

## Understanding context: An essential factor for educational change success

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### Abstract

Contemporary pedagogical experts have stressed the importance of context in education as a critical determinant of the success of learning outcomes. These recent arguments stem from earlier scholars who claimed that the context of education is often taken for granted, although its influence on teaching and learning is crucial. Perhaps the main reason the context of learning is often ignored is that it has been defined vaguely over the years. Educational context is less understood because it comprises many aspects, including culture, history, social factors, and national ethos, influencing people's perceptions and understanding. The relationship between context and education outcome remains unclear due to the lack of a clear definition. Since context plays a key role in influencing education outcomes, ambitious policies on educational reforms must consider the context of learning to be implemented successfully.

Keywords: Context, change, educational change, educational context, educational reform, English language teaching;

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the past century, education researchers have tried to understand educational context's influence on educational outcomes and change. Some experts in education policy, such as Wedell and Alshumaimeri (2014), argued that context is often taken for granted in educational change. Conversely, Vygotsky (1997) and Piaget (1977) explored the role of social context in cognitive development and learning. For example, in language, the context of an utterance can affect the understanding of the discourse. Understanding the context of educational change and the intent of the change is crucial because this lends a new perspective and allows effective strategies to be implemented to support the achievement of intended goals and objectives (Alshumaimeri, 2022).

Wedell (2009) indicated a tendency among policymakers and educational leaders planning educational reforms to neglect their context, specifically the people affected by that change process. These individuals seem to think that the change process is linear and that planning from the top authority with direction will automatically result in a smooth application of the change process. The misunderstanding of their context leads to a failed educational reform. Reforming teaching and learning practices requires innovation. However, Wedell (2022) emphasized the importance of considering how the innovation will affect implementers when developing plans to support implementation. This consideration is important because educational innovations affect many people and are notoriously difficult to implement successfully. This review aims to identify the concept of "context" in education, its components, and its influence on the change process of language education. It answers the following questions:

- 1-What do we mean by the term context?
- 2-How do social and cultural contexts influence teaching and learning processes?
- 3-To what extent is context recognized in changes in language education?

What exactly is the context in education? Different texts define the context in various ways depending on the key factors considered important in each case. Theorists who study context do so from a particular bias or a theoretical perspective. This approach is evident in the works of theorists such as Vygotsky (1997), Dewey (1956), and Piaget (1977). While Piaget focused on different levels of cognitive development for learning, Vygotsky linked learning with society and culture, and Dewey related learning to experiences and interactions. Most research often prefixes context with historical, cultural, social, technological, or national adjectives. While these connotations tell the reader what constitutes an educational context, they do not define the concept directly. The most popular contextual aspect researched extensively in the education sector is the social context and its role in aiding or curtailing learning. Broadly, context is understood as the environment or setting, in which learning and teaching take place (Batstone, 2002). Several other texts reviewed in this study have defined the term "context" in similar or near-similar terms as the definition provided by Batstone (2002) above. The term "context" has been used in various fields of study, such as pragmatics, linguistics, and education. The meaning of the term changes according to the field of study in which it is used. However, one may present a simple definition of educational context as the place where the educational process occurs. A single classroom may be considered a context on its own inside the larger context of school in a multi-layered context. The context can be physical, such as the classroom or the school, and emotional or unphysical, such as the cultural values of a community. In education, the term "context" was referred to with different terms, such as "Environment Analysis" by Nation and Macalister (2010) or "Situational Needs Analysis" by Brown (1995) and Graves (2000).

Based on the preceding definitions, context bears the connotation of a tangible or intangible space within which an event occurs. As a result, many factors should be taken into consideration when defining

a context in education, including the characteristics of the people in the learning environment (e.g., age, gender, or culture), the physical characteristics (e.g., location, design, or classroom size), learning and teaching resources available, the nature of the course taught, the type of institution, and the time component. A context, therefore, can be made up of several factors, including social, political, technological, and economic. This definition portrays educational context as dynamic, multi-layered, and primarily based on the influencing factors that change over time.

