Thinking CAP

Jason Anderson describes the importance of context in a best practice teaching model.

Almost all teachers are aware of the importance of context when introducing new language. Whether it comes from a text, images, video or a classroom situation, context helps learners to understand meaning, it provides an opportunity for noticing form, and perhaps most importantly, it shows how the new language can be used. It is a fundamental ingredient of communicative (or 'post-communicative', if you prefer) classrooms around the world.

Changing contexts in the communicative era

But how has the way that we contextualise new language changed over the decades?

This was a question I posed myself when I began a recent research project in this area. I chose to look at perhaps the most widespread artefact that both influences and reflects what we do in the classroom – ELT coursebooks. I intentionally chose the most popular 'global' coursebooks, on the basis that these are most likely to capture the spirit of an era, and then counted and categorised ways in which language focus sections of the coursebooks provided context. I was surprised to find that only four basic types emerged from the data:

1. image-supported context (e.g. matching sentences to pictures, reading a comic strip, etc.)

2. text-integrated context (e.g. reordering paragraphs, slotting sentences into a text, completing gaps in a text, etc.)

3. extensive text context (e.g. a longer reading or listening text that precedes the new language introduction)

4. minimal/no clear context (under 30 words, with little indication of where, when or why the new language is being used)

Very early 'communicative' coursebooks, such as *Strategies* (1975), tended to include 'comic strip' contexts, often with characters and storylines that developed through the book. The new language was usually presented in conversations, and focused more on its functional use (e.g. 'present interest in past events') rather than its grammatical categorisation (i.e. present perfect). This use of image-supported context was common in the late 1970s and influenced the first truly global coursebook of the 1980s, *Headway*, and those that followed it (see Figure 1), although the trend to describe language functionally waned fairly quickly.
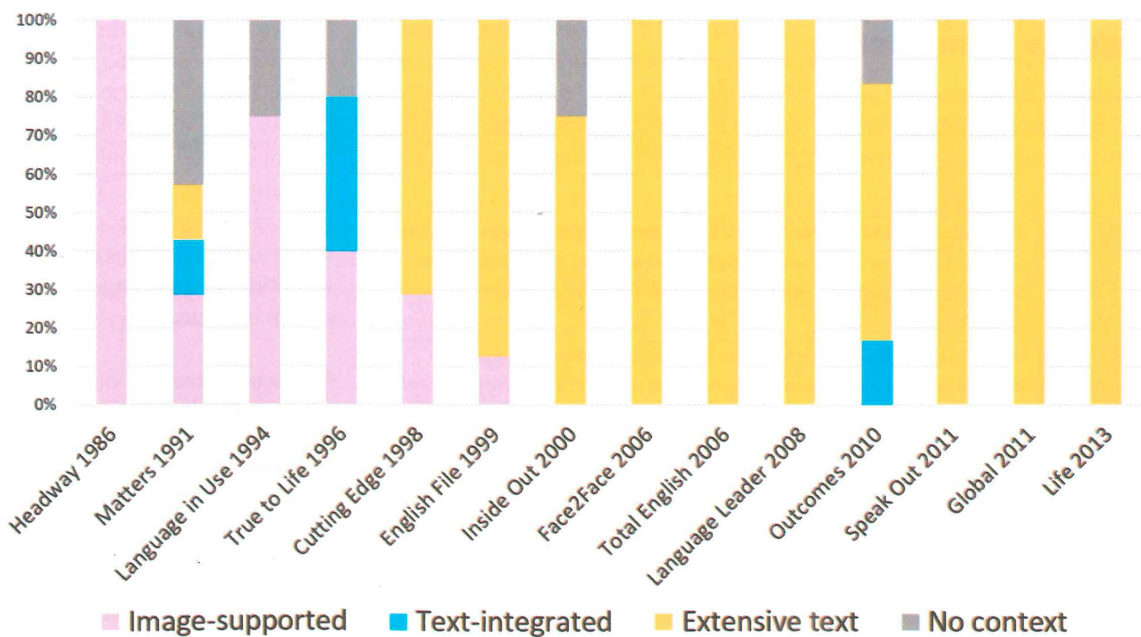

Figure 1: Changes in context type in popular global ELT coursebooks 1986–2013 (*intermediate level, 1st edition, based on three randomly sampled units from each book*)

Then, in the late 1990s, there was a fairly sudden change to the use of extensive texts to provide context (see Figure 1), a change that passed largely unnoticed. While *Headway* had typically introduced new language at the start of the unit, and used texts afterwards to provide receptive skills practice of the new language, coursebooks such as *Cutting Edge* (1998) and *English File* (1999), began to provide receptive skills practice *before* the language analysis, using texts that included examples of the new language. This may be due to the influence of Schmidt's (1990: 129) 'noticing hypothesis', which posited that 'noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake' or the influence of Krashen's (e.g. 1982) Input hypothesis that emphasised the importance of 'exposure' to the target language before production. But wherever the influence came from, it persisted, and we can see that coursebooks since the turn of the century have mainly used extensive text contexts to introduce new language. While my research focused on the most popular mainstream global coursebooks used in adult classrooms, I also looked at more localised coursebooks used in secondary classrooms in Europe, Asia and South America, and saw similar things happening.

New language from a text

The lesson type that this change to 'text-first' teaching espoused has even developed its own name on pre-service teacher education courses such as the Trinity CertTESOL and the Cambridge CELTA: 'new language from a text', and typically involves several stages:

1. Learners discuss the topic of the text to build background schemata, and possibly learn any important vocabulary relating to the topic/text.

