

Educational Context: The Factor for a Successful Change

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Abstract

Educational change is vital for a number of reasons, one of the most important of which is its role in addressing developments in teaching and learning. Generally, educational change is implemented to make education better and improve outcomes. A focus on teaching English represents a strong area of change in education as it is becoming increasingly necessary to be fluent in English, which is considered a global language. It is important to consider English learning within the context of educational change because it seeks to establish relationships between different components of change, including interrogating its necessity. For example, there must be a justification for teaching and learning the English language. To date, little attention has been paid to context in educational change, and building an understanding of context will lend a new perspective and allow effective strategies to be implemented to support the achievement of intended goals and objectives. Change requires an awareness of context, and every stakeholder must have a clear understanding of the different dimensions, as well as the intent, of the change.

Keywords: context, context components, curriculum change, educational change, EFL, English language teaching, teacher training.

1. Introduction

Education comprises micro and macro components. Education's micro components include activities that take place in schools, especially those that unfold inside the classroom. Teaching and learning activities are considered to be micro components, and instruction at this level has certain critical elements. The two most notable of these elements include content and context. Content refers to the important concepts, facts and principles to be taught, while context refers to the components of the content that help the learner understand meanings. Context encompasses situations that occur in conjunction with the instruction process, such as the time in which it occurs, the abilities of the student and teacher and the location of the instruction itself. Educational content, meanwhile, must be presented and developed in a way that allows the learner to better comprehend its various components and elements. Context, therefore, interrogates the intent of the content, while the content must consider the learners' individual needs (Wedell & Malderez, 2013).

Context is ever-changing; it is a fluid construct that consists of several variables and comprises the interactivity of their process. The definition of context here, therefore, is not fully comprehensive. It is impossible to understand context as a separate concept; it must, instead, be viewed in light of the aspects that it covers, which are under constant change. This can occur for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that any researcher who defines a 'context' in any specific instance will have their own form of bias or preference; this can lead to some factors being given priority over others (Wedell & Malderez, 2013).

Teaching English as a foreign language requires that a solid context be established; this benefits both the learner and the instructor. The context of English learning centres more on student learning than on teaching, and therefore the instructor will come to understand the learners and their particular needs. While teaching originates from the instructor, the best instructional technique is one that is guided by the learner's capacity to master the concepts.

The macro level of education involves policy, and education policies shape the entire landscape of education. In some countries in which the English language had not previously been taught at the primary stages, such as Saudi Arabia, it was introduced through changes to educational policies (Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014). An ideal national policy on teaching English is one that considers learners with different levels of English proficiency.

The development of such a policy will create the context at the macro level, which will then guide micro-level activities that take place in English classrooms. This ensures that the teaching and learning objectives can be achieved to the greatest possible extent. In practice, however, this can be more difficult to achieve, as some macro-level context reflects a very minimal understanding of the realities that occur at the micro level. This can lead to the creation of policies and context at the macro level that cannot be properly implemented at the micro level.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview

Educational change involves implementing reforms that have been developed to improve the education sector. Pedagogy represents a central component of education in this construct, and it is usually a top priority of any educational reform. The efficiency of the pedagogy, as well as the method of teaching that is implemented, is an essential consideration; every aspect of reform seeks to improve efficiency. However, it is dangerous to shift paradigms and implement changes in the education sector without paying attention to critical elements of pedagogy (Pickering, 2019). For example, while educational change can take the form of curriculum revision, which addresses the content aspect, the aspect of context, especially regarding why that revision is necessary, is often forgotten. This presents a barrier to successful implementation of educational change, as context is necessary for successful execution of the content (Reio, 2011). Context puts content into perspective and aids its successful delivery.

Educational change takes place at both the macro and micro levels. The macro level refers to the wider educational system, including curriculum change and new policies that affect managerial actions. Micro-level changes refer to internal changes that are implemented within academic institutions, such as revising teaching schedules and instructional strategies. School administrators may collaborate with teachers to determine better approaches to instruction; for example, they may consider how extra help can be provided to weaker learners to help them catch up with their peers (Rincón-Gallardo, 2019).

