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# Dynamic context and cultivation of communicative competence

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**Abstract:** Communicative competence is not confined to the communicators' ability to make their utterance adapt to the context, because communicators take a leading position in dynamic process of communication. In order to make the communication successful, communicators should also learn to take advantage of the dynamic properties of context to select the most appropriate contexts to comprehend the utterance and construct a context which is beneficial to them. This will indicate a new look at the research on communicative competence. This paper will give some implications for improving communicative competence in English teaching on the basis of the dynamic property of the context and communication.

**Keywords:** Dynamic Context, Communicative Competence, Interactive Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Communication is the goal of every second language learner. Only when used in the real life can the language realize its value. Hymes coins the term "communicative competence" (Zhuanglin, Hu, 1988) to refer to the knowledge which enables someone to use a language effectively and their ability actually to use this knowledge for communication.

Generally speaking, communicative competence contains the following four aspects (Richards, et al. 2000: 81): The first is the ability of grammar. It refers to the knowledge and competence of language perception and expression in which the context plays a great role; The second level is the knowledge of rules of speaking such as the knowledge about how to begin and end conversation, which address forms should be used with different persons. The third one is the knowledge of how to use and respond to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks and invitations. And context, in this way, supplies an adequate clue for people to recognize these speech acts and choose appropriately way to respond them. The fourth, and the hardest one, is the ability of knowing how to use language appropriately. When someone wishes to communicate with others, he/she must recognize the social settings, the relationship to the other person(s), and the types of language that can be used for a particular occasion.

These four categories of communicative competence

emphasize mostly on using language properly according to contexts. However, as illustrated in previous chapters, both communication and contexts are dynamic and communicators take a leading position in communication. So communicators should also be able to actively create and manipulate contexts to communicate effectively. From this point of view, the development of the communicative competence falls into two aspects: the development of the ability to recognize the context properly so as to comprehend the utterance effectively and the development of the ability to construct a favorable context so as to express effectively. All of these need wonderful language competence which is used flexibly in certain context. Language is not isolated, but depends on certain setting, namely, context. Hence, the knowledge about context will surely perfect people's ability on language application.

The following sections will provide some implications in foreign language teaching to improve the communicative competence from the aspects of comprehension and expression. First, it will indicate what the teachers should pay more attention to and teach in English teaching, and then the interactive language teaching method will be introduced to integrate the knowledge into practical language teaching. That is from the aspects of what to teach and how to teach.

## 2. Developing the Ability to Recognize Contexts Effectively

### 2.1. Introducing Students Some Pragmatic Principles

Pragmatic principles are important points teachers should pay attention to in foreign language teaching. In order to achieve the goal of communicating effectively and successfully, communicators sometimes should conform to some pragmatic principles, such as Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle. In fact, there are many examples in the intensive reading texts of College English. In Lesson 7, Book 2, the sentence “?ii a group they were very brave ” violates Grice’s “quality maxim” (do not say what you believe to be false.) in Cooperative Principle. When the author who was attacked by muggers asked for help from the neighbors, they didn’t open the door. However, after the muggers had gone, they came out and helped the author find the keys. In spite of their brave gesture after the event, the neighbors were in fact cowardly and self-centred persons. The implicature of this sentence is that those people are not brave, and that they are merely cowards. So in explaining this sentence, Grice’s Cooperative Principle can be introduced to the students so that they can better appreciate the author’s satiric meaning.

After the introduction of Grice’s “quality maxim”, more examples like the following can be given to the students for understanding and practicing.

(1) A: Beirut is in Peru, isn’t it?

B: And Rome is in Romania, I suppose.

In this dialogue, surely B knows Rome is not in Romania, but he says so on purpose, thus violating “quality maxim”. He is actually ridiculing A’s ignorance.

So pragmatic theory is a very strong explanatory function to language, students with some functional knowledge of pragmatics can analyze the target language from the pragmatic point of view.

### 2.2. Introducing Students Some Knowledge about Social and Cultural Differences between Chinese and English

Sometimes, communicative failure is caused by the lack of the knowledge about social and cultural differences between Chinese and English. So in the teaching process, teachers should teach the knowledge in this aspect. This section will list some entries of cultural difference in detail:

(i) The differences in colour.

Different nations have different meanings to the same colour. “Blue” in English refers to “藍色” or “青色” in Chinese. So “blue sky” means “藍色的天”, while “blue bricks” means “青砖”.

