2. SLA and context:

Towards "local understandings"
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Abstract
A major goal of SLA research is to help teachers better understand how their students interact with the language they are learning and with the learning process itself. This paper suggests that the exploration of context plays a crucial role in this endeavour. With this in mind, the paper proposes an analysis of context involving two main components – pragmatic and mental – and discusses the role of case studies in the exploration of students' interaction with language learning. In this way, it argues for the development of "local understandings" of the learning process. On this basis, a case study is examined to highlight the type of contextual factors which can influence students' interaction with and ability to learn from learning materials. In conclusion, it is suggested that the study of context should be an integral part of pedagogical decision making and, in particular, that it is important to explore the contextual dimension of what Krashen refers to as the "affective filter".

Second language acquisition (SLA) as a field of study emerged in the 1960s as part of the large scale expansion of interest in language teaching which characterised this period. In its early days, SLA was driven by a positivistic agenda whose more or less explicitly stated goal was to discover the process by which individuals learn a language other than their first language. From the point of view of practising language teachers, this was clearly a very exciting prospect. In essence, if it was possible to discover the processes by which our students assimilate the structures and mechanisms of a foreign language, our task as teachers would be enormously facilitated: we would, in a sense, have a blueprint of the learning process around which we could structure our pedagogical choices. As we will see below, SLA research has taught us a great deal about how language learning takes place. Nevertheless, we have to accept that it has not produced a clear, unambiguous blueprint of the learning process. Lightbown, for example suggests that "second language acquisition research does not tell teachers what to teach, and what it says about how to teach they have already figured out" (1985: 182), and Ellis remains non-committal as to whether a "single unifying account of L2 acquisition" is necessary or even likely to emerge (1994: 689-690). In other words, SLA research has *not* come up with general principles which can provide

teachers with unambiguous guidelines for their pedagogical choices, and it may never do so either.

Indeed, rather than neat, general "rules" or set recipes, what SLA research has discovered is rather just how complex a process language learning is. Research into individual differences, for example, has made us aware of the many factors of a psychological and cognitive nature which influence our students' interaction with the learning process (Oxford and Ehrman, 1993; Skehan, 1989). Indeed, recent research has shown that individuals' interaction with the learning process is influenced by a wide range of attitudinal and experiential factors, many of which may seem far removed from language learning in a narrowly mentalistic sense of the term (Williams and Burden, 1997). This has made us aware of the need to explore the learning process holistically, and to try to discover what language learning means to students in the full context of their lives within but also beyond the classroom. This clearly makes it necessary to study language learning in context, which in turn involves studying it "locally" and thus developing "local understandings" (Freeman, 2000; Tudor, 2001a).

These trends have moved SLA research closer to the concerns of practising teachers. They have to work with their students holistically, and a key skill for teachers is to discover what language learning actually means to their students, as it is only in this way that they are able to mediate between student perceptions and the goals they have to pursue in the language classroom. Our students are not disincarnate entities or "simply" language learners in some abstract sense of the term with no other goals in life than learning a given language. They are full human beings with lives, attitudes, beliefs and concerns beyond the classroom, and these will inevitably influence their identity within the language classroom. In other words, the baggage students bring with them to the learning process will influence how they perceive the language they are studying and what takes place in the classroom, including our actions and choices as teachers. For this reason, context needs to be an integral component of both SLA research and pedagogical decision making.

The context of SLA

"Context" is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It can, however, be seen as having two main components – pragmatic and mental.

Pragmatic context is made up of the objectively observable features of a teaching situation. It includes factors such as class size, the availability of teaching-learning resources, and access to target language (TL) materials or TL speakers. These factors exert a significant influence on the type of contact which students can have with the TL and the learning opportunities which they have or which teachers can offer them. The hierarchical and decision making structures in place in a given institution constitute another important constituent of pragmatic context in that these structures influence teachers' flexibility and ability to respond to student needs. The presence of an examination is yet another factor in terms of the vision of the language it conveys, and the modes of learning and study habits it generates.