2. Learners read or listen to the text, usually twice for global and detailed comprehension.

3. Learners notice the new language in the text.

4. Learners analyse the new language, typically for meaning, form and pronunciation.

5. Learners practise the new language, typically in controlled (first) and then freer practice activities.

6. Learners receive feedback, especially correction, on their performance during the freer practice stage.

A more fundamental finding of the research

Aside from the noticeable change described above, Figure 1 reveals something perhaps even more important than the type of context provided, and this is simply the prevalence of context in all the coursebooks sampled. Contrary to early criticisms of *Headway* from the 1990s, it *did* provide context, albeit an ostensibly visual one. With just a few exceptions, context has been an important part of new language in global coursebooks since *Headway, Strategies*, and even before. Analysis of L.G. Alexander's very popular coursebooks from the 1960s (e.g. *Practice and Progress; Developing Skills*, both from 1967) shows that these too, in almost every unit, provide an 'extensive text' context, after which a 'Key Structures' section focuses in on potential new language features in the text. Not only is 'New language from a text' pre-communicative, but context has been part of the language classroom for over 50 years.

CAP (Context, analysis, practice)

Hopefully the above discussion demonstrates clearly that context is a central part of how we typically introduce new language in contemporary ELT. Yet where exactly is it in the three-stage models that we often use to help us structure new language lessons? Models such as PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) and ESA (Engage, Study, Activate) fail to mention Context, either in the names of the stages or their more detailed description in the methodology books where they originate (Byrne, 1976; Harmer, 1998). It is for this reason that I have recently begun to use the following simple model, in my writings for teacher education (e.g. Anderson, 2017a; 2017b) and also on pre-service courses. It's a model that emphasises the importance of context to help us to plan effectively for its integration in new language lessons. It consists of three stages: Context, Analysis, Practice, with an optional fourth stage, Evaluation, as shown in Figure 2.

CAP is intended as a descriptive, integrated skills model, with receptive skills (reading and listening) early on in the lesson, and productive skills (speaking and writing) towards the end. In my description of the stages, I have been careful not to prescribe whether images, texts or situations should be used to build context, careful not to prescribe whether analysis should be inductive (e.g. discovery learning) or deductive (e.g. teacher explanation)

Context	The context for the new language is established. This may involve the use of a text (e.g. listening, reading, video), a situation (in the classroom, on the board using pictures, etc.), or the learners (e.g. through a conversation).
Analysis	Learners notice the new language in the context and they analyse its features (e.g. meaning, form, pronunciation, use, text structure). This may involve teacher-led elicitation, guided discovery, text reconstruction, etc.
Practice	Learners practise using the new language. This may include controlled (e.g. a drill or a gap-fill) and free practice (e.g. a role play, letter or discussion) of the new language, using either speaking or writing activities.
Evaluation	This may involve teacher feedback to learners on their performance in a speaking activity, or feedback on a text they have produced, including praise, suggestions and correction. Alternatively, learners can self-evaluate or peer-evaluate performances or texts.

Figure 2: The CAP/CAPE model

"Whether it comes from a text, images, or a classroom situation, context helps learners to understand meaning ... "

and careful not to prescribe how many practice activities to use, or what type of activity. The model merely reflects the fact that these three stages typically happen in new language lessons.

The stages of CAP are presented in the order they typically happen – something that trainees will benefit from noticing if they are to become part of our community of practice. However, as teachers develop greater confidence with the model, it is possible to show how the stages can sometimes be rearranged, for example reversing the Analysis and Practice stages to reflect more 'emergent' ways of dealing with language, as may happen in Task-based language teaching and Dogme ELT.

Figure 3 shows three example lesson skeletons described using the CAP model. Notice how it can describe a wide variety of lesson types, including lessons involving reading, listening, 'watching', writing and speaking skills, and lessons where the focus of the analysis is grammar, functional language or even text genre. While I haven't mentioned controlled practice in these brief skeletons, this may also happen at the start of the practice stage.

'Context' and 'contexts'

While I have hopefully shown in this article, firstly that context is a key part of the dominant paradigm for language teaching today, and secondly that the CAP model reflects how it is realised in many new language lessons, I'm very much aware that the contexts in which we as teachers work differ so much around the world. For example, I know many effective teachers who work in 'monolingual' classes, and share their learners' first language. They often rely less on context when introducing new language, and more on translation, translanguaging and L1 explanation to clarify it. I have done so myself whenever I have shared a language with my learners. Sometimes PPP gets the job done faster, and leaves more time for Production.

So I am not prescribing this model, merely offering it as a reflection of current practice for experimentation and critical appraisal. I would be very interested in feedback from teachers in different contexts on whether the model is easy to understand, practical (given variations in lesson length and timetabling around the world), and reflective of the coursebooks, materials and approaches that you use in your classroom. Wherever you're working, I'd love to hear what you think.

References

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CAP Stage	1. Intermediate (B1) **Making arrangements by email**	2. Upper intermediate (B2) **Telling an anecdote**	3. Advanced (C1) **Negotiating a business contract**
Context	Learners read and evaluate two different emails; one good, the other not good.	Learners listen to a recording of people telling anecdotes from childhood, matching speakers to topics.	Learners watch video of business negotiation from reality TV show; answer comprehension questions.
Analysis	Learners study the structure of the better email, and notice useful expressions and phrases.	Learners analyse tenses used (e.g. past simple, past continuous, etc.) from the tapescript and why.	Learners watch the negotiation again. Make notes on techniques and language used.
Practice	Learners write emails to each other to plan a weekend holiday.	Learners make notes and then tell anecdotes to each other in groups.	Negotiation role-play on similar topic.

Figure 3: Three examples of CAP lessons (from: Anderson, 2017a, *Trinity CertTESOL Companion*, used with permission)

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