Look at the following sentences:

(2) It was blue Monday and Tom just didn’t feel like going back to work.

Here, “blue” does not refer to a colour, but means “unhappy”. So this sentence means Tom was in a bad mood and didn’t want to go back to work.

(ii) The differences in time

There are also some different preferences to express “time” in Chinese and English. Look at the following sentence:

(3) They are coming here today week7week today.

In English, “today week”, “tomorrow week” and “yesterday week” respectively mean: “today in next week”, “tomorrow in next week” and “yesterday in next week” or “yesterday of last week”. However, in Chinese, a fixed time was preferred.

(iii) The differences in colloquial expressions

Because of the cultural differences between the two nations, there exist different meanings in the colloquial expressions. Here is an example:

(4) A: Ron, you don’t read, do you?

B: Me? No, I’m a tube freak.

In colloquial expressions, “freak” means “a fan” and “tube” refers to “TV”. So in this dialogue, B means that he/she does not like reading but is crazy about watching TV. If the meaning of the colloquial expression is not clear, what B wants to convey cannot be understood.

(iv) The differences in values

There are some differences in psychological values. For example, people in western countries believe that everyone is equal and they care more about the individual’s social status in society. So “Z” is always in capital. In China, most people are bound by traditional ties and are always modest and courteous. So when responding to a compliment, Chinese people will say “No, no. You’ve praised me too much”, while English people will just say “Thank you” or something like this.

There also exists some difference in image values. For example, Chinese people often use “狗腿子”, “狗仗人势”, “偷鸡摸狗” to describe or modify something or somebody bad. But in English culture, dogs are looked upon as “pets”, people do not only love dogs, raise dogs, but also coin some commendatory phrases with dogs such as “a lucky dog”, “a jolly dog”, “love me, love my dog”, etc.

If the students are familiar with these social and cultural differences, they will interpret more appropriately in verbal communication and less communicative failures will be caused.

## 3 Developing the Ability to Construct Favorable Contexts

Section above has provided some suggestions on what should be taught to improve students’ ability to interpret appropriately, which is one aspect of communicative competence. This section will provide some implications on how to improve students’ ability to express appropriately, which is another aspect of communicative competence.

### 3.1. Cultivating Students’ Awareness of Using Language in Appropriate Contexts

Context is a decisive factor in the production and interpretation of utterances. Contextual factors determine

the production of utterances including the choice of language, code, style, utterance-building ingredients and utterance-building principles, and they also determine the interpretation of utterances. And Chinese students of English often produce communicative failure due to the ignorance of the context in which the language is used.

English learners is often tend to assume an equation between linguistic forms and communicative function. They are commonly misled to think that commands are uniquely associated with imperative sentences and questions with interrogative sentences. However, imperatives are seldom used to express command or request in informal spoken English. Requests are more often expressed indirectly than by imperatives. To perform the function of asking people to close a door, for example, different linguistic forms can be used. He Ziran (1988: 16) lists the following nineteen different ways of expressing the function:

- I want you to close the door.
- I'd be much obliged if you'd close the door.
- Can you close the door?
- Are you able by any chance to close the door?
- Would you close the door?
- Won't you close the door?
- Would you mind closing the door?
- Would you be willing to close the door?
- You ought to close the door.
- It might help to close the door.
- Hadn't you better close the door?
- May I ask you to close the door?
- Would you mind awfully if was to ask you to close the door?
- I'm sorry to have to tell you to please close the door.
- Did you forget the door?
- Do us a favour with the door, my dear?
- How about a bit less breeze?
- Now, Johnny, what do big people do when they came in?
- Okay, Johnny, what am I going to say next?

Of the nineteen sentences, only one (sentence p) is in the imperative form, but all of them can express request. The difference lies in the fact that they should be used in different contexts and thus their pragmatic force is different.

Therefore, in foreign language teaching, context in which language is used should be paid much attention to. Teachers should teach not only the general rules of the language, but also the pragmatic rules in using the language. That is to say, in explaining linguistic forms, teachers should also give explanations on the relevant stylistic features and provide information of using the appropriate linguistic forms in given contexts, which can enable students to know the contextual factors they should adapt to in communication and improve their pragmatic competence. For example, the sentence pattern "Would you mind doing... ?" is a polite way of making a request. Actually, people do not always say so. A polite form does not suit all the situations. In different situations, to different people, different linguistic forms are used to perform the same function. Thus, when one wants to

get to the airport by taxi, he/she need not say to the taxi-driver in a formal way like "sense me, would you mind taking me to the airport?" In this case, "Airport, please" is more idiomatic.