As shown below, education systems have undergone significant transformations in the recent past to correspond with societal changes. However, little attention is given to the contextual factors of education compared to the pedagogical developments when envisioning and designing change in the education system. Over the years, governments and educational policymakers have striven to enhance their education systems like individuals seek to improve their skills: by pursuing education with increased vigor, focus, and attention. At the national level, nations have developed goals to improve the quantity and quality of education rendered to their citizens to improve the quality and quantity of the workforce serving their needs. However, changes in education usually occur at a very slow pace, regardless of the external appearance of the implementation of new policies or ideas. For example, the education authority may change the English curriculum and implement it in schools all over the country. The implementation of the curriculum does not entail success in achieving the hoped-for objectives of that change.

## 2. How Do Social and Cultural Contexts Influence Teaching and Learning Processes?

This section assesses the role of context in educational change, having understood the context in relation to the education system. The previous research reported that three elements influence what occurs in any classroom setting: (i) place, (ii) people, and (iii) time. This paper aims to emphasize the importance of these three central, interdependent contextual elements in the educational context (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). Place refers to the physical environment, in which the educational process occurs. It can be put in a continuum, starting from the classroom at one end and the world at the other (Figure 1). People are those involved in the education system, such as students, teachers, principals, educational supervisors, district leaders, educational authorities, policymakers, and parents. When linking the two elements, one may find visible elements of place that lead to understanding the invisible. For example, one can see the classroom, its settings, available resources, size, and the students attending that classroom. These visible elements may give us an idea about the invisible things, such as the economic and cultural background of that place and the type of interactions of the students – whether they study collaboratively or independently. One may infer the student-teacher relationship, behavior, goals, and interactions. Each classroom has its own culture. These two elements occur in a specific time, which is the third element of a context. Any incident has a unique moment in a given day, year, century, or under an administration. Therefore, when describing any context, one should consider the period of time (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). The context's role is analyzed in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to understand how it influences educational changes.

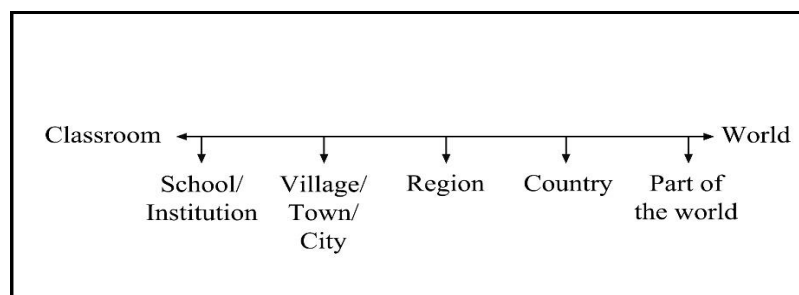


Figure 1. The Context as Place Continuum

There is a rising call for academic institutions to produce competence, innovation, and critical thinking in the graduates they release to the market. Consequently, these demands have led to a shared quest for educational pedagogies emphasizing the connection between the classroom and the context in which teaching and learning activities occur (Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014). However, the call for a change in classroom pedagogical strategies highlights the need to incorporate other pedagogical practices relating to the learners' immediate environment. As a result, new classroom teaching pedagogies have emerged that bring context into classroom learning, such as blended learning and contextual education. One of the areas in which these context-friendly pedagogical approaches have been accommodated widely is in EFL education. In teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL), Wedell and Alshumaimeri (2014) observed that the connection between content and context becomes crucial in aiding EFL students. As Birdsell (2013) outlined, the more EFL students can connect to the learning context, the more they can derive meaning from it and retain it for future reference. Simultaneously, relating learning to the context helps learners appreciate what they learn. Further, Beltrán (2014) observed that the more EFL students could relate English to its contextual use, the more they developed a positive attitude toward it and became more open to acquiring new skills and knowledge of the language. This application points to the cultural and social factors of the learners' characteristics, implying that different cultural backgrounds may affect learners' success and failure in foreign language acquisition.

