TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES THROUGH SCRIPTED ROLE-PLAY

Irina Dimitrova

Abstract: The research paper explores the theoretical underpinning of the formal-informal contextual alternation in scripted role-plays for learning and teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Learning is defined as intercontextual interaction. Register contextual aspects are analyzed from a linguistic, pragmatic, meta-pragmatic and philosophical perspective in view of the plausible introduction of the informal context in the design of scripts for learning and teaching ESP.

Keywords: context, love, drama, ESP, learning and teaching, design

Learning Contextualization

From the perspective of social interactivism and discourse analysis, learning can be seen as a process of intercontextual interaction and acceptance or rejection of certain contextual ingredients by the learner as a context-generator thus forming each individual’s personal collection of knowledge and skills, both consciously and subconsciously. (Dimitrova, 2013) Ray Mc Dermot (1976) explains that “people become environments for each other”. (Duranti, 1992) “A relationship between two orders of phenomena that mutually inform each other to comprise a larger whole is absolutely central to the notion of context (indeed the term comes from the Latin contextus, which means ‘a joining together’). From this perspective the relationship between focal event and context is much like that between an ‘organism’ and ‘environment’ in cybernetic theory (Ashbey, 1956, 1960; Bateson, 1972; Buckley, 1968).” (Duranti, 1992) Oxford Dictionary defines the term ‘context’ as ‘the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.’ (www.oxforddictionaries.com) Thus, meaning is created through establishing connections.

The act of planning the learning process requires from the teacher to adopt the role of a designer. Referring to teaching as a design science has become popular both in e-learning technology designs (Laurillard, 2012) and in education in general. Some scientists have referred to the teacher as an experience designer (Koch, 2011) or an activity designer or a learning designer (Persico et al. 2013) (Mor, 2013) and designer of learning (Rogers, 1971). The term ‘learning design’ was first coined in the 1990s but the concept has been into use
since World War II. (Reiser 2001) The definition of the term ‘learning design’ and its distinction from ‘instructional design’ and the similar less frequent expression ‘pedagogical planning’ (Earp and Pozzi 2006; Guiterrez et al. 2007) is still debated (Craft and Mor 2012; Dobozy 2011). (Persico et al. 2013) In order to implement learning design, a teacher should be a context designer bearing in mind all the possible context-generating factors in a particular situation, including the teacher’s personality as one of them. A teacher cannot be fully in charge of learning design because the learner is a co-designer of learning by means of consciously or subconsciously selecting what to interact with and what to reject. A teacher, however, is supposed to strive to design a learning-inducing environment considering all context-generating factors: directly involved in the learning process - the teacher themselves, the learners, the learning materials, the available equipment; and indirectly involved - the educational legislation, the culture, the social expectations, the climate, the weather, the political situation, the international and world context. All context-generating factors are subject to design, especially when drama methods are applied and through drama they can shift form directly to indirectly involved and vice versa. Thus, as a context designer of the optimal learning environment in each particular learning session, the teacher’s task is to foresee, plan, shape and manage the possible contextual interactions in any one learning environment, so that the learning objectives be achieved. However, the fact that, teachers have put in a lot of effort and offer their designs to the learners, does not guarantee successful learning. Learning at the end of the day is the learners’ conscious or subconscious choice. (Dimitrova, 2013; Димитрова, 2013)

The experimental model of scripted role-plays for teaching and learning ESP is based on formal-informal contextual alternation. Whereby, contextual alternation can theoretically encompass all context-generating factors and as far as textual design is concerned – as context generating will be deemed, in particular, components such as: linguistic and pragmatic competence manifestations and their conversational implicatures. For instance, contextual alternation can comprise a purely discourse register alternation accompanied by the corresponding situational context, but alternatively, for example in a more absurd drama setting there can be a crisscrossing between a formal discourse and an informal situational context and vice versa.