At both the macro and the micro levels, the goal of change is to introduce new ideas with the aim of improving learning outcomes and achieving efficiency in teaching and learning processes. Educational change begins with the ability to evaluate the needs of those at the micro level, including understanding the knowledge base that is to be provided, as well as expectations and the capability of implementing changes. This must then be conferred to those at the macro level in order to provide the proper balance of efficiency required for success.

2.2 Defining Context as a Concept

Educational context can be defined as the manner in which the education system is designed to meet specific goals and objectives and to address specific needs. More narrowly, it also refers to the manner in which curriculum content is positioned to provide value to the learner. The goal of educational systems the world over is to achieve specific goals – some universal, others particular to the (national) setting in which the system is implemented (Oerlemans, 2010). Curriculum content is a subset of the education system; it is the tool that is used to convey the knowledge that the education system is designed to impart. However, the content must follow a certain path; it must be presented through certain processes which vary and must be contextualised to meet learners' specific needs.

The understanding of context and its applications must, therefore, be continually refined to increase the ease with which learners can master content. Further, this context must engage a balance between the capacities of all who are involved (including teachers, learners and their schools) and the curriculum goals. Therefore, teaching and learning processes should be interactive so as to ensure constant exchange between learners and instructors (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). For every educational change, there is a context which must be clearly defined before decisions can be made on the dimension in which the change will be implemented. This will determine the effectiveness of the change in terms of its outcomes and the efficiency with which it can be applied.

Where possible, learners will make their instructors aware of their particular learning needs; from this, instructors can frame the instruction in a way that suits the learners' needs. This is accomplished by positioning the content in a manner that will enhance the learner's comprehension,

Which is especially important when it comes to teaching English as a foreign language. This can also be of particular benefit to learners who have little to no history of interaction with the English language (Mertkan, 2010).

Teachers also have needs that must be addressed in the context, including needs related to support, training and education; availability of resources; and the available time to provide individualised services for individual learners. In essence, the context helps create a connection between the needs of the learner and those of the teacher. Further to this, every learner has unique needs. Some may find learning English to be extremely difficult, while others may not struggle to learn the language. The pedagogical approach should address the needs of both categories of students rather than focusing on one group to the disadvantage of the other. This can only happen when the context is considered in the teaching and learning process (Nguyen & Hunter, 2018). Context allows the learning process to be specifically targeted toward the students' needs and intentions rather than implementing an overall teaching method that concentrates solely on teaching the basics of a language or teaching it in a manner that is ideal according to theory instead of actual practice.

Decisions in the education sector must be made based on the context; these decisions have to be informed and the measures must be tailored to meet students' specific needs and directed to meet specific goals and objectives. While it is easy to take context for granted, this can severely limit the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

2.3 Components of Context

In the education space, context comprises three main components: people, place and time (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). In order to fully understand context, these components must each be fully explored and evaluated. These components tend to influence what happens in the classroom setting; they may also be influenced by what happens in the classroom. Educational instruction – not just English teaching – involves people (i.e. the instructor and the learners). People are central to instruction; teaching and learning processes refer to interactions between instructors and learners in an educational setting (Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014). These processes are human activities which are mediated by people who interact with each other.

Learners differ in terms of their cognitive abilities, and instructors are generally required to work with all of them in the same class. People tend to behave differently because they think differently due to their different experiences in relation to a particular subject. As people relate with each other in the educational setting, they come to understand more about each other; from this, an instructor can decide which instructional approach will be most effective (Wedell, 2009).

Under ideal conditions, teachers and instructors will have received training to understand the different methodologies that can and should be used in an English as a foreign language teaching environment; they may even have developed their own teaching approaches and have gained experience in the process of recognising and teaching to address individual needs (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). Such teachers would be well-equipped to engage students through the proper methods for their specific situation. It is essential for effective English teaching that the instructors possess a solid understanding of individual learners' strengths and weaknesses and that they have developed an approach that will enhance their strengths and address their weaknesses. As mentioned above, however, this generally only occurs under ideal circumstances in which teachers have received the right type of training on teaching methodologies and ways of monitoring students to determine the proper method for them.

