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Introduction to the Dynamic Interplay between Context and the Language Learner

Jim King

Traditionally dominant approaches in applied linguistics have tended to emphasise cognitive aspects of second language acquisition (SLA), and have placed the language learner as being largely independent from the context. Such approaches suggest learner traits to be stable, monolithic phenomena which are essentially divorced from the social environment. This volume questions this notion by bringing together a state-of-the-art collection of works which acknowledge that learner characteristics and behaviour are in fact dynamic and can be influenced by a multitude of competing temporal and situational factors. The works presented in this book include contributions from researchers based in a variety of countries around the world (including Austria, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States) who are specialists in a range of different language learning-related disciplines. Many of these contributors adopt the relatively new (for applied linguistics) and exciting conceptual framework of complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) in their work in order to better understand the inherent complexities involved in learning and using a second language.

CDST posits that individuals are intrinsically joined to their environment and context does not therefore represent a static external variable but is in reality part of the individual, meaning learners are influenced by context and they in turn help shape the context itself as time progresses (de Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007; Dörnyei, 2009a,b; Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). Using the example of language input, Ushioda (2015) provides us with a good illustration of this dynamically evolving, bi-directional relationship and explains 'the ways in which language learners orient and respond to language input will affect the content, quantity and quality of further input in

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the developing context of the interaction' (p. 47). Building upon this example, Ushioda argues that learners co-adapt with their environments to become part of the 'physical, historical, social and cultural context within which the interaction is taking place ... In short, learners are not simply located in particular contexts, but inseparably constitute part of these contexts' (p. 48).

Clearly then, context is important and deserves our attention. But what exactly is meant by the rather nebulous term 'context' in this book? The contributions presented here discuss context at multiple levels: from the micro-level contexts of intrapersonal narratives and interpersonal interactions, to the physical and social contexts of individual classrooms in which instructional contextual features (such as the teacher, learning tasks, pedagogical method, and so on) are embedded, right through and up to the broader sweep of macro-level sociocultural and national contexts. The book also addresses the important notion of temporal context, considering language learner characteristics and behaviour across various timescales of activity. While at first glance the potential range of interconnected contextual factors may seem dauntingly large and complex, through careful empirical research, such as that which is presented in the following chapters, it is possible to decide upon what aspects of context are important to the phenomena under investigation and what are not.

That said, it would be wrong to assume that CDST has a monopoly on the idea that there exists a dynamic interaction between learners and their environment, that the social and the psychological are linked. Indeed, over 30 years ago Breen (1985) was arguing for the need to explore in greater depth within classrooms the integration of social and cognitive factors in a bid to understand language learning in a more contextually valid manner. More recently there appears to be renewed momentum within applied linguistics research to bridge the gap between social and cognitive approaches (see Hulstijn et al., 2014), and this is exemplified by scholars such as Atkinson (e.g., 2014) with his sociocognitive stance towards SLA, and Benson and Cooker (2013) with their intriguing exploration into the role of the language learner as an individual operating within sociocultural frameworks. Personally, I am quite far from being a CDST purist and I welcome such disciplined alternative conceptual approaches as those described above, believing them to have the potential to make an important contribution to our knowledge about language learners and the complex processes of SLA they engage in. For me, complexity works best as a kind of supra-paradigm which allows other theories to flourish within it (cf. Davis & Sumara, 2006), and so it is with

this in mind that the current volume has consciously included a small number of works whose alternative theoretical approaches complement the main CDST thrust of the book.