Another example of the cultural aspect influencing classroom dynamics is Yamachi's (2015) qualitative study of female Arab college students' English writing experiences. The researcher noticed that the students appeared uncritical or passive inside the classroom when completing the writing tasks but became very critical about the assignments outside the classroom. This occurrence demonstrated that the teacher could not understand the cultural aspect of her students. This observation was supported by a statement from one of the students who said, "I am not what you think I am" (Yamachi, 2015).

Far from the social and cultural aspects, some scholars have examined the educational context from a resource perspective, in which human resources, technological resources, learning resources, and pedagogical practices are considered critical in determining the success of teaching and learning in any discipline. Omaggio (2000) further noted the need for EFL educators to design learning activities related to the students' expectations, such as professional goals. Todhunter (2007) noted that educators should adopt instructional strategies related to contextual characteristics, such as the technology used to dispense learning and the accessibility of learning resources by the learners. It is understood that all languages are linked to specific cultures since each language identifies with a particular cultural group. Due to this, language teaching and learning cannot be done in isolation from the culture associated with the language. This explains how contexts differ in their view of educational reform. Some think any changes to the status quo would threaten society's culture and social identity, while others think that change is an opportunity for the society's existence. Therefore, policymakers contemplating educational reform need to consider the characteristics of the context that may support or hinder the desired change. Policymakers should also be aware of the cultural and social effects of the change and minimize the aspects that may affect the success of the educational reform (Wedell, 2009).

### **3.To What Extent is Context Recognized in Changes in Language Education?**

It is essential to assess the extent to which contextual considerations are incorporated in educational change, having discerned the critical role context plays in facilitating learning in various disciplines. Due to context's important role in determining learning outcomes, Burner (2018) emphasizes that considerations for classroom changes must often account for the contextual factors that impact learning, as outlined above. One of the most critical contextual factors that should be considered when implementing educational change is student characteristics, such as career obligations and learning styles. The rationale for considering the student as an element of context is that education's core

revolves around the students and equipping them with the necessary skills. In addition, learner characteristics – such as intellectual capability, mental processing capacity, and learning style – influence teachers’ selection of learning activities and materials. For instance, international students studying a second language often experience difficulties pronouncing words correctly in the target language due to their first language (L1) influence. However, current ideas regarding translanguaging, the multilingual classroom, and English as a lingua franca suggest that L1 can have a place in the language classroom. As a result, EFL educators may want to utilize pedagogical strategies that accommodate targets incorporating the first language’s effect on an EFL learner’s spoken English. For this reason, the learner as a contextual factor plays a critical role in influencing the success or failure of educational outcomes and must be closely considered when determining changes in education settings (Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014).

However, classroom practices are not affected only by the learners’ social and cultural beliefs and habits but also by the teachers who play a key and possibly unrecognized role in educational context. Fullan (2007) stated, “educational change depends on what teachers do and think-it is as simple and complex as that” (2007, p. 129). However, the lack of success in implementing changes in schools and classrooms, such as with curriculum development and new methodological approaches, often occurs due to ignoring the vital role of teachers in the process. Many research studies reported that teachers were left in the dark regarding the educational change process and were unsupported when charged with enacting the desired change (Graves, 2021; Wedell, 2015; De Segovia & Hardison, 2009; Soto, 2018; Macalister & Phonekeo, 2022).

De Segovia and Hardison (2009) explored the teachers’ experiences of a curriculum reform in 1999 in Thailand, which entailed transitioning from “teacher-centered” to “learner-centered” approaches to language instruction. The researchers reported that after several observations of English classes, they found no evidence of learner-centered classes and communicative use of the language. The cause for this occurrence was the lack of support for teachers during the implementation process. The teachers expressed their desire to change but did not know how and had no help implementing communicative language teaching. Being told to change their teaching was insufficient and would not help them reach the desired outcomes. The teachers also reported their worries about their language proficiency, which resulted in a lack of confidence in teaching the language using the communicative approach (De Segovia & Hardison, 2008). In similar findings, Soto (2018) indicated that teachers were left unsupported and made their own adjustments to achieve the goals of the new skills-integrated communicative curriculum. The teachers reported a lack of training and other resource-related support in the classroom, such as a lack of equipment. Soto (2018) questioned the viability of new, ready-made language teaching approaches implemented with little or no adjustment to suit the local context. Similarly, Graves (2021) asserted that the idea of one curriculum fitting all contexts is false. Research on curriculum change and development supported Graves’ claim (Kirgöz, 2008; Le et al., 2020; Sefarej, 2014; Wedell & Grassick, 2018; Zhang & Hu, 2010).

