TOPICS

- Contextualised teaching and learning.
- Demonstration in context.

Contextualised teaching and learning

I wish to emphasize the importance of teaching new language in context. The context may be a story, a situation created by the teacher, a dialogue, a reference to a current event, an article from a newspaper or magazine on a specific topic, a real life situation. In relation to topics and themes, let's read what Harmer (2012) suggests:

One of the best ways of planning a sequence of lessons for young learners is to organise our classes around a TOPIC or a THEME.

- When we use a topic or a theme to build our lessons, we can decide how long (five lessons, ten lessons, 15 lessons) we want our topic or theme to carry on for.

- We don't do the same thing lesson after lesson just because we have organised everything around a theme.

- When we organise lessons around a topic or theme, we still need to think about what activities, language skills and language learning we want the students to practise. We need to see how we can fit all these different elements into and around the topic or theme we have chosen.

- When we choose a topic, we need to think about how to make it personal for our young learners. We will choose topic-related activities which are interesting and relevant to their lives. However, we will also use our topic to introduce the children to the wider world, including giving them some INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING where this is appropriate.

Almost any topic can be used for a large variety of activities and lesson types. A lot will depend on the age of the children, and what DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE they are at →91. For our example in this unit, we will take the theme of bananas as our organising topic and show a range of CROSS-CURRICULAR activities based on this topic that could help our students learn English.

- We can get the students to research/look at different types of banana and categorise them.

- The students can learn about the life cycle of a banana. They can research the growing and harvesting of bananas.

- They can learn about where bananas are grown and make VISUAL ORGANISERS (such as graphs or maps) →105 showing which countries are the biggest producers.

- They can complete a class survey, asking each other about which fruits they like most, or how many bananas they eat in a week, a month, etc. They can transfer this information to a visual organiser of some kind.

- Students can hear or read about the daily life of a banana grower.

- The students can enjoy learning and singing *Day-o (The Banana Boat Song)*, a traditional SONG about dockworkers loading the banana boats in Jamaica and waiting for their work to be counted when daylight comes so that they can go home.

- Students can think about other work songs which have call-and-response verses to help people enjoy their work. We can introduce simple sea shanties, for example.

- The students can learn about how bananas are weighed and sold. They can act out a visit to the greengrocer's where they go to buy bananas and other fruits and vegetables.

- Students can make banana puppets and use them to create conversations.

- They can discuss different banana recipes. They can make a banana smoothie or other simple banana-based dish.

- They can read information about why bananas are good for you. They can discuss healthy eating in general and make lists about healthy and unhealthy eating options. They can design a healthy eating programme or leaflet.

- Students can write an *I like/I don't like* poem about bananas →63.

We can summarise (some of) the different activities in a TOPIC WEB. We can use the topic web as the basis for planning a SEQUENCE OF LESSONS →80.
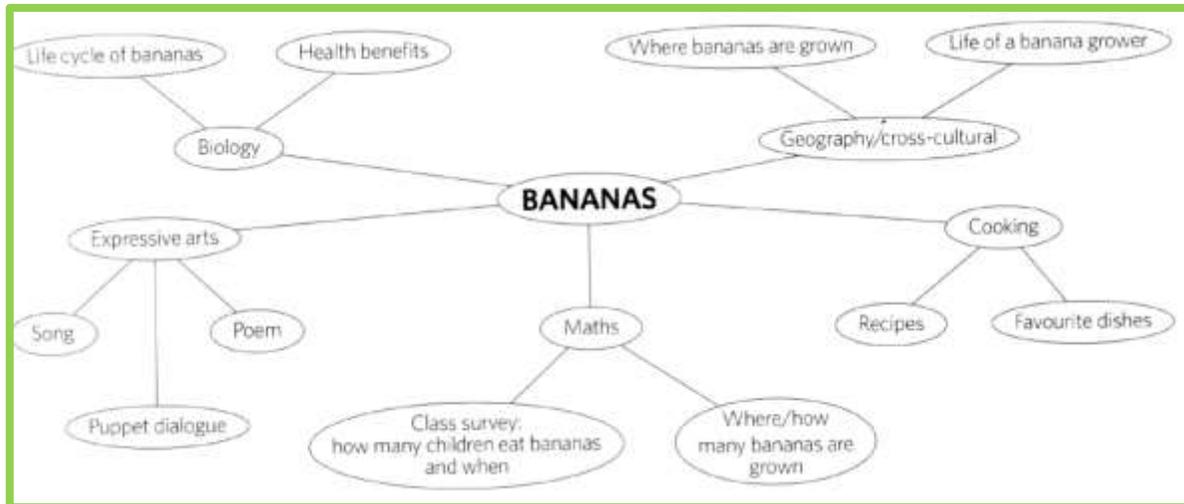
The context allows the learner to focus on the new language item, and the information that the context provides enables the learner to make a tentative inference as to the meaning or the rule that governs the language that is being introduced.

Context includes knowledge of[1]

- the topic or content
- the vocabulary and language structures in which the content is usually presented
- the social and cultural expectations associated with the content

To help students have an authentic experience of understanding and using language, we can help them by raising their awareness of the context in which it occurs.

- Ask them what they know about the topic
- Ask what they can predict from the title or heading of a reading selection or the opening line of a listening selection or video
- Review the vocabulary (including idiomatic expressions) and sentence structures that are usually found in that type of material.
- Review relevant social and cultural expectations

In this way, students' learning can be speeded by exposure to more input and by the application of their cognitive strategies, thus helping the process of learning.