An overview of the book's contents

This collection of works is divided into three broad sections whose common themes allow the discussion to flow smoothly from one area to the next. The first of these sees four chapters focusing on issues which surround how language learners construct their identities and the important role that context plays in this process, particularly with regard to how self-concept is shaped. A notable theme to look out for in this part of the volume is the intriguingly dynamic relationship between on the one hand, temporal context, and on the other, second language (L2) motivation, as learners engage with and try to make sense of their pasts, presents and future goals. The second part of the book considers oral participation within the L2 classroom itself, and has a particular emphasis on the interplay between environmental factors and the learner in instances where oral production appears not to be forthcoming. The classroom interaction focus of chapters 6 to 9 includes discussion of themes surrounding the construct of willingness to communicate (WTC), the puzzling issue of language learner silence and also the turn-taking practices of students studying English as a lingua franca within a university setting. The third and final part of the book broadens the scope of the discussion by looking at three further intriguing areas of applied linguistics in the form of engagement with language and grammar awareness, research methodology for language education, and language testing and assessment. As alluded to previously, a feature of the text is that the first chapters in each section adopt a complex dynamic systems theory framework, while the final one provides the reader with an alternative theoretical perspective which still acknowledges the complexity of contextual issues in language learning.

Following on from this introductory chapter, in Chapter 2, Sarah Mercer writes about the complex nature of learner self-concept, exploring the dynamic interplay which exists between a learner's L2 self and his or her context. Adopting a view of the self which is both socially *and* mentally situated, she argues convincingly that rather than being an external independent variable, in reality context forms an integral part of one's self system. Mercer challenges the notion of cultures and contexts as being static and monolithic phenomena, and instead proposes them to be dynamic, multifaceted and open to change. With this notion in mind,

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she suggests that we can only really understand a learner's sense of self if we acknowledge that individuals subjectively interpret and appropriate experiences from past contexts and interactions within present contexts to determine their future selves and goals. Of course the integration of self, contexts and cultures working together in a constantly evolving flux sounds like a devilishly difficult proposition to research effectively. However, Mercer provides us with one possible way forward by illustrating her innovative use of social network analysis through an open-narrative research approach.

Letty Chan continues with the theme of self-concept but in Chapter 3 she changes direction by reporting on a motivation-orientated study which makes use of Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System to investigate the interplay between a successful language learner's ideal selves, mental imagery and contextual environment. Inspired by Dörnyei's ideas about possible selves, future self-guides and vision (see Markus and Nurius, 1986), in recent years there has been a surge of studies seeking to better understand the role of the ideal L2 self in learners' motivated behaviour. Chan builds upon this body of work by exploring how context played a part in the dynamic change of one successful language learner's ideal-self imagery as he progressed towards becoming an English language professional. The longitudinal qualitative research she presents in the chapter is essentially a narrative of her Taiwanese participant's L2 life, and through this approach we are able to observe the learner's subjective interpretation of past experiences and how this feeds into his shifting reinterpretation of mental images which are influenced by feedback from the environment.

In Chapter 4, Joseph Falout expands the volume's discussion surrounding the role that context (temporal, intrapersonal and interpersonal) plays in shaping language learner self-concept by focusing on the use of past selves as emerging motivational guides. He begins the chapter with an unlikely slogan – 'Preparing students for their past!' – to emphasise the notion that thinking back and reflecting upon previous education experiences can either be a help or a hindrance to learners in developing future motivated L2 learning behaviours. Falout draws on ideas from cognitive neuroscience to make the point that we use the same areas of the brain and neural processes for both retrospection and projection, and the two are dynamically linked as learners imagine themselves in the future based on changing, malleable personal narratives built from subjective memories of the past. Unfortunately, within a Japanese EFL context geared primarily towards high-stakes testing, for many learners these memories are all too often far from positive. As a

teacher-research working within this context, Falout reports on classroom intervention research he has carried out with colleagues which seeks to provide students with opportunities to identify, share and reframe their past selves in a bid to promote positive self-image and motivated L2 learning.

Chapter 5 is the final chapter in the book's initial section and in it Florentina Taylor and Vera Busse provide us with a conceptual and methodological change of tack with their impressively large-scale, quantitative investigation into the strategic identity displays of L2 learners. Reporting on a questionnaire-based project which surveyed over 4000 adolescent learners of English situated across four European countries, Taylor and Busse argue that individuals must interact within multiple social contexts in which they may be expected to display often contradictory social identities depending on the expectations of who is present during an interaction. To illustrate this, they use the term 'relational context' (see also Taylor, 2014) and report on how their teenage participants presented themselves in three such contexts: with their English teacher, with peers and with family. Taylor and Busse highlight some interesting findings concerning discrepancies between the ways in which learners present themselves publicly and how they perceive of themselves privately, and suggest that trends in the cross-country comparative data they report on appear to show that certain features of national contexts and cultures may well play a role in this. Their chapter underlines the importance of both teacher and family support in maintaining adolescent English learners' academic engagement during the identity fulcrum of their teenage years.

