

Understanding language classroom contexts: The starting point for change

M. Wedell and A. Malderez, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, Pp. x + 238, £63.34/US\$104.50, ISBN 9781441198372 (hbk); £20.95/US\$34.15, ISBN 9781441133076 (pbk); US \$17.81.00/US\$28.79, ISBN 9781441102454 (Kindle Edition)

“The thing about context is that it is easy to take it for granted.”
(Wedell & Malderez, 2013: 7)

Would anyone deny the fact that teaching and learning are context-embedded activities? Probably not. Yet, the contextual dimension of education is frequently forgotten (Fullan, 2007). Educational change implementation is often based upon considerations other than the context or the main players within it. Attempting to describe schools and classrooms, however, entails an understanding not only that the classroom context (and what goes on within) depends on a myriad of visible and invisible interconnected variables, but also that context itself helps shape such variables in return.

It is the existence of such cohesive but complex interrelationship that *Understanding Language Classroom Contexts* explores. In this stimulating book, Wedell and Malderez remind us that what takes place in the language classroom is simultaneous and immediate, and also unpredictable; it is concrete and overt, yet abstract and covert. Above all, the book reminds us that only through a conscientious consideration and a thorough understanding of the complexity of any classroom context can educational change be successfully initiated and implemented.

The brief Introduction outlines the book as a whole and presents its main structure. The rest of the book is divided into ten chapters. Each of these follows a similar organisation: a) an introduction, which makes a good entry point to the key concepts under discussion; b) a series of reflective tasks that invite the reader to relate the contents of the book to their own contexts and personal experience; and c) a summary and final task for further reflection, all intermeshed with theoretical and practical considerations. In addition, each chapter includes a substantial bibliography.

Chapter 1 invites readers to make sense of their own teaching contexts. To help them do so, the authors provide an overview of a typical language classroom setting, which is the starting point for the analysis of the visible and invisible layers that permeate classrooms and that are the key concepts described later on. Context is here presented as “dynamic” and “evolving”, and therefore only partially described. The chapter also introduces the relevant distinction between BANA (British, Australasian and North American), and TESEP (Tertiary, Secondary and Primary) as two types of contexts affecting current English teaching (ET) realities (p. 13). Finally, the authors describe

the core components of context – namely, people, place and time – and the extent to which each of these impinge both teaching and learning.

In Chapter 2, Wedell and Malderez conceptualize the notion of culture and its relation to language and language classrooms. The main goal of this chapter is to understand culture as pervasive and affecting all “the visible layers of any context” (p.30). The authors begin by exploring their own definitions of culture and move on to elaborate on the notion from a historical perspective, reviewing both traditional and more recent definitions. The relevance of this detailed discussion of the term resides, in my opinion, in an enhanced understanding that culture(s) can be learned, that people generally belong to more than one (dynamic) culture simultaneously, and that there are classroom cultures embedded within the wider cultures of the organizational and/or national culture of a particular group. Most importantly, the authors argue that for a deeper understanding of how culture influences language teaching and learning, what matters is the process of stopping to think about cultural influences, more than the product of such process (p.52).

Chapter 3 looks at language and languages in education. Here, Wedell and Malderez discuss three main concepts: the language of everyday communication (LEC) and the language-as-subject (LAS); languages in contexts; and the role of English as a global language (Graddol, 2006). The first part of the chapter focuses on LEC and learning from a socio-cultural perspective. A discussion of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding ensues, with a view to exemplifying how these are crucial in enhancing teaching and learning in a LAS context. Next, the authors discuss the different linguistic profiles that countries adopt, elaborating on the concepts of monolingual and multilingual societies, and analysing how such profiles relate to language use and the ET context. Last, the authors proceed to describe the global importance of English and how this affects the different ET contexts around the world, together with the reactions this generates. All this discussion anticipates the shift culture-method-approach introduced in the following chapters and the suitability of ET methodologies for the contexts where they are adopted and implemented.

In effect, Chapters 4 and 5 explore the relationship between contexts and teaching methodologies. The authors provide a basic presentation of the developments of ET methodologies through the decades, and briefly look at those methods and approaches that have been most influential, ranging from Grammar Translation, the Audio-Lingual Method, and Humanistic Approaches, to the emergence of the communicative approaches that, to a greater or lesser extent, shape most language classrooms today. Wedell and Malderez explore why methods change, discuss how the changing perceptions of language and subsequent related research have evolved, and show how all this has affected the world of ET. A more experienced reader might perhaps at this point doubt

the inclusion of what might be rendered a rather unnecessary explanation. However, it is also relevant to remember that any ET methodology should be appropriate for the (social) context within which it is to be used (Holliday, 1994). This was probably the guiding principle behind the inclusion of these chapters in a book that stresses the importance of understanding contexts in order to introduce well-informed changes.

Subsequent Chapters 6 to 8 focus on teachers and learners and the way in which they relate to each other. The chapters look at how the people involved in teaching and learning can not only create their own cultures and contexts but also be the products of such contexts. This is, from a very personal perspective, one of the most significant contributions of the book. In these chapters, the authors differentiate between the more obvious physical context of the classroom—the spatial features, the materials, the equipment, class size, school location and so on—that build it; and the more complex and hidden “mental context”, realized by the cognitions—that is, “(the) context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs that language teachers draw on” (Borg, 2006: 272), the emotions, expectations and motivations, interests and styles that the people in the classroom might hold and share. Wedell and Malderez make a relevant claim by pinpointing how all these variables affect the relationship between language learners and language teachers, and how they can turn teachers into learners and learners into teachers.

Chapter 9 looks at context in relation to the planning and implementation of curricular changes, the second nodal point in the book. Here, educational change is analysed from the perspective of time and as involving a cultural change. Under the premise that the process of implementing an educational change cannot be successfully completed without the active involvement of teachers (Fullan, 2007; Wedell, 2009), the authors contrast changes that are originated at a larger, national scale, with those that are teacher-initiated classroom-centred changes. They conclude by proposing a parallel learning model that seeks to envision change as an “evolutionary process” (p.217) that must be planned bearing the needs of the people involved, placing teachers and learners at the centre, and policy makers and planners at the outer extreme of an education onion (p.218).

The final chapter summarizes the main contents, concisely bringing together the two main topics of the book: context and change. The authors’ final claim is that educational contexts are complex constructs and that the starting point for change lies in the ability to understand and support the different learning processes that take place in such contexts. Most importantly, Wedell and Malderez advocate the adoption of a more horizontal perspective towards educational change, in which the hope-for outcomes are the result of the interaction of all of those involved (teachers, learners, local and national educational leaders) and of informed joint decisions.

To conclude, the authors have written a thought-provoking book in which they provide an easy-to-read yet very insightful account of the close interconnection that exists between educational contexts/cultures and educational change. The book is surely correct in arguing that the starting point for change should lie inside the culture of the classroom. Through the different chapters Wedell and Malderez manage to engage the reader in a stimulating conversation, creating in the latter a feeling of involvement, which is undoubtedly one of the main strengths of the book. I have greatly enjoyed reading it, not only because of the friendly conversational style adopted by the authors and the interactivity offered through questions and prompts for personal reflection, but also because it challenged some of the assumptions I hold about my own teaching context. I would strongly recommend it for anyone wishing to understand and address the role context plays in language teaching and learning.

María Alejandra Soto

FHAyCS, Universidad Autónoma de Entre Ríos

masotton@gmail.com

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