Mental context is made up of the attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural expectations which learners bring with them to the learning process and to the classroom itself. It thus includes the many individual differences of a psycho-cognitive nature which have been studied in SLA research and which, in interaction with their life experiences, make each of our students the individual that s/he is. Then we have students' attitudes to the TL and to the TL community, both individually and as members of a given sociocultural community or peer group: these factors influence what the language means to students and thus have an effect on their interest in and openness to this language. Another feature of mental context is the modes of study and learning strategies which students have developed in their prior experience of language learning, as well as in other subject areas. Yet another is the place language learning holds in learners' overall set of priorities and their perception of the usefulness of the TL either currently or in the future. Then we have students' attitudes to the institutional setting in which they are studying the language, and possibly to the educational and political decisions which have led them to be studying the language in question.

Many of these factors may seem fairly distant from SLA in a narrowly mentalistic sense of the term. In practice, however, they can and do exert a significant influence on what TL learning *means* to students in the here-and-now of their lives, and this in turn contributes significantly to their openness to the TL and to TL learning. Furthermore, it is within the overall context created by these various factors that the pedagogical actions of the teacher assume a "local meaning" for students and thus enter into the SLA matrix.

Context and the role of case studies

Acknowledging the role of context in language learning has implications for our attempt to understand how our students learn a language and, in consequence, of how we as teachers can help them in this endeavour.

There is a widespread tendency for language teachers to look outside of the specifics of their own situation to the canon of general theory or best practice in order to find solutions to the pedagogical challenges they face within these situations. This strategy can of course offer teachers insights and open up valuable perspectives. Nevertheless, language teaching is never lived out "in general", but in the specifics of a given setting, and there is no guarantee that general principle will feed through to classroom realities in a linear, predictable manner. Rather, classroom realities emerge dynamically from the interaction of methodology and context, and in particular from the meaning which methodology has for the students (and teachers) directly involved in its use.

For this reason, there is a growing trend to use case studies as a means of exploring language teaching (Wallace, 1999). The details of a given case study may be what Freeman (1996) describes as "messy", but it is precisely in the "messiness" of local detail that language teaching is actually lived out. Indeed, case studies focus our attention on the dynamic interaction between methodology and context and, in this way, can shed more light on the realities of language teaching than methodological precept and generalisation.

A coursebook and its context of use

With these considerations in mind, I would like to discuss the role of context in language learning on the basis of a case study. The study in question (Canagarajah 1993, 1999; cf. also Tudor 2001b: 145-154) shows a mismatch between a fairly mainstream methodology as manifested in a given coursebook – *American Kernel Lessons: Intermediate (AKL)* (O'Neill, Kingbury, Yeadon, and Cornelius, 1978) – and the attitudes and expectations of one specific group of students. Canagarajah's study is set in a university English classroom in Sri Lanka, and describes the interaction of a class of 22 students over one academic year with the coursebook *AKL*. The use of *AKL* in the classroom in question was related to aspects of the pragmatic context of English teaching in Sri Lanka. Commercially produced materials were expensive and difficult to come by, and even reproduction facilities were limited,

which made it difficult for teachers to prepare their own courses. For these reasons, coursebooks donated periodically by aid agencies constituted a practical useful approach to organising language teaching. It should, however, be pointed out that in Canagarajah's study the coursebook in question was donated by the relevant aid agency, and was not selected by local teachers themselves.

Early in the course, Canagarajah, who was the teacher, became aware of discontent among students with respect to the coursebook, and his study revolves around his effort to understand the causes of this discontent. Canagarajah approached this task by means of a number of ethnographically oriented research techniques including observations and field notes made during the course, analysis of the glosses and drawings made by students in their coursebook, a pre-course questionnaire, and one-to-one interviews with students at the end of the course. The discontent which Canagarajah observed among his students with respect to *AKL* was related to two aspects of mental context.