With its focus on the interplay between context, self-concept and the construct willingness to communicate (WTC), the next chapter forms a segue into the book's second section which deals with classroom interaction themes. In Chapter 6, Jian-E Peng reports on a case study into the fluctuating levels of L2 WTC that one Chinese learner of English experienced over a seven-month period of studying the language at her medical college. Peng suggests that a desire to communicate in the target language is a basic prerequisite if one is to master the language, and that such a readiness to speak is highly situational and context-dependent. By drawing upon multiple sources of data (interviews, observations and student journal entries), the author illustrates how her participant's WTC and self-concept waxed and waned in active response to interaction with contextual features such as the pedagogical methods the participant encountered, her classmates' in-class behaviours and the levels of support she received from her instructor. Peng draws important

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conclusions about the need for L2 educators to try and maintain or boost the self-concept of their students if they are to be successful at promoting active communication within the classroom.

In Chapter 7, Tomoko Yashima, Maiko Ikeda and Satomi Nakahira also consider how L2 communication is shaped by the interplay between context and the learner, but their investigation focuses on the low levels of oral participation displayed by a class of students studying English at a Japanese university. Their innovative study responds to my own work on language learner silence (King, 2013a,b) in which I suggest that L2 classroom silence has become a kind of 'norm' in Japan's tertiary system and, despite the best efforts of many dedicated and inventive teachers, it stubbornly continues to form a relatively stable and predictable attractor state across the nation's university language classrooms. Yashima and her colleagues ask the question: if silence has become such a powerful attractor state, how best can we encourage our students to break this silence and initiate communication? To try and discover the answer, they designed an interventional study to track levels of oral participation amongst 21 English language majors during one semester's worth of open-class discussion activities. In addition to uncovering some surprising quantitative results about fluctuations in the amount of talk and silence which occurred during these discussions, the study makes good use of qualitative analysis of interactions during three focal sessions to explore why particular patterns of oral participation (or, indeed, non-participation) emerged. Although various interrelated factors were found to influence whether participants spoke or not, the contextual variable of discussion topic appeared to play a critical role in this process.

In Chapter 8 the discussion remains focused on a Japanese university L2 setting, and I build upon the previous chapter's findings by reporting on a stimulated recall study (Gass & Mackey, 2000) which aimed to explore what five individual students were thinking and feeling whilst silent episodes unfolded during a series of language learning situations in which there was an expectation of talk (e.g., during small-group discussion work). By using this retrospective research approach in tandem with classroom observations, I was able to examine reticent students' perceptions of the tasks they encountered at the time silences occurred and also gain insights into how these quiet learners perceived co-participants in their lessons. The recall sessions also provided a useful forum in which the students were able to express their socially and culturally derived fundamental beliefs about the avoidance of talk in education settings. In the chapter I use the lens of dynamic systems theory

to interpret results which point towards the underlying complexity of language learner silence and illustrate how an individual learner's silent behaviour can be influenced by a wide range of interconnected learner-internal and learner-external contextual attractors (i.e., variables) which work concurrently together to draw the person's discourse system towards, what appears to be in the Japanese EFL context at least, the very seductive attractor state of silence.

Concluding the volume's second section, in Chapter 9, Michael Handford provides our second departure from a complex dynamic systems perspective as he draws upon ideas from language socialisation and socially orientated discourse analysis to write about the interplay between social context and language within an English as a lingua franca (ELF) classroom. Handford discusses a novel approach to teaching spoken English which pays particular attention to turn taking and the interpersonal functions of speech. This approach makes use of a three-part model of a single speaker turn called the Head, Body, Tail Model in which the head is the interlocutor's turn-initial item, the body forms the main propositional content and the tail represents the turn-final item. The approach asks students to analyse authentic, corpus-derived examples of the model and reflect upon how it relates to features of their mother tongue before engaging in role plays which practice the Head, Body, Tail pattern. Thus the pedagogic focus is on a whole, floor-taking speaker turn rather than concentrating simply on the sentence or the clause. Handford prepares the ground for his pedagogic model with an insightful conceptual discussion surrounding the reflexive relationship between language and social context, arguing that L2 practitioners should prioritise the interpersonal aspects of learners' spoken discourse, thereby helping their learners to communicate in a coherent and socially appropriate manner.