**Formal and Informal Communicative Registers – Etymological, Linguistic and Pragmatic Implications.**

“Register is the level of formality used when speaking or writing. Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman, authors of *An Introduction to Language*, call it “a stylistic variant of a language appropriate to a particular social setting, also called style.” (Hunt, 2013)

Etymologically, the word ‘informal’ has a Latin origin. The adjective ‘informis’ in Latin means ‘shapeless, deformed, ugly’. The verb ‘informo’ means ‘to shape, to form, to fashion, to form an idea’. The shapeless and ugly characteristic of the real world is perceived as creative and form-shaping or rather form-seeking. It is actively chaotic and abstract, while the Latin verb ‘formo’ means ‘to shape, fashion, form, model’. Whereas ‘formo’ denotes ‘the following of a model,’ ‘informo’ refers to ‘the forming of an idea’, i.e. a repetitive reproduction of form versus a unique freedom of form as a result of creative expression. (Morwood, 1994)

The formal implies definiteness, finiteness, stability, inflexibility, precision and specificity. Pragmatically, formal communication is task-oriented. The communicative energy is directed at task completion in the most efficient way. Main linguistic and pragmatic characteristics of the formal style are: limited use of emotional involvement, preference for passive voice structures, terminology, fixed phrases, polite expressions, neutral or impersonal
tone, predominantly long and abstract words, frequently of Latin origin, clear and task-focused communication, dominated by long complex sentences and tightly-structured paragraphs (http://www.really-learn-english.com/language-register.html) in an attempt to express thoroughly all possible intended meanings for achieving maximum clarity and focus. In brief, formal communication is characterized by linguistic and pragmatic communicative correctness, by personal distancing and objectivity. Formal style is typical of communication when contacting people we do not know with the aim of solving a problem or accomplishing a task.

On the negative side, the formal-only context typically implies the following communicative characteristics:

- It can generate communicative stress caused by the strain to follow social rules and expectations in a particular communicative situation, by the strain to express all intended and context-bound meanings the way they would be best understood by the addressee and by the responsibility associated with its use in occupational environments where often consequences of misunderstandings can have dire effects.
- The formal information flow can be clumsy and therefore slower than the informal.
- Its dissociation from the person can be interpreted as coldness and lead to cultural and personal relationship clashes or misunderstandings.

On the positive side, the formal-only context can have the following implications:

- It is precise in terms of word-meaning signification and usage.
- It is task-oriented, instrumentally effective, i.e. saves time and communicative effort at the expense of emotional involvement and dealing with matters of personal importance but which are deemed irrelevant to the task completion.
- Because of its impersonality, formal communication can be protective of a person’s dignity when sensitive issues are of concern, e.g. in a doctor-patient conversation.

The informal, conversely, or the ‘non-form’ has fuzzy boundaries, lacks substance and certainty, and thus leads the mind to search for a form and deliberately not finding it, playing with language and never reaching the limits, because it has a higher purpose – that of creating ideas by creating relationships and this is an infinite process of experimentation or play.

The informal style encompasses the formal and goes beyond it, wreaking havoc with its limitations selectively or randomly. Formalities, for example, can be ironically used in an informal situation expressing the speakers’ personal attitudes.

From a linguistic and pragmatic perspective, informal communication is characterized by: loosely-structured sentences, predominantly short sentences and paragraphs, ellipses, ambiguities, emotive language, flexibility, high error tolerance, use of general words, colloquial expressions, slang, active-voice constructions, use of contracted forms, personal and emotional involvement and subjectivity. Linguistic and pragmatic incorrectness is admissible.

The usage of formal or informal style is culturally dependent, context- and person-bound.