Expectations with respect to language learning

In this respect, the students showed discontent with the relative importance accorded to grammar in the *AKL*. Specifically, they wanted more explicit grammatical instruction, which in their eyes meant the provision of abstract grammatical rules, paradigms and charts they could study and learn as products or content. Canagarajah notes, for example, that the students often skipped activity-oriented classes but attended classes which dealt with the more overtly grammatical elements of the coursebook. Furthermore, student attendance fell off dramatically from the second month of the course. Canagarajah discovered, however, that from this period a number of students had been following extra classes given by private teachers who used Indian and Sri Lankan coursebooks and who adopted a very "traditional", grammatically based approach to teaching. The students thus actively sought out the kind of grammar teaching they felt they were not getting in class. Indeed, even within *AKL*-based classes Canagarajah observes that students tended to "filter out" grammar and vocabulary from "supposedly interesting conversations" (1993: 617). In other words, they recycled *AKL* input into their own preferred view of language. The post-course interviews conducted by Canagarajah with the students revealed that they were reasonably happy with the more explicitly grammatical parts of *AKL*, although most felt that *AKL* should be replaced by a more grammar-based coursebook, that grammar should be given primacy in the course, that grammar

should be taught first, and that time should not be "wasted" on skills and activities. These student reactions reveal a perspective on language as the code and content, as opposed to language as a skill and a means of communication.

This aspect of mental context was also present in the students' reactions to certain learning activities. The students showed reluctance to participate in the role-play or conversation activities found in *AKL*; they also showed resistance to engaging in collaborative learning activities, trying to shift classroom interactive patterns towards a teacher-centred format. In this respect, Canagarajah reports that students rearranged into neat rows the desks that he had put in a circle before the class began: the physical layout of the classroom thus assumed a symbolic value in terms of what the students considered to be appropriate modes of classroom interaction. Canagarajah suggests that the students were looking for a product-oriented and teacher-centred mode of learning, an approach which was held in high esteem in the students' own culture and to which they were accustomed from their previous educational experience.

Social attitudes and values

The second component of mental context which influenced students' interaction with *AKL* was more broadly social in nature, and was linked to the social attitudes and value system which underpinned the situations found in *AKL*. Student discontent in this area manifested itself in a number of ways. One was the nature of students' comments and drawings in their coursebooks, which Canagarajah interprets as an attempt to "localise" the scenes shown (e.g. by drawing in Sri Lankan clothing on the characters), or as indicative of a negative affective reaction to the characters, scenes and cultural norms portrayed. In this respect, Canagarajah observes that in the situations contained in *AKL* upward social mobility and consumerism, the work ethic and the routine of factory life are positively connotated, whereas strikes and demonstrations, and the lifestyle of African Americans are not. In other words, Canagarajah suggests that there was an implicit social agenda in the coursebook, an agenda which did not, however, coincide with the value system, life experience and aspirations of the students.

These factors alone would probably have been sufficient to undermine students' interaction with *AKL* as a learning resource. The situation was, however, exacerbated by the fact that many of the learning activities in *AKL* – particularly

the role-play and conversation activities – required students to step into the situations in question and to assimilate, albeit verbally, aspects of this culture. Canagarajah observes that in these activities the students "uttered their parts in a flat reading intonation when they were supposed to dramatize the dialogue in front of the class" and that they found it "funny" or "unbecoming of them" (1993: 617) to attempt to bring the dialogues to life. Canagarajah attributes this in part at least to the social values underpinning the portrayal of the TL culture in the coursebook, and remarks that "... the discourse behind these dialogues was itself so alien to these students that they had difficulty entering into the roles specified" (ibid.). The gap between the students' own life experience and value system and the situations in *AKL* was such that they were unable (or unwilling) to suspend their disbelief sufficiently to use the relevant activities even for intonation or pronunciation practice.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that English is socially marked in Sri Lankan society. Canagarajah reports that "correct" English is seen as the hallmark of the privileged Sri Lankan elite, and he suggests that students' reluctance to engage in spoken activities arose in part out of inhibitions within the class group as a micro-society in its own right, the students not wanting to break ranks with their fellow students by approximating a form of English associated with Sri Lankans from a more privileged social background. The question of identity with respect to use of the TL thus related not only to the source TL culture as such, but also to the social connotations of English usage within Sri Lankan society itself. The students were therefore reacting to English not only as learners of a foreign language but also as members of a society in which this language is socially marked.