The second component of context is place. Education does not take place in a vacuum, but in a physical space. At the micro level, this indicates the specific physical environment in which the instructor and the learner meet. At the macro level, this space refers to the institution or school in which the classroom is situated; it also includes the city, region and country. Place has other definitive aspects such as culture, which influences how people behave and perceive things, and language, which is used for instruction (Harris & Jones, 2018). While some places are harsh, thereby inhibiting learning, other places are welcoming, which can enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. The place aspect of the educational context must be arranged in such a manner that learners will feel comfortable and ready to learn.

Educational changes must always strive to improve the conditions of the learning environment so that instructors and learners feel safe and can concentrate on what matters. This occurs when policy-makers understand and react to the existing conditions and current thinking that occurs within the learning environment.

From that understanding, they must also consider the needs of both learners and instructors to ensure that the correct form of change is being implemented. Institutional culture, which determines the academic culture of a school observed by the teachers and learners as they interact with each other within the school, is another factor that must also be considered (Hauge et al., 2014). In fact, macrolevel issues such as educational policies often have a strong influence on educational culture and practices.

The third component of context is time. When reflecting on how people behave or think and the environments in which they operate, the element of time will always be relevant. Teaching and learning processes take place at a given point in time, and it is important to consider this when striving to gain a complete picture (Feu-Gelis & Torrent Font, 2019). There is a difference in time between when a learner begins to learn the English language and when they master it. There are also various stages of learning; each milestone is attained in its own time. This explains why instructors use instructional plans, which break down content into smaller units and outline when each unit will be covered and how long a programme should take to implement. It is important for each component of the process that teachers and learners can measure time in a manner that works for them and understand the manner in which time may change their level of context. At the macro level, for example, what is seen as desirable or required will change as outside influences change, while at the micro level, what teachers consider 'possible' will also change as time passes (Wedell & Malderez, 2013).

Further to this, without the element of time, teaching and learning processes would be disorganised, as there would be a lack of clarity in terms of the timelines within which the content will be covered. For something like teaching English as a foreign language, learning outcomes are negatively affected if there is no plan in place that outlines the learning schedule. This can also occur when the timeline is unrealistic and high standards are set that cannot be achieved within the time allotted.

2.4 Importance of Context in Educational Change

Educational change is a necessity; there will always be a need to improve education systems to make them more effective and efficient tools for societal transformation. Reformation of education systems requires a focus on several factors which vary from one context to another (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2013). For example, as time goes on, the needs of society, teachers and students may change; new issues and challenges will emerge that call for reformation of the education system to make it more responsive to the needs of the present time, which tend to differ from the needs of the past.

Time as a component of educational context is thus something that must be explicitly considered when making changes to the education system. Educational change does not take place in isolation, but in the context of a background. It seeks to solve problems and enhance strengths so the system can work for the people as it should (Harris & Jones, 2018). The education system is, after all, complex. It comprises several components that must work together, though this does not always happen in practice; a school is more than just its physical structures and the people operating inside it.

When a change is to be implemented, it is important to consider how it will affect all parts of the system. This requires looking at the system as a whole rather than considering its various aspects individually. The components of an education system are dependent upon each other, which requires those making changes to examine all of the components together and assess how each one is likely to influence the change process (Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014). This can help put things into perspective and allow choices to be made regarding the dimension of change. Understanding this context can lend a sense of direction to the changes that are being considered.

Knowing the current status of the education system, including its strengths and weaknesses, is essential when one is determining the kind of change that will be required. Policy-makers, however, are not always open about what is currently happening in their education systems; they will not always investigate adequately to determine the system's actual needs prior to implementing (or attempting to implement) a change. In its ideal form, there are a number of ways this investigation could take place. For instance, those who are engaged in a change process that is aimed at improving schools can focus on the students that will be affected and conduct a thorough examination of their needs. This involves concentrating on the factors they already have an awareness of, the manner in which the students learn best and what they expect from the learning process. Changes can then be evaluated based on the students' particular needs.

Next, change-makers should also evaluate the challenges faced by at-risk students. In this case, the assessment will involve investigating factors such as family background, social behaviour of the learner, the learner's personal characteristics, as well as the school context (Brody & Hadar, 2017). All these factors interact to create conditions that can result in a risk condition, which can make it difficult for the learner to achieve their academic potential.