**Formal and Informal Organizational Communication – Subcultural Pragmatics.**

In the book “Understanding Management” (2004) Richard Daft and Dorothy Marcic present four types of organizational communication: upward, downward, horizontal and the grapevine. (Daft, 2004) From a stylistic perspective, it is the first three that will mostly comprise formal communication and the last one that will comprise mostly informal communication. According to the authors, the grapevine will always exist in organizations;
its purpose is to fill in information gaps; it tends to be more active during periods of change; its topics are 80% business-related and its accuracy varies between 70% and 90%. Other authors call it ‘the Hierarchy versus the Grapevine’. (Daft, 2004)

In her article “The Importance of the Grapevine in Internal Business Communications” Kristie Lorette (Lorette, 2013) describes informal communication as internal business communication which spreads through the grapevine throughout the organization in a random, undocumented manner and is open to constant change with individual interpretation. The grapevine is useful as a supplement to formal channels of communication. It often travels more quickly than other channels and is usually more direct. The grapevine is present within all levels of staff. It exists because of a natural desire to know things and brings a sense of belonging to employees and managerial staff alike. It can create corporate identity and build teamwork. On the negative side, grapevine communication is referred to as unreliable and unstable, leading to anxiety, conflicts and misunderstandings. (Lorette, 2013)

Therefore, despite the predominantly formal communicative environment of business organizations, from a subcultural pragmatic perspective, the informal register is naturally used as a short-distance style in emergency or unregulated situations where speed of communication is a higher-order priority than precision and truthfulness. It is often the style of crises, change, anxiety, secrets or hidden manipulation.

Teaching English for Specific Purposes

What differentiates English for Specific Purposes (ESP) from English for General Purposes (EGP) is obviously its specificity of focus. However, experts’ opinions vary as to the degree of narrowness of the needs spectrum of the learners to the point of altogether eliminating the existence of the ESP division in English language teaching (ELT).

Some scientists take the stand that ESP is “an important subcomponent of language teaching, with its own approaches to curriculum development, materials design, pedagogy, testing and research (Nunan, 2004).” (Basturkmen, 2010) Emphasis is placed upon the importance of ESP’s practical results, among its main concerns being: needs analysis, text analysis, and effective communicative skills preparation. Dudley-Evans and St John (Dudley-Evans et al., 1998) and Barnard and Zemach (Barnard et al., 2003) express a view that ESP and EGP should not be regarded as discrete divisions of ELT, but ESP is “simply an area (with blurred boundaries) whose courses are usually more focused in their aims and make use of a narrower range of topics.” (Basturkmen, 2010) According to Cook (Cook, 2002) ESP is very much concerned with external goals such as skills for communication outside the classroom, directed at achieving ‘real world’ objectives. (Basturkmen, 2010) Similarly, Holme (Holme, 1996) states that: “Every discipline refers to others and each draws on the same reservoir of language. A science student who comes to grips with the past simple passive through the description of laboratory procedures is unlikely to lock that tense into that context for the rest of their English-speaking life.” (Basturkmen, 2010)

Therefore, a need for context variance can be perceived in the design of learning materials and learning activities for ESP, so that language can be taught effectively at any level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Presently, ESP is taught after the completion of intermediate level B1 or at levels B2 and above with few exceptions. At upper-intermediate level learners have already mastered basic linguistic and pragmatic skills for coping in general-English language situations. It has been as quite natural then to shift the focus to almost entirely formal-style teaching materials for ESP learners and a narrowing of topics and linguistic objectives in accordance with the respective ESP branch. Legal English for example, is typically taught within a formal-only style of communication.
English for Occupational Purposes in general is characterized by formal communication due to cultural and social expectations.

In practice, however, informal interpersonal communication has its importance at the workplace and in many respects is as beneficial to the communication flow as formal communication is. Likewise, their complementary relation could be mirrored in teaching ESP materials by purposefully including both styles within discourse samples for flexible role-playing. Possible benefits of the two-style complementary collaboration are:

- Encompassing all communicative skills necessary for interpersonal communication, both linguistic and pragmatic and offering a wholesome ground for communicative learning interaction;
- The alteration and co-existence of two contrasting styles of communication can act as a stimulus to creativity and provide learners with a challenge to play and experiment with communicative effects of using one or the other style and observe their effectiveness in terms of achieving their communicative purpose.
- Lessening the stress and strain typical to formal-style-related situations and allowing for a fuller learning interaction to take place between the learners’ individual personality and the learning environment. (Dimitrova, 2013)