### 3.2. *Cultivating Students' Awareness of Manipulating Contexts as Communicative Strategies*

In order to cultivating students' awareness of manipulating context as communicative strategies, the teachers should introduce students some strategies of manipulating contexts. This section will list some examples to illustrate some strategies in manipulating contextual factors in verbal communication so as to achieve communicative goals.

(i) Communicators can establish or re-establish spatial-temporal and social settings which are beneficial to advance their communicative purposes.

One aspect of spatio-temporal dimension of setting that can be manipulated is the setting referred to by the utterance. Here person deixis can be taken as an example. For instance, the first-person pronoun "we" can be either "we-inclusive-addressee" or "we-exclusive-of-addressee". The latter is functionally equivalent to the second-person pronoun "you". By adopting "we", "our", "us or"you" or"y'our", the speaker can intentionally shorten or expand the empathetic distance with the hearer. Additionally, communicators' social roles and mutual social relationships can be manipulated and encoded by means of a variety of linguistic devices such as address forms. For example, the same person can be addressed as Katie or as Professor Wales. Those who use Katie assume a close, possibly familiar relationship with the hearer. Those who use professor Wales, however, assume a more distant, formal relationship with the same person.

Social settings are also dynamic and can be redefined. In the process of communication, the speaker can prescribe honorific expressions to reproduce the context in order to force the hearer to do what the social role expects him/her to. Therefore, honorific is not only a method of showing politeness but also an emergent pragmatic power. The choice of honorific is decided not only by the status of language users but also by communicative goals.

Look at the following example of Prof. He (He Ziran, 1997: 19). One day, when Prof. He was consulting A about computer operation, his colleague B came in. At first, A called B "Xiao B" according to Prof. He's introduction. After a while, when A came to know that B is an expert on computer, A began to address him as "Professor B". At last, A asked B whether B could teach him knowledge about computer. B agreed, although B and A were casually acquainted and from the conversation between Prof. He and B, A knew B was very busy. After A left, B said to Prof. He that A was very clever to address him as "professor B". In this case, B found it difficult to refuse. In order to attain his communicative goal, A constructed a social framework and produced a context by means of honorifics. A gave B a social role of a teacher, and his social role is a student. When B was addressed as 'Professor B', He was expected to do what a teacher should do. Thus, the speaker's strategic use of

honorifics as a pragmatic power can restrict the hearer's behavior and make him do something according to the speaker's intention.

(ii) Intentional code-switching is also one aspect that can be manipulated in verbal communication. Code-switching can also be operated deliberately by the speaker so as to define the situation. By code-switching, the speaker can consciously manipulate the communicative context by means of diverging from or changing current role relationship and corresponding social distance and right obligation relationship so as to re-establish a new context for interaction. The following is an interesting example that best illustrate this:

(5) On the border along India and Nepal a frontier inspector blamed a woman for smuggling tea. The woman firstly argued in Nepalese that the tea she took does not exceed the quota. But when she noticed that the inspector spoke with Navels accent, she immediately switched to Navels and asked for his forgiveness as a home-mate. Finally she complained about fiaws of the current policy in English, which implied that she was dissatisfied and that she was cultured and by' no means intended to "smuggle" several small boxes often.

(Zhu Wanjing, 1992: 199-200)

The woman was successful in the end. Her success resulted from her international code-switching (from Nepalese to Navels and then to English).

Here is another example of Prof. He(He Zhaoxiong, Jiang Yanmei, 1997: 18):

When Prof. He teaches English in class, he only speaks English and plays the role of a teacher. After class, he talks with the students in Chinese and plays the part of a friend of them. This fact is mutually manifest between his students and him. At the end of a term, a student was disqualified from the examination because he had been caught cheating. After the examination, the student offered an explanation to Prof. He in Chinese at once. Knowing what the student's attention was, Prof. He consciously replied in English. Hesitating for a while, the student had to speak English, too. When Prof. He's communicative language was changed from Chinese to English, his communicative role was returned from a friend to a teacher. When the student asked whether he could be given a way out, Prof. He answered "No" in English immediately. To turn down such a request might be a little difficult when Prof. He was playing a role of a friend. However, when Prof. He was playing a role of a teacher, it was easy for him to do so because the student violated the discipline of examination. At first, the student tried to use Chinese to produce a context favorable to him, but obviously unfavorable to Prof. He. Prof. He not only refused to recognize the context produced by the student but also reproduced a context favorable to his own communicative goal by means of speaking English.

