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## Changing Perspectives on Context

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# Changing Perspectives on Context

Argiro L. Morgan

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to show how older, largely context-free models of reading and its instruction became changed into a multidimensional, context-dependent orientation toward written language and the reading process. This change was influenced by an identical trend in linguistics, which also shifted from an over-reliance upon isolated pieces of language to a study of naturalistic, connective texts (Kintsch, 1974). The article concludes with suggestions for using a variety of contextual strategies to increase reading comprehension.

# CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEXT

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Recently I visited a number of third grade classrooms during reading instruction. In one, the teacher had placed the following diagram on the chalkboard:

pay	ADD <u>ment</u>	payment
amuse	ADD <u>ment</u>	amusement
adorn	ADD <u>ment</u>	adornment
achieve	ADD <u>ment</u>	achievement
place	ADD <u>ment</u>	placement

One child could not pronounce the word achieve. The teacher used phonics to help the child unlock the word. Then the teacher pointed out to the children that the ment suffix changed the original words from verbs to nouns. Although the children were asked to use both the original verbs and the resulting nouns in sentences, the lesson, by and large, was decontextualized. The words had not been selected from meaningful reading material. They were not introduced by the teacher in sentences. The teacher was using the words simply as instructional tools to illustrate how a small part of the English language works.

In a second classroom, the children were engaged in a cloze activity, attempting to predict the missing words in a series of unrelated sentences on the chalkboard. The children appeared to be attending to both grammar and meaning to determine which words best fit the blanks in the sentences. In some cases, a number of words were suitable for the same blank, and the pupils were actively engaged in discussing how different words slightly changed the meanings and the implications of some sentences. Clearly, context played a larger role in this activity than in the first. The children were using the surrounding words of each sentence to help them determine a missing word. They were also using their own life experiences to perceive the nuances of meaning a particular choice imparted to a specific sentence. The sentences, however, were not a part of continuous text. Therefore, the children were not learning how segments of text both before and after a sentence could constrain the predictions they were making.

In a third classroom, the children were discussing the word "piskie" found in the title of a Cornish folktale they were going to read afterwards. Since the story was a folktale, they suggested that "piskie" probably referred to some type of magical creature. The teacher directed the discussion so that specific predictions were made regarding the nature of a "piskie." After silent reading,

the children discussed which predictions were substantiated. Then the children noted a number of words in their reading that caused confusion. The teacher had the children re-read parts of the story to show how the meanings of the words could be ascertained by surrounding segments of text, and sometimes by clues found in both preceding and subsequent paragraphs. She also pointed out how the general intent of one of the unknown words could be inferred by considering the character who spoke the word in the story, the purpose of his message, and the effect the entire utterance had on another character in the story. Since the folktale was brief, the children were encouraged to embellish upon unstated episodes that could link the incident explicitly stated in the tale. Different suggestions were offered, and each was evaluated in terms of the ultimate resolution of the plot, characteristics of the personages of the tale, and the specific details that would support or reject each imagined happening. The teacher then called attention to structural characteristics of the original tale, and pointed out how the plot pattern of the Cornish story was similar to another folk story the class had read recently. The class then divided into groups; one to construct a chart comparing and contrasting major elements of the two folk tales they had read, another to plan a dramatization of one of the stories, still another to write an original story using the same type of plot pattern, and a final group to plan murals depicting major events from both tales.

Clearly context was playing a broader role in this classroom than in the first and second classrooms. Elements within and beyond the sentence were used to foster comprehension. The children's knowledge of how normal conversation flows and how the roles of speakers influence the language they use was employed to assist understanding. The comparison of two tales encouraged the children to relate their present reading experience to what they had read in the past. The children were encouraged to use both textual and real-world experiences to make inferences about the story. A variety of contextual elements were used by the teacher immersing the children in a dynamic learning event. The students were actively involved in relating, interpreting, extrapolating, comparing, contrasting, and creating. At the conclusion of the activities based on the Cornish story, it could even be said that the narrative itself was extended beyond the pages of the book in which it was found. Instead of treating the story as a number of episodes tied together by theme, motif, and character, the children embedded their reading in the oral story tradition, their own life experiences, and the on-going life of their classroom. The text was no longer merely a bearer of specific information; it was the stimulus for the creation of personal and social meaning.

The three classrooms described above are mirrors of different interpretations of the role of context in reading instruction. Additionally, they reflect a change of perspective on context which has occurred during the past two decades. Previously, reading specialists used the term context to refer to clues within passages that could help readers identify words or determine their meanings.

Today context no longer refers only to adjacent words or sentences in a text. Nor is it merely one of several word attack subskills. Context is a broader and more dynamic term referring to many contextual elements—some within the text, some within the reader, some within the environment, and how all of them influence the unique meanings constructed by individual readers when they comprehend what they read.

The purpose of this article is to show how older, largely context-free models of reading and its instruction became changed into a multidimensional, context-dependent orientation toward written language and the reading process. This change was influenced by an identical trend in linguistics, which also shifted from an over-reliance upon isolated pieces of language to a study of naturalistic, connective texts (Kintsch, 1974). The article concludes with suggestions for using a variety of contextual strategies to increase reading comprehension.