**Educational Drama**

Drama as a method in education when appropriately applied presupposes the creation of a safety environment. Educational Drama implies role-play, i.e. the acceptance of a contextual environment close to the real, but unreal, as well as the participants’ consent to co-experience this environment and explore the possible interactions between aspects of their own personality and aspects of the environment. The drama approach can potentially encompass the whole contextual environment of reality and recreate it. Every single role acting implies following some implicit and explicit, socially- and culturally-encoded rules of conduct, but due to the personally-encoded context contributed by each separate individual, the role play is open-ended and can take unpredictable turns. (Dimitrova, 2013)

‘When students assume a role, they play a part (either their own or somebody else’s) in a specific situation. ‘Play’ means that the role is taken on in a safe environment in which students are as inventive and playful as possible.’ Students ideally are ‘unselfconsciously creating their own reality, and by doing so, are experimenting with their own knowledge of the real world and developing their ability to interact with other people.’ (Ladousse, 1987)

Role-play is a kind of real communication, because regardless of the fact that the participants are aware of their performative status, they would often integrate some grains of truths from real life experiences in order to experiment with their new existence into a safer reality with partially factual consequences. Consequences take place at a level of pretence but have mental and emotional value due to the empathic nature of educational drama interaction. (Dimitrova, 2013)

Role play can represent compressed life experience with a high degree of temporal unreality. Unreality can intensify emotional experiences and accelerate their happening by means of temporal or spatial hyperbole leading to a higher concentration of dramatic events than really possible.

Role play in education follows not only social rules typical in similar communicative situations, but also hidden rules originating from its design which aim at the practicing of certain linguistic units: grammar or vocabulary units or language functions. (Dimitrova, 2013)

Role play generally requires active involvement from the learners, but even in its most passive extremity, taking the form of intrapersonal communication where the learner
experiences the text on their own, they can co-interact with its reality. According to Andre Klein – a German author of stories for language learning: “By reading and listening to stories in a foreign language, we are not just learning about the target language and culture from the outside, we are actually experiencing it from the inside.” (Klein, 2013) Intrapersonal role-playing can take place any time we imagine we are somewhere else than where we really are and we are somebody else than who we presently are and as such can serve as an educational-drama technique we apply every time we read an interesting book or we daydream. (Dimitrova, 2013)

Dorothy Heathcote, one of the British pioneers in Educational Drama says: ‘When you come to drama you deliberately start muddling the waters because you know everything is connected with something else. Drama will not offer you direct learning bits. What it does, is explore ideas, throw them around and give context. …Once you start doing drama, you stop being antiseptic.’ (Heathcote, 1991) Drama is holistic and it is capable of encompassing all aspects of real life. It is a plan, a premeditation of our future into thoughts which emerge into actions in a game. We play to prepare for real life because we strive for the best possible results.

In educational drama both learners and teachers substitute elements of reality with elements of unreality and we combine them to experiment with their interaction into an alternative reality. Therefore, it is a multi-faceted interaction between our perceptions of our selves, the reality residues and the unreal implants of imagination. It is, as if reality plays a multitude of roles in our minds – some of which assigned as real, others perceived as unreal, imaginary, but ‘pretendedly real’. However, drama fills up everything with meaning and eventfulness. (Димитрова, 2013) According to D. Heathcoat “There isn’t an empty space in the drama; it is filled with waitingness.” (Heathcote, 1991)

Context and Love – Register Meta-Pragmatics

‘Form’ from the Latin ‘forma’ means ‘beauty’. (Morwood, 1994) Plato’s love described in the Symposium is associated with the rational admiration caused by beauty, especially beauty of the mind observed in communication between men. Platonic love is love for the ideal beauty, not a particular individual, but the element of true (ideal) beauty they possess. In Plato’s writings ‘eros’ is held to be a common desire that seeks transcendental beauty, that which exists in the world of forms or ideas. (Naugle, 2010)

Therefore, the formal context seeks to nurture the form, to preserve the perfection in its precision and coherence.