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[1] From 'Teaching Goals and Methods', NCLRC, Washington DC

Teaching contextualized target language

As you well know by target language we mean the language which we think students are not yet able to use, the language we want to teach.

Further on in this unit, I will refer to the importance of teaching by demonstration, that is to say, showing students how language is used. This is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching, and unfortunately, one that is sometimes disregarded by teachers.

I'll try to explain the differences between the concepts of making students understand meaning (which is very important, of course) and showing language use by means of the following example:

Suppose you want to show your students the Present Continuous Tense. You will probably tell them that it is used to express actions that are taking place now.

- Do you honestly think that after you have told them the rule, students will know how to use this tense?

    Not likely. Most probably they won't have a clue on how to use it.

Problem number 1: You can repeat to the class, till you are blue in the face, that they can use this tense whenever they want to refer to something that is happening right now, at this very moment, and that won't make much difference as to the use they will give this tense.

Problem number 2: As it is there is a more serious and realistic problem, which is that native speakers rarely use this tense in this sense.

We never say: 'Look, I'm eating an apple', because everybody can see that I'm eating one. It is not necessary to describe all the time what everybody can see you are doing. This goes to say that for the sake of 'teaching grammar' we may be teaching unrealistic language use.

Of course native speakers use the Present Continuous when there is a valid reason to do so. For example, in answer to somebody's question: 'what are you doing?' or when we want to comment on people's action, for some specific reason or when we want to demonstrate something we are doing (giving a recipe, or showing how to work a machine, or on the phone.)

Teaching real language use

So, going back to the teaching of the Present Continuous, if we want to teach students real language use the best thing we can do is create an adequate context in which to teach this tense, for instance:

-broadcasting a car race on TV

-giving a recipe

-describing a fashion parade

-reporting a football match

- speaking on the phone

This would be far more appealing and effective than teaching 'I'm opening the door 'and 'you're shutting the window'

Remember that , for instance, if we decided to teach the Present Continuous tense in a story, students would be more likely to understand it and use it, than if we just introduced it as a 'verb tense' Especially with children you don't need to refer to any grammatical category. And thus we would be showing students the language 'in operation', so to speak.

Once we have checked their understanding of the tense (they can answer just 'Yes' or 'No'), we can ask them to start reproducing what we say- They haven't reached the production stage yet- so we can only ask them to reproduce some of the easier patterns of the new language. Thus, we give students time to internalize meaning and language use as the learning process takes time.

How to create context

Some teachers seem to have some difficulty in creating context for introducing new language. Perhaps this is because context should have some clearly defined characteristics. The context itself should show what the language means and how it is used as in the examples given above.

.Yet, what it requires is some previous thinking and a bit of creativity on the teacher's part.

To begin with, context should be interesting for the students, closer to their experience, to their preferences and their interests. Students couldn't care less what Mr. Smith does, or whether 'Mary' has a sister or a brother. They are just not interested. Would you?

So, always try to choose a context which is near students' lives and reality. Sometimes current affairs offer us a lot of effective context, such as the Football World Cup or the Olympic Games or Oscar Awards. We should exploit the opportunities Modern Life has to offer. We draw from that to create context.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we have to be madly creative or funny all the time, but we should at least try to motivate our students somehow, if only by telling them this language can be applied for them to uses other than in the course-book.

As not all of us teachers are wildly inventive all the time, we can try to adapt the situation or context containing the new language in the text book to more realistic situations which are closer to the students' experience. This is easily done, and you'd be surprised to see the results!.

Exploring possibilities of creating context for my target language

As you may well remember context means the situation which causes the language to be used. In real life we have first the context and then the language, which is not what we do in class.

We have three main areas to help us create context:

 a) the physical world around us, the classroom, the school, the town, the country.

b) the local or world-wide news and events

c) some specific information our students may be interested in, (I often go to the Internet for this).

d) information which can appear in air-plane, bus or train time-tables, or in brochures describing the local areas, in phone bills, notes, diagrams and charts, etc which form part of real life. (For instance a pile of bills can help presenting the language of regret and complaint)

d) the words or the feelings in songs and stories that we assume will be appealing for our students.

There are as many contexts as there are ideas in your head; you can introduce a lot of variations on the contexts that are suggested here, and there is ample room for improvement.

Of course, the teacher soon realizes whether the context he has devised is effective or not. Nothing wrong with changing it on the spot if it doesn't seem to work. Of course, the context we create will depend on the type of language we want to teach. And don't forget you can change this context as many times it may be necessary, and being sensitive about students' reactions to it.

Some contexts are like magic, they clearly show the target language and then the class is a big success. Sometimes we make a mistake and the context may turn out to be irrelevant, silly or simply boring. Don't get discouraged, better luck next time.

Some ideas for contexts taken from Teaching English (British Council)

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/teaching-kids/family-friends

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/teaching-kids/invent-a-planet

REFLECTIVE TASK 1

a. *Do you usually create a context for your lessons?*
b. *Do you resort to a variety of contexts?*
c. *How were contexts created in the links above?*

Demonstration in context

A very effective teaching strategy is to demonstrate the use of grammar. For this demonstration a context must be created.

The idea is to build grammatical knowledge through demonstration of its use.
We have often insisted on the importance of context, and like any other piece of target language grammar has to be taught in context. We'll be referring to context throughout this unit, as context is an essential part of teaching.

If we are talking about raising students 'language awareness we need to have a context that will allow the student to infer meaning of the new grammar pattern. Sometimes this pattern will be inferred by the students through context, that is to say the context itself will make the students understand the grammar. Some other times the grammar pattern will have to be clearly explained and exemplified, but it should never be taught in isolation, in a decontextualized way.