The final section of the book begins with a study by Agneta Svalberg and Jim Askham who examine student language teachers' awareness of grammar within a collaborative learning context. In Chapter 10, the two researchers report on a mixed methods inquiry which employed learner diaries, interviews and interaction data to track the very different pathways towards learning experienced by two participants attending a series of grammar workshops. Each learner's engagement with language (EWL – Svalberg, 2009) was investigated in order to better understand the complex cognitive, affective and social processes which helped shape their individual journeys of learning about grammar and grammar teaching. Svalberg and Askham suggest that the EWL of each of their participants represents a sub-system nested within a larger

class-level EWL system in which students act as agents. Learner-internal variables, such as beliefs about teaching and learning, prior knowledge of grammar, and so on, interact with external contextual factors during group interactions to influence the trajectory of each learner's, and ultimately the whole group's, EWL. What makes this study so intriguing (and links it back nicely to the book's previous section), are the markedly different learning strategies used by the two focal participants who, despite contrasting levels of oral participation, both appear to have been highly engaged in the collaborative grammar workshops they attended.

What methods of data collection are best suited to the relatively new area of complexity-orientated applied linguistics research is a question which has exercised a number of the field's thinkers in recent years (see, e.g., de Bot & Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Dörnyei, 2014; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). In Chapter 11, Alex Gilmore picks up the baton and considers the role of mixed methods research for exploring language learning as a complex phenomenon operating at multiple levels of social organisation and on different timescales. To do this, he describes his own longitudinal, classroom-based study into the development of students' communicative competence using authentic materials in a Japanese university EFL context, retrospectively evaluating the study from a complex dynamic systems perspective. Going somewhat against the orthodoxy of CDST, Gilmore suggests that the quantitative aspects of his project (in the form of a two-group pre/post-test design using inferential statistics) helped him to interpret his data from a macro perspective (i.e., at the level of sociocultural groups) and make predictions about his students' communicative competence on a long-term timescale. At the same time, qualitative aspects of the study (which included learner diaries, interviews and analysis of classroom interaction) allowed Gilmore to focus on lower levels of the learning context, thereby gaining individual-level, emic perspectives from students which complemented his quantitative findings on the benefits of using authentic materials. With mixed-method empirical investigations forming the backbone of this book, Gilmore's methodological conclusions would appear to be highly relevant to the empirical research presented in this volume.

Rounding off the book is Glenn Fulcher's conceptually based chapter exploring the role of context and inference in language testing. In Chapter 12, Fulcher points out that language tests represent high stakes for many users whose futures may depend upon the result they achieve. It is therefore no surprise that testing processes are standardised by providers in an effort to eliminate as far as possible any contextual features which might disadvantage certain test takers and lead to a

variation in scores not caused by differences in ability. In spite of this need for decontextualisation, Fulcher ponders over whether it is desirable or even feasible for language testers to take complex context into account whilst still maintaining score generalisability, and he looks to validity theory for potential answers to this conundrum. In an engaging chapter which sees the author unafraid to draw upon the still-pertinent ideas of some slightly dusty Victorian scholars, Fulcher employs a series of analogies, which include such disparate pursuits as life-saving, purchasing a new fridge and wine tasting, to systematically consider the issue of context in language testing from three perspectives: atomism, neobehaviourism and interactionism. He concludes (after Carroll, 1961) that we should see language tests as being akin to scientific experiments in which, although it may not be possible to replicate perfectly all the complex contextual realities of the real world, it is possible to identify and control which contextual variables are likely to impact results. Only by paying close, ongoing attention to the role of context in test interpretation can we begin to make valid inferences about the future performances of learners.

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