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The Role of Actual Situational Contexts in the Interpretation of Situation-Bound Utterances

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Abstract

This paper deals with the comprehension of situation-bound utterances (SBUs) by Russian EFL students and their further correct usage of SBUs. The results of the research revealed the problems faced by learners in the process of carrying out practical activities. The importance of an actual situational context in the interpretation of SBUs by EFL learners is noted.

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1. Introduction

Over the course of the last 15 years scholarly attention has been increasingly paid to foreign language learners' comprehension of situation-bound utterances (see Kecskes, 2000). A "situation-bound utterance" (SBU) is defined as "a particular type of formulaic expressions that are highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized communicative situations" (Kecskes, 2010). According to the degree of motivation three types of SBUs can be distinguished: plain, loaded and charged. Plain SBUs have a compositional structure and are semantically transparent. Their situational meaning may only differ slightly from their propositional meaning because their pragmatic extension is minimal if any. Their meaning can be computed from their compositional structure.

An SBU may exhibit pragmatic ambiguity, in the sense that its basic function is extended pragmatically to cover

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other referents or meanings. On the other end of the continuum we find loaded SBUs that are the closest to semantic idioms because they may lose their compositionality and are usually not transparent semantically any more. Their pragmatic function is more important than their original literal meaning that is difficult to recall if needed. These SBUs are “loaded” with their pragmatic function that remains there, and usually cannot be cancelled by the actual situational context because it is encoded in the expression as a whole. They are pragmatic idioms whose occurrence is strongly tied to conventional, frequently repeated situations. We think of a particular situation even if we hear the following expressions without their routine context. Charged SBUs come in between plain and loaded SBUs. An SBU may exhibit pragmatic ambiguity, in the sense that its basic function is extended pragmatically to cover other referents or meanings. The situation-bound function is charged by the situation (Kecskes, 2010: 2891).

In our opinion, culture specific content is very important in the process of language learning. We suggest that provision of actual situational contexts will allow Russian EFL learners to become familiar with functional use of the language. It is also important to mention that two sentences or utterances taken together, for instance in a dialogue, can have meanings different from each one taken separately and without a context. However teaching experience shows that EFL learners still tend to focus on learning rules, translation into the native language, semantic and syntactic properties of language units and pay little attention to how the language is used in real situations of intercultural communication. We believe that providing actual situational contexts helps to avoid artificial usage of the language and allows EFL learners to choose and operate correct units and strategies adequate to the communicative situation.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Objectives

The goal of the research is to investigate the importance of context in the comprehension and interpretation of situation-bound utterances by EFL learners. The following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What is the role of an actual situational context in interpreting SBUs by Russian EFL learners?
- 2) What types of difficulties take place when Russian EFL learners interpret SBUs?

2.2. Methods

The methodological basis for our research was an analysis of articles and monographs devoted to pragmatics and situation-bound utterances. Corpus-based research was conducted in order to select the relevant lexical units for further interpretation by EFL learners and then reveal problems encountered while interpreting SBUs and typical mistakes.

2.3. Research Design

The experimental study was conducted within the research project under the supervision of Prof. I. Kecskes (State University of New-York, USA) and the activity of the Laboratory of Sociocultural Linguistics and Teaching Foreign Discourse (headed by Prof. S. K. Gural) at National Research Tomsk State University. Students at the Faculty of Foreign languages (74 learners) took part in the research. The participants in our research were second, third and fourth year students majoring in Linguistics and Translation and Interpreting Studies. According to the conducted placement test (Placement Test, Upstream, Enterprise) the level of the English language of the students ranged from pre-intermediate level up to advanced level.

The first step of the research group was to choose situation-bound utterances that would be offered to the learners to analyze and then define the meaning of them with and without the context. Ten situation-bound utterances were chosen from the Corpus of Contemporary American English and studies by Kecskes (2000, 2010). Further the dialogues in which all these situation-bound utterances were used by native speakers from the United States were recorded and a set of special exercises was developed and offered to the participants to complete and analyze. The set of the developed exercises was aimed at the interpretation and acquisition of situation-bound utterances and their

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