#### Older Models of the Reading Process

Older models of the reading process saw written text as a linear visual arrangement of alphabetic symbols standing in place of oral language. The print contained the message, and readers had only to translate the written text into the sounds of language for comprehension to occur. If readers could not understand what they could pronounce, either a language deficit and/or a thinking problem was the cause (Bloomfield & Barnhart, 1961).

Older models of reading also implicitly divided readers into two groups—beginning and skilled readers. Although it was assumed that a continuum existed between the novice and the proficient reader, the task of learning to read was viewed as primarily one of "cracking the code," that is, of learning how to pronounce the words in books. It was recommended that the text itself be over simplified to make the task easier.

Although a variety of different approaches were advocated as the most efficient method to help children learn how to pronounce the words found in text, all of them assumed the text contained the meaning and that beginning readers progress by mastering the smaller units of text first (i.e., letters and/or words) and then proceeding to interact in sequence with larger units of discourse (i.e., sentences, passages, brief stories). The result of this orientation was a decontextualized approach to instruction: isolated drill and practice in ditto sheets and workbooks with an emphasis on the bits and pieces of written language. Even the use of pictures in beginning readers was suspect, for they cued the pronunciation of words. Reading instruction became to a considerable extent context-free.

#### The Beginning of the Change

Although an over-reliance on word identification had its early critics (Lefevre, 1964; Lee and Allen, 1963; Stauffer, 1969), it was not until the implications of generative grammar became clear that a fundamental shift in thinking occurred. The work of Chomsky (1965) indicated that the surface form of language

(language as it is actually heard or read) is different from its deep structure (the underlying grammatical relationships which determine the "meaning" of a given sentence). Chomsky cited ambiguous sentences to show that a sentence may have more than one meaning; he also pointed out how the same meaning may be expressed in different surface forms. From this perspective, therefore, merely pronouncing the words of a sentence correctly does not guarantee that its meaning has been understood. Readers must interact with what they are reading to comprehend the underlying grammatical relationships of words within sentences to understand the message of a text (Larkin, 1979).

Under the influence of generative grammar, syntax played a larger role in reading research. Many studies were conducted to determine how different grammatical arrangements impeded or facilitated reading comprehension (Huggins, 1977). Although the reader came to be viewed as a more active participant in the reading process, the text itself, however, was still viewed as the source of meaning, the sentence (rather than letters and words) being the primary contextual influence.

#### Toward a New Perspective

Insights from generative grammar motivated reading researchers to understand what readers actually do when they interact with text. Goodman (1977) observed that the exact words of a text were not always pronounced by readers. Proficient readers sometimes substituted and omitted words, but retained the underlying meaning of the text. Goodman found that readers selectively used three language systems to make predictions as they interacted with what they were reading: syntax, semantics, and graphophonic patterns. Many readers also transformed the language of books into their own dialects. Text, therefore, could no longer be viewed as a precise, static entity which must be responded to in an exact fashion.

Research also indicated that the idea of a dichotomy between beginning and fluent readers was an over-simplification. Smith (1978) asserted that the same factors that operate in fluent reading also occur in beginning reading. Memorization of letter names, sounds, phonic rules, spelling patterns and word lists were no longer recommended as standard instructional procedures for beginners. Naturalistic, connected text (particularly children's stories with highly predictable sentences and language experience materials) were recommended as vehicles for instruction. Learners were seen as needing more context rather than less in order to become better players of a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1967).

These developments in reading research paralleled the interest in connected discourse in the field of linguistics. Stories were shown to have organizational patterns used by readers in comprehension (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Marshall & Glock, 1978; Rumelhart, 1975; Stein & Glenn, 1979). Cohesiveness was studied (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), and models were developed to analyze how the underlying propositions of text were connected and related (Grimes, 1975;

Frederiksen, 1975). More and more, multidisciplinary research supported Goodman and Goodman's finding that words were more easily read than sentences, and that sentences were more easily read when embedded within connected discourse (1977). More, not less, context was seen to foster comprehension, even with beginning readers.

#### The Final Refinement

Factors other than those within the text itself were shown to influence comprehension. Research on inferences and schema studies from the Center for the Study of Reading indicated that readers bring their own perspectives to bear on what they read (Spiro, 1980). Background experiences, values, personal characteristics, purposes, conceptual levels, cultural expectations—all play significant roles in guiding what readers expect, comprehend, recall, and apply from their reading.

An adequate model of reading, therefore, must see written language as a blueprint for the creation of meaning (Spiro, 1980). Although texts do constrain the types of meanings readers construct they are no longer regarded as fully explicit. Readers (with their own particular background of knowledge, interest, attitudes, purpose) restructure, interpret, integrate, and evaluate the writer's intent according to their own purpose at the time of reading. Context is no longer a handmaiden of reading instruction, but the entire domain in which the reading act occurs.

#### Recommended Teaching Practices

The following teaching practices seem to reflect the orientation that context of various kinds exerts a powerful effect on reading comprehension.