Conversely, the informal is associated by origin of its Latin meaning of ‘shapelessness’ and ‘ugliness’, but also ‘ideation.’ (Morwood, 1994) Hence, the dynamic and creative nature of the non-formed, the form-in-progress, which once balanced and formed, will remain static and perfect, worthy to be termed ‘formal’.

The formal is restricted but beautiful. It is beautiful because it meets all requirements. It is unemotional (non-motional) and therefore static. It is reproductive. The formal is dedicated to preserving the form and therefore operates exclusively through established forms. Formal communication promises love on condition, love meaning rather - acceptance, friendship, affiliation, care and support, i.e. ‘I will accept you, if you behave by the rules, if you are beautiful.’ Moreover, the acceptance in its absolute form is to an extent that the individual’s personality is completely ignored and irrelevant. The formal style is business or task-oriented, protective by means of detachment from the personality. The form represents Platonic love or ideal love, non-existent but strived for.

The informal is emotional (enables motion, in-motion) and therefore dynamic. Ugliness is affordable and necessary in the process of creation. Informal communication
promises unconditional love, which does not exist as a tangible phenomenon, but only conceptually. Informal communication is based on trust that we will eventually understand each other, no matter how imprecise our language can be, because it is personal, protective by means of personal-involvement, i.e. interaction and sustaining relationships with the person is more important than task completion. “I will do the task, if you accept me and I accept you. I can even surpass your expectations.” The subjective is of central importance, not the objective. It transcends limitations because it strives for change, it sacrifices its beauty to create something new and ultimately achieve unconditional acceptance, irrespective of the fact that often the result is basically a learning experience because of dealing with change and change acceptance. Meanwhile “Change is at the heart of learning. If nothing changes then there is no learning.” (Rogers, 1971)

Philosophically, the formal and the non-formal are dependent on individual perception and recognition. The non-forms provide for the change, the forms strive for preserving the result from it. They recognize each other’s otherness and complementarity.

In the process of learning ‘forms’, the ‘non-forms’ can be instrumental as they provide a source of recess from the pressure of meeting the strict requirements of ‘forms’ and maneuvering through their fixed relationships and ramifications.

Conclusion

The informal communicative style is instrumental for the formal and vice versa. Their complementary existence is vital for effective interpersonal communication.

The informal context is the idea-generating style of communication. It is the way forward to creativity and experimentation with language as action, so that learners acquire communicative skills through their own personal experience of language and its pragmatic results. Meta-pragmatically, it is the style of love and acceptance. It is the typical style used between people who love each other. It is a short-distance style which enables the quick information flow. Due to its acceptance and tolerance of the non-form, the informal style is reminiscent of love and more specifically of the impossible but often-dreamt-of unconditional love or ideal love, where the form is not important because participants trust each other, therefore they will find a way to each other; the person is more important than the task; acceptance is more valuable than form.

Drama as a method in education is used to break the formal social expectations and create a parallel social reality based on imaginary close-to-real or totally unreal circumstances. Drama can be likened to ‘a chaos queen’ eager to play and experiment with the status quo in a socially protected environment. It is protective because of its detachment from the real world, but needs control from an ethical perspective so that social suffering is prevented.

The purposeful introduction of the informal context in role-playing scripts for teaching and learning ESP can provide for achieving a wholesome ground for communicative learning interaction; stimulating communicative creativity and lessening the stress and strain typical to formal-style-only communication.

The current paper aims to focus on the benefits of the presence of informal context as well as formal in textual learning materials and language practice in view of a role-playing model based on formal-informal context alternation for learning and teaching English for Specific Purposes.
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About the author: Irina Dimitrova, Doctoral Candidate in Educational Theatre at the Faculty of Education, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. E-Mail: dimitrova_irene@yahoo.com.