Schools exist and operate within communities that have their own cultures; this has a significant influence on a school's culture and values. This is especially true given the fact that schools work together with communities, which are the foremost stakeholders. Implementing changes that are incongruent to a school's values and traditions will negatively affect teaching and learning processes because of the disruption that comes with such changes (Burner, 2018). Traditions and values are an aspect of context under people and place and they shape how the school system as a whole. Educational change should only be considered when it can improve a situation or address aspects of the process in which something has gone wrong. Holding to this requires that policy-makers develop a full understanding of the existing culture and values of the community relative to the educational process. Only through this understanding will it be possible to implement change in a way that is conducive to the educational environment and everyone immersed in it.

When a change is overly disruptive, its purpose may be defeated, leaving the school or education system in a worse situation rather than achieving improvement. Moreover, the timing of an educational change should be taken under careful consideration, as some changes in the education sector may only fail to reap the desired results because they have been timed incorrectly (Chapman, 2020). Again, time is an important aspect of the educational context; it determines whether or not measures should be taken in a given situation at a given point in time. This is also where considerations of time frame for the implementation of a change from start to completion will occur. Changes that will take too long could 'miss the mark' on their usability.

Those who are involved in the educational change process must understand the different dimensions of the process, as well as the issues that it seeks to address. These are vital components of change and have a major role to play in how it will be implemented at different levels. The capabilities and competencies of the people involved must thus be considered in assigning roles for implementing change. In teaching English, the most pertinent issue to be addressed is the need to impart knowledge of the English language to people who have had little or no past interaction with it (Brody & Hadar, 2017). Each learner has unique needs, and it is the role of the instructor to address them on an individual level. The measures that will be adopted by the instructor or the approach they choose should be those that are best suited to address their students' particular needs. A educational change is a people-driven process, the interests and concerns of the individuals who will be affected must be considered from the outset. It is these people who will either benefit from the change or be hurt by it if things go wrong as a result of the change.

As we look at each of the components addressed above, it is possible to better understand the ideal manner in which context can and should be utilised in creating the changes necessary for an educational system. However, when it comes to the actual application of the process it can be far more complicated to ensure that context is properly considered. In part, this is due to the multitude of factors that must be considered in the process, including the understanding and cohesion of different capacities, ways of thinking and characters related to each of the involved participants. Therefore, it is essential to create a unified method of implementation. While this presents a complex challenge, policy-makers must develop an overall awareness of the principles to be used and the methods of developing curriculum as well as an understanding of those who will be most affected by the proposed changes (Wedell, 2022). They must then work to determine who and what will be involved in overcoming the challenges, and even provide proper principles and practices through which the process will be implemented (Wedell, 2022). While this may be challenging, it is most definitely possible. In fact, research suggests that allowing teacher associations to not only set their own research agendas but also work collaboratively to identify and generate solutions improves the process of developing these educational processes (Banegas et al., 2022). Furthermore, gaining an understanding of the association members' priorities was shown to lead to an even stronger recognition of the challenges to and methods for improving student learning (Banegas et al., 2022).

It is crucial that specific processes be created for every possible area, and this will often involve adapting national curriculum policies to accommodate local needs (Banegas et al., 2022).

While this can be complicated, it will make a significant difference and will allow for the decentred method of change that is necessary for providing proper language learning and support to students while also engaging with educators and others who are involved to improve the process itself.

3. Conclusion

Educational change is a necessity; it addresses emerging problems and ensures a focus on the needs that develop with changing times. However, change does not take place in isolation, but in a physical context. Contextual elements should be considered and a proper assessment must be conducted to establish how contextual components will affect or be affected by the change process. The three main components of context for change include people, place and time. Change is a process that is driven by people; it is used to make things better for the benefit of those people. However, change also takes place in a specific setting and at a particular point in time, and the timing of a change can determine whether the change process will be successful in bringing about the desired changes.

In English language teaching, especially in situations in which English is taught as an additional language, context can aid the instructor in understanding the learner, their needs and their concerns. Given this understanding, an instructor will then be able to frame the learning by delivering instruction in a way that will best address each learner's individual needs. It is only through looking at this culmination of context that the learning process can be appropriately and efficiently executed.

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