Discussion
As was pointed out above, we do not at present have a model of SLA which teachers can use as an unambiguous guide for pedagogical decision making. There is, however, a growing realisation that learners' affective interaction with the TL and with the learning process plays a very important role in their learning of this language. Helping our students to develop a positive affective involvement with the language they are studying as well as with the learning process itself is thus a key pedagogical objective.

Canagarajah's study shows that learners' affective involvement cannot be predicted

from materials or methodology alone. *AKL* is a professionally produced and widely used coursebook which attempts to offer students a varied and motivating approach to language learning, and there is every reason to believe that many students will have perceived it in these terms. For a number of reasons relating to aspects of mental context, i.e. the attitudes and expectations which students brought with them to the learning process, this was not the case with Canagarajah's students. The "problem" did not therefore lie with *AKL* as such, but in the interaction between the vision of language and of language learning found in *AKL* and the attitudes, expectations and value system of the students in question. Interactions of this nature are, however, fundamental to the creation of the affective matrix within which language teaching and learning occur, and cannot therefore be ignored in terms of SLA.

Implications

Canagarajah's study illustrates just how powerful a role context, and in particular mental context, plays in students' interaction with their language learning. We can select materials on the basis of their objective relevance or theoretical credentials, but this in itself does not guarantee that our students will be able to relate to these materials in a personally meaningful manner. This depends crucially on the attitudes and expectations that students bring with them to the learning process, and these relate to context.

Context, therefore, is not something accessory to language teaching and learning – simply a more or less elegant décor for the enactment of a pre-set script. Rather, it is an integral part of the complex matrix of attitudes and expectations within which our students interact with the TL and with our own actions and choices as teachers. For this reason, context needs to be an integral component in pedagogical decision making. As has already been suggested, general methodological principle or notions of best practice can offer teachers valuable insights into the choices they have to make in their classrooms. There is no guarantee, however, that general methodological principle, even if it comes with the cachet of best practice, will assume pedagogical meaningfulness in the specifics of any one classroom. This depends on the interaction beween methodology and context, and mental context in particular. For this reason, an open and non-judgemental study of context should be a fundamental component in all pedagogical decision making.

Another implication is that we need to explore the contextual dimension of what Krashen describes as the "affective filter" (1982; 1985). Krashen highlighted the role of learners' affective involvement with learning materials with respect to their ability to engage with these materials in a personally meaningful manner, and thus to be "open" to the learning potential of the materials in question. This is a very valid insight, and Canagarajah's study highlights just how many contextual factors can influence students' openness to and engagement with learning materials. In Canagarajah's study the factors which assumed importance included students' expectations with respect to language learning as derived from their previous learning experience, their value system with respect to the vision of the TL culture as represented in the coursebook, and then also a complex set of social attitudes which related to the TL in the students' own society. These factors go well beyond what is generally seen as being the domain of "rational" methodological choice and materials development, but Canagarajah's study reveals how powerful an influence such factors can exert on students' ability to interact with and thus to learn from what could be seen as fairly neutral, mainstream language teaching materials.

Finally, it is necessary to incorporate an explicitly ethnographic component in teacher training. In the first instance, this equips teachers with the skills and strategies they need in order to explore the context within which they will be making their pedagogical choices. This is particularly important with respect to mental context, as this is, almost by definition, less easy to pin down. An awareness of mental context can allow teachers to explore the meaning their pedagogical choices have for their students and thus the way in which these choices are likely to interact with students' affective interaction with language learning. This, however, clearly involves the study of the ethnographic basis of methodological choices, including, of course, those of the culture in which we have been brought up and have received our professional training. No choice is unmarked in ethnographic terms, and thus studying the ethnographic underpinnings of the methodological assumptions which we as teachers bring to the teaching-learning process is as much a part of a context-sensitive approach to language teaching as exploring what our students bring with them to the language classroom. The context within which our students perceive and interact with the TL and with the learning process arises dynamically out of the interaction of all these factors.

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