(iii) Additionally, prosodic features such as intonation, stress patterns, tone, voice and so on are also important and effective devices for the manipulation of context. For instance, intonation can serve as a marker of intonation structure by

bringing parts of the utterance into focus. One of the main functions of this focus is to make new information, and forebode immediate communicative behavior coming up. Here is an example (Gumperze, 1982: 111):

(6)(a). George has plans to' leave.

(b). George has 'plans to leave.

If the speaker stresses the word "leave", he/she means George intends to leave, while if the speaker stresses the word "plans", he/she means George has blueprints to deliver. Communicators can therefore take advantage of these features as signals of their intention, emotion and to increment or alter the utterance meaning.

Besides the intonation, many other features of prosody can be manipulated by communicators, which has been illustrated with some examples in Section 4.3.3.

(iv) Apart from prosodic features, communicators can also take advantage of non-verbal devices, namely the body language such as gestures, postures, eye movement, facial expression, etc., as effective devices for the manipulation of context. Body language is often thought of as an accompaniment to the more important verbal signal. It is a powerful tool in communication, because it is part of contextual ingredients and keeps changing in the process of communication.

By means of body language, the communicators cannot only keep a certain relationship with their interlocutors but also negotiate with their interlocutors to reproduce a context which is favorable to them. For example, if one wants to withdraw from the interaction, he/she may get up from his/her chair (getting up from one's chair is an accepted body language pre-sequence to saying goodbye). If his/her interlocutor does the same thing, it means the latter recognizes the context produced by the former. Take another example. When a group of people are talking together, if A wants to talk with B and stops talking with C, he/she may increase his eye contact with B, and move away from C. If both B and C recognize the context produced by A, they may perform accordingly. Therefore, the communication will go on to the next stage. These examples show that in communication, some non-verbal features are closely related to the communicators' intention and in consequence function as the attention track. The hearer takes the non-verbal features which are clear in the immediate physical situation as a clue to what they signify and comes to the information core of utterance and recognition of the speaker's intention. Communicators can therefore make use of the dynamic property of these features to construct a context beneficial for the achievement of a positive communicative end.

(v) Last but not least, communicators can make use of the background knowledge outside the immediate scene. This often occurs in debate. Because in debates, much of the talk in conflict-managing settings is about defining truth, and that the ability to establish what is true and what is false is but an instrument of power. The power resides in the ability to evoke and use the relevant domains of knowledge that link certain individuals with particular rights, duties and

responsibilities. The authority of one's voice is thus conveyed and realized by relying on culturally acceptable discourse procedures, which can reshape the ongoing context. In other words, people can use context to add value to what they say and devalue the talk of their opponents. The following story, to some degree, illustrates this point:

(7) A man by the name of Mr. Browter went swimming with his friends one afternoon. They had all put on their swimming trunks except him because he thought there would be some place for the swimmers to change clothes near the beach. However when they got there, he found nowhere to change clothes near the beach. So Mr. Browter had to go to a car to change his clothes in it. But as Mr. Browter was putting his swimming trunks, an elderly woman came near and stood by the car. Mr. Browter had to hasten. Then he opened the door of the car and shouted angrily to the woman. "Do you always watch people changing clothes?" The woman shook her head and said. "Do you always change your clothes in other people cars?"

In this example, both parties take different perspectives: Mr. Browter considered it impolite to watch others changing clothes, while the car owner considered it inappropriate to change clothes in her car. In this case, each party tries to activate and make use of different rules as the basis for arguing so as to put the other party to an inferior position.

All the above discussions and examples indicate the dynamic interadaptability between language users and contexts. It shows that communicators do not only interact under the limitations of context but also manipulate contextual ingredients intentionally so as to construct an advantageous context for communicative purposes. All of the strategies can be taught by the teachers with some vivid examples so as to cultivate students' awareness of manipulating contextual factors as communicative strategies which enable them to communicate effectively.

