘context’ seldom appears when discussing these variables, but the term is not inappropriate, as they, too, may be considered as factors shaping communicative exchanges. Some of these variables are often discussed in SLA research on individual differences: for instance, the often drawn distinction between ‘traits’ (relatively constant psychological dispositions) and ‘states’ (rapidly changing conditions) parallels that between more or less stable contextual dimensions. Even qualitative approaches to data analysis, which do not usually employ terms such as dependent and independent variables, can nevertheless be seen as attempting to interpret certain linguistic behaviours with respect to various contextual elements, that are evoked in the description and explanation of what is going on.

If all research is thus ultimately an activity of contextualising phenomena, the question of delimiting context arises once again. Just as speakers do not conjure up all possible contextual parameters to interpret a linguistic act, but only those relevant for their purposes, researchers should also be guided by a pragmatic spirit in choosing which variables to consider. Firstly, it is healthy to avoid obsessive neurosis due to having overlooked some remote aspect of context, which may lead us to think that our research may be limited, simplistic, reductionist. These speculations and admonitions, including the butterfly effect discussed in the previous section, have been made several times in a certain type of literature in recent decades, but it seems to me they are less common now, and I hope they will soon disappear altogether: they are trivial, useless, all too easy to formulate. Proposing to broaden the field of investigation to include new contextual aspects and new explanatory factors is certainly legitimate and welcome, but it is necessary to specify exactly which factors, how to measure them, how to include them in an explanatory model, and then investigate them systematically in one’s own studies: it is not enough simply to evoke them in a generic criticism of those who have not considered them in their own work.

Every research project is a very partial representation of the context in which language acquisition and use take place: from a pragmatic perspective, this partiality is not a problem, but on the contrary should be claimed as a conscious decision, explicitly clarifying the inclusion criteria for the few contextual variables taken into consideration and weighing up the pros and cons of different alternatives. For example, Kersten (2023; Kersten & Greve, 2023), proposes the ‘proximity of stimulation hypothesis’, according to which the role of different variables must be disentangled, differentiating in particular between more ‘proximal’ ones, such as a certain type of interaction between adults and children, or a certain instructional treatment, and more ‘distal’ variables, such as the family’s level of education or the organisation of the entire school system. In particular, it is necessary to clearly articulate the causal chains from distal to proximal variables (a certain level of education may have an impact on the family’s communicative behaviour, for instance), being aware that only proximal variables can be considered as direct causes of learning, while distal ones act only indirectly, through their influence on proximal variables. This avoids conceptual and statistical errors, such as treating proximal and distal variables as objects of the same kind, when in fact the former are ‘contained’ in the latter and part of their variance can be explained by that of their ‘container variables’. In her study, Kersten (2023) uses structural equation modelling as an approach to reconstruct the different explanatory chains and relationships between variables, arguing that it is more correct to consider proximal variables as moderators of distal variables, rather than summing them all up in a single model.

Kersten’s study shows how important it is to construct explicit models of context, which take into account multiple variables not in a simple additive way, but also considering their logico-causal relationships and the conceptual make-up of the context in which they are embedded. These models are the result of conscious choices about factor inclusion and exclusion, possibly within broad and coherent research programmes in which a multiplicity of studies are organically integrated with a clear general aim. Each study presents a small fraction of the context in which language acquisition and use take place: being aware of this is a first step towards the construction of the often-invoked ‘big picture’, which can only be achieved through a collective and cooperative effort, and not through sterile criticism of those who have neglected this or that aspect of context that someone else just happens to be particularly interested in. This coopearative effort should also include different approaches and methods, from exploratory, hypothesis-generating, detailed case studies to more systematic hypothesis-testing experimental designs. Each of them can contribute, in different and complementary ways, to our understading of contexts.

A pragmatic approach to context is also relevant for teachers and language practitioners at large. A classroom, an online interaction and any other experience of language learning and use are themselves contexts ‘made’ by the people involved in them, which at the same time are to be ‘found’ within larger social contexts. Language educators cannot take into account all the possibly conceivable dimensions of contexts, but need to be aware of which are more relevant for the situtation at hand and for their didactic purposes. Researching context in the classroom involves in the first place gathering as much information as possible about the pupils, including their psychological traits and dispositions, their mental models, their skills, experiences, their socio-cultural-interactional milieu, and so forth, all of which amounts to describing the context ‘found’ in a certain didactic situation. At the same time, educators should realise that language users are not just contained in a pre-existing contextual bucket, but can actively contribute to shaping their social context, for instance by negotiating their roles and identities or by taking certain courses of action. Seeing language learners as context-makers and the language classroom as an ever-changing context leads all those involved in a didactic relationship to perceive themselves as dynamic social actors, trying to make sense of and give sense to the social situations they live in.

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