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The Situational Context Effect in Non-Language-Majoring EFL Students' Meaning Comprehension

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Abstract

The article aims to explore the importance of the situational context for enhancing students' comprehension of particular phrases of the English language in their native-like use. This case study particularly focuses on situation-bound utterances and opportunities for creating relevant learning environment in the process of teaching. The authors present the results involving Russian EFL non-language-majoring students to rely on their comprehension of such phrases depending on the context. It analyses to what extent the situational context helps students comprehend and infer the meaning of SBUs in two organized ways – within and outside of the socio-cultural situation.

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1. Introduction

It is commonly known that context is a common ground that brings together a speaker and a listener, and, more specifically, it reflects some aspects of this ground that a listener needs to know in order to understand a given utterance. The situational context implies that a speaker and a listener share physically some common knowledge in their present communication. Another type of context, the linguistic context, refers to the common ground created on the basis of the speaker's and the listener's previous linguistic experience. According to Kecskes (2008), in addition to the situational and linguistic context a speaker and listener may have common experiences or culturally shared knowledge. This common knowledge can be conceptualized as an intrinsic context, again to the extent that

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this is common knowledge necessary for the listener to understand a linguistic input.

The intrinsic context depends on the listener's background knowledge, the knowledge stored in memory representations often referred to as scripts, schemata, mental models, etc. However, to understand the meaning of vocabulary items, using linguistic context may involve syntactic and morphological interpretation of the elements within a text. In other words, to determine the meaning of an item, it is necessary to know whether the item is a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb, functioning as a subject, a predicate or a complement. This information gives important clues to the meaning of the text. But it is not sufficient to provide a full understanding of utterances.

Kecskes (2008) also emphasized that the dynamic nature of human speech communication requires the development of a model that recognizes both regularity and variability in meaning construction and comprehension, and takes into account both the selective and constitutive roles of context at the same time. From his work we can conclude that there are no meanings that are context-free because each lexical item is a repository of context (contexts) itself; that is to say, it is always implicitly indexed to a prior recurring context(s) of reference. Fauconnier (1997: 188) also wrote that when we deal with a single language the complexities of modeling meaning do not necessarily stand out. We have got another situation if we learn a foreign language, when we compare two or more languages, or translate something from one language to the other. In this case, one can realize that different languages have developed different ways of interpreting and understanding the required constructions. As a result, interlocutors face some difficulties in speech communication, because of their own socio-cultural experience with lexical items that leads to misunderstanding the appropriate meaning, and feel the difference in using lexical units without taking consideration of actual situational contexts.

In this case, we come to the definition of situation-bound utterance (SBU) which was proposed and developed by Kecskes. SBUs are determined as highly conventionalized, prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrences are tied to standardized (Kecskes, 2010). SBUs are frequently used in any language because these expressions serve as interactional patterns and rituals that usually mean the same to all speakers for a particular speech community (Kecskes, 2014). Consequently, misunderstanding of the real meaning of SBUs can significantly hinder the use of them in the process of communication for the learners of the second language. Since the conceptual system of the learner is based on his native language, the closest concept can be reached through the word of this language that denotes the concept in this language and these concepts are culture-specific. But when we have to deal with the second language acquisition, there can hardly be any direct route between the L2 word and the L2 concept at this stage of two-language system development (Kecskes, 2008).

In our opinion, the most adequate comprehension of the L2 word and a set of all possible connections of this word in phrases and set expressions can be reached through focusing on SBUs which contribute to the adjustment of the concepts in the native language with those of L2. For different languages which reflect different worldviews the associative connections will be different.

In this way, the research questions of our study are:

- *To what extent do Russian learners rely on situational context when inferring the meaning of situation-bound utterances?*
- *What are the instruments for the meaning inferring by the Russian learners? – translation of a separately taken utterance (without context) into learners' native tongue and translation of the same utterance exposed in context and interpretation of the meaning of the whole situation*

The results reported here can be considered a case study presenting the findings from a larger research project on SBU interpretation by Russian EFL learners. The present paper will focus on the strategies employed by Russian EFL non-linguistics students to interpret SBUs in authentic American English speech situations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The experimental study was conducted at National Research Tomsk State University. The participants in our research were second year students of the Institute of Biology. Twenty-two students (7 male and 15 female students)

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