## 4. Interactive Language Teaching and Communicative Competence

The above sections have introduced some techniques of improving communicative competence in terms of the dynamic context. All of these are just intended to show what to teach. This section will provide some techniques to show how to organize a class to realize these techniques in the teaching process, which indicates how to teach.

### 4.1. What Is Interactive Language Teaching

Students achieve facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages (that is, messages that contain information of interest to speaker and hearer in a situation of importance to both). Communication is an interactive process in which context, language cognition and social factors interact with each other. Brown (2001: 159) points out that:

"Interaction is an important word for language teachers, in the area of communicative language teaching, interaction is,

in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about. ...the best way to learn to interact is through interaction itself".

From this point of view, communicative competence should be imposed in an interactive classroom where linguistic interaction is conducted.

Linguistic interaction is a collaborative activity involving the establishment of a triangular relationship between the speaker, the hearer and the context of situation. Interaction involves not just expression of one's own ideas but comprehension of those of others. One listens to others; one responds (directly or indirectly); others listen and respond. The participants work out interpretations of meaning through this interaction, which is always understood in a context, physical or experiential, with nonverbal cues adding aspects of meaning beyond the verbal.

As noted in the previous chapters, both context and communication are dynamic. Students cannot improve their communicative competence only in static and formulaic environment. Just as Rivers (1987: 4 — 5) points out that:

"Through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic materials, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals. Students can also use all they possess of the language — all they have learned or casually absorbed — in real-life exchanges where expressing their real meaning is important to them. They thus have experience in creating messages from what they hear, since comprehension is a process of creation, and in skilfully creating discourse that convey their intentions".

### 4.2. How to Organize an Interactive Classroom

Last section illustrates briefly that interactive language teaching is a necessary and scientific teaching method, which is in accordance with the dynamic property of communication and context, for students to improve their communicative competence. This section will summarize some tentative techniques suggested by Rivers (1987) to illustrate how to organize an interactive classroom.

(1) Some authentic materials should be provided to students in an interactive classroom. The listening will be purposeful as students prepare to use what they have heard in some way. The materials should be carefully selected and prepared, and will always be used in some productive activity: as background for a research project to be discussed with others; for re-play in a role-playing situation with a problem-solving components; as a dramatization or humorous story telling; or as input for a small-group discussion or debate about controversial or unexpected elements, perhaps cultural, which need study in order to be understood and accepted in their context. Besides, songs and music can also serve as the materials to help the students appreciate the cultural traits of another group.

(2) Some activities can be organized so as to provide chances for students from the beginning to listen and speak in authentic communicative environment. For example,

Students can create radio talk shows, conduct class flea markets with personally selected artifacts (buying, selling, negotiating, explaining, persuading, retracting), simulate cocktail parties or job interviews, report on newscasts, providing their personal commentary from their own cultural and national viewpoint, argue about events and positions taken and share points of view.

(3) Students can watch films and videotapes of native speakers interacting. They observe nonverbal behaviour and types of exclamations and fill-in expressions that are used, and observe how people initiate and sustain a conversational exchange, how they negotiate meaning, and how they end a conversation.

(4) Students can be involved in joint tasks: purposeful activity where they work together doing or making things, making arrangements, entertaining others, preparing materials for cross-cultural presentations and discussions, arranging international festivals or open days for parents — all the time using the language as they concentrate on the task.

(5) The learning of the grammatical system of the language should also be included in an interactive classroom. Understanding and expressing meaning require careful syntactic choices. Learning grammar, however, is not listening to expositions of rules but rather inductively developing rules from living language material and then performing rules. This process can and should be interactive, with students internalising rules through experience of their effectiveness in expressing essential meanings. Many activities such as “Simon says” for imperatives at the elementary level can be developed so as to make students use particular structures without feeling they are “learning grammar”.

Through these varieties of interactive activities, the students can practice what they have learned such as the knowledge in a vivid and authentic environment, which is beneficial to improve their communicative competence.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter firstly has presented some implications for improving the communicative competence from the aspects of developing the ability to comprehend and 'express effectively under the manipulation of the dynamic contexts in verbal communication. Then it has integrated the implications with the interactive language teaching to provide some techniques to realize the implications in the practical teaching process.

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