(1) Treat all children as readers when they enter your classroom. Research has indicated that even pre-schoolers can respond meaningful or "orchestrate" some printed signs (Harste, Burke & Woodward, 1981). For example, young children respond to labels on cereal boxes and candy, television titles, environmental signs, names of popular toys, their own names. Print is everywhere in a literate society. It is a part of the everyday context of the lives of children. As members of a highly literate culture, children know a great deal about written language. Expand on what children already know to lead them to a higher level of literacy.

(2) Use dictated stories, experience charts, and much writing (diaries, stories, scripts) with developing readers. In that way, you are assured of a match between children's own experiences and their texts, and you are also involving them in the creation as well as the interpretation of written discourse.

(3) Teach reading skills in the context of natural reading. Isolated practice sessions on skills should be used sparingly, only when individual readers have shown the need for such instruction during the process of reading meaningful text.

(4) Encourage children to predict or define their own purposes for reading a selection. Let them evaluate and revise their predictions as reading proceeds. The Directed Reading-Thinking Activity

(DR-TA) developed by Stauffer (1969) is one procedure teachers can use to encourage readers to become involved in their reading. Another procedure which develops abilities to ask questions and sets purposes for reading is the ReQuest Procedure developed by Manzo (1968). In this strategy, the teachers and students silently read sections of a selection and then take turns asking and answering each other's questions. Children should be guided initially in the ability to formulate questions that go beyond that of factual recall.

(5) Build experiences before reading many selections. Use what children already know as the starting point for pre-reading discussions. Have the children themselves work on an "idea framework" or conceptual chart showing relationships among the ideas they already know and understand about a topic. Enlarge the chart to incorporate whatever information is vital to the understanding of a selection. This procedure is an adaptation of the Structured Overview Strategy developed by Earle (1969).

(6) Most of the time, permit the children to read silently a cohesive story all the way through. Tell them to make predictions about unknown words and to substitute synonyms in the service of meaning. Later go back to analyze some of these predictions, permitting students to confirm or to self-correct their own substitutions.

(7) Construct cloze exercises as teaching devices to help pupils utilize syntactic, semantic and graphophonic clues. At first, it may be necessary to use single sentences, and a maze technique (i.e., a multiple choice format) rather than completely blank spaces. Early cloze exercises should be on the children's independent reading levels (Schell, 1974) and words should be deleted not by any rigid numerical formula but selectively to encourage children to focus on different elements. Accept synonyms for deleted words, and discuss varying answers. As soon as students understand the cloze technique, progress to larger segments of text. When first introducing cloze passages, use material highly predictable from children's prior experiences. For example, construct a cloze passage based on a recent popular movie or current television series. Children can see themselves as active participants in the reading process when they can generate acceptable alternatives to blanks used in the cloze procedure.

(8) Let children become aware of how writers use context to help them learn the meaning of many new words. Rather than giving them a list of contextual techniques and examples (i.e., synonyms, definitions, prior experiences, etc.) point out these techniques as they occur in actual reading situations.

(9) Give children practice in seeing how paragraphs and longer texts cohere. Let them find sentences not pertaining to the topic in a constructed paragraph. Let them practice (use the overhead) rearranging sentences in paragraphs to see how text is constructed. Let them work with their own writing in the same way.

(10) Develop children's sense of story. Let them create story maps (Swaby, 1982) to outline events and reactions in narrations.



Let them create divergent plots using the same characters or the same initiating event of a story they previously read.

(11) Develop the idea that texts are process tools in learning. Use books in the classroom to seek information, test ideas, compare sources, respond divergently. Do not confine narrative reading to basal reader selections. Use children's literature copiously. Do not be overly concerned about controlled vocabulary and readability checks.

(12) Encourage children to pursue their own interests in reading, while you help them refine and develop new ones. Let children read in your classroom, and let them see you read. Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading is a good practice to permit children to see that reading is not confined to scheduled skill instruction (McCracken, 1971). The socio-cultural environment of your classroom should encourage children to view print not as a closed instructional tool but as a means to enrich their own ideas and experiences.

(13) Help children to tie texts together. Use one reading to create a context for another.

(14) Allow children to translate their understandings of texts into a variety of different mediums. Murals, music, scripts, puzzles, discussion groups, poetry, posters, drawings are preferable alternatives to the usual multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank evaluation sheets.

(15) Teach children that non-linguistic, textual context (i.e., charts, graphs, pictures, tables, maps) provides valuable assistance for comprehension. Many pupils tend to skip over graphic aids. Visual aids can enhance print in a variety of ways. Children should be taught how to engage in the back-and-forth reading graphics demand (Vacca, 1981). Open-book discussions, and the overhead projector are techniques to use to help children profit from the non-linguistic context provided by writers.

### Conclusion

During the past twenty years, reading has come to be viewed as an active process of creative response to print rather than a mere recovery of information found in written texts (Spiro, 1980). What the reader brings to the printed page interacts with the text to generate interpretations that are coherent and functional. The conditions under which reading occurs also influence the comprehension process. A sequential, skills-based reading program does not reflect adequately this dynamic, contextually-dependent process. Teachers who are aware how factors within the reader, within the text, and within the environment interact will create a classroom environment in which reading can become a vehicle for learning and for personal enrichment.

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