Alshumaimeri (2022) assessed the extent to which various contextual factors – such as the student, resource materials, and educational facilities – and teacher-related factors – such as training and qualification, the school environment, the dominant culture, and the instructional materials – are accommodated when implementing educational change. Alshumaimeri (2022) argued that the above contextual factors have overlapping impacts on the educational outcome and should be considered jointly. However, researchers noted that in most cases, each factor is treated in isolation when implementing change in educational settings (Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014). This finding suggests that when implementing change, we must consider the system as a whole, not as isolated components. The interrelationships between components are often ignored, causing negative effects on implementation. This situation probably occurs because it is so difficult to understand how components influence each other (Wedell, 2022). Omaggio (2000) attributed this trend to the assumption that individual factors

have isolated influences on education outcomes, contrary to the observation made in their research. It is this differential consideration that most contextual factors are often assumed during change implementation. One key assumption that Alshumaimeri (2022) highlighted is that teacher considerations, such as qualifications, competence, and experience, can mediate learner characteristics, such as special learning needs. Moreover, Alshumaimeri (2022) indicated that contextual factors are often considered only partially when implementing educational change because identifying their overlapping influences is difficult.

In another study, Pandey (2018) considered teacher-related factors as critical contextual considerations when determining curriculum and educational change. The teacher's role in educational change is often perceived as autonomous from all other contextual factors due to their direct involvement in implementing the intended educational changes. Pandey's (2018) qualitative study reported that teachers often feel less involved and under-consulted in important educational change decisions. These sentiments were reiterated in many studies (Fullan, 2007; Graves, 2000, 2021; Wedell, 2009; Wedell & Grassick, 2018; Wedell & Malderez, 2013). For instance, the teachers surveyed by Pandey (2018) complained that they were given insufficient information regarding the proposed changes and that their opinions were less sought. As a result, the changes implemented were misaligned with their expectations. Some key teacher-related contextual factors that the researchers felt were not fully addressed included professional development to align teachers' skills to the proposed changes, lack of frameworks for sustaining peer collaborations, and access to the recommended educational resources. The experience that teachers bring to the classroom also affects the implementation of the change, as researchers have indicated (Farrell & Kun, 2008; Macalister & Phonekeo, 2022; Soto, 2018; Xie, 2021). Pandey (2018) argued that a lack of consideration of teacher-related contextual factors by policymakers and change planners often jeopardizes the fidelity of the educational changes implemented.

The various contextual factors influencing educational change make it clear that planning and implementing change within the educational setting is often complicated, and the outcomes are likely not immediately visible. Moreover, the effects of change in any setting are likely not identical due to the different dimensions and influencers of the change process. In most instances, the goal of educational change is to improve performance outcomes in terms of school performance and individual performance in the workplace (Burner, 2018). For this reason, Wedell (2009) argues that most educational change processes are steered at the policy level without considering the influence of several other contextual factors on the change process. As a policy-driven process, the impacts of factors, such as human and social characteristics, that exert considerable effects on the change process are often ignored. Therefore, this school of thought views educational change as a linear process, a matter of legislation rather than lobbying, and a matter of rational-technical planning. The primary assumption in educational change from this perspective is that once the change decision is made through policy legislation, the process of change implementation can be achieved merely by issuing clear guidelines to the relevant stakeholders to execute the changes. The outcome of such thinking is a failure to achieve the change goals. This failure is because the policymakers ignored the context and its components, especially the people (e.g. learners, teachers, school administrators, and inspectors). It is the people who implement the policy documents and guidelines in classrooms and who make the change process successful or not. Their understanding of the policy documents shapes the final outcome of the change. As Fullan (2001) and Wedell (2009) asserted, many educational initiatives failed because policymakers ignored the context and its people.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The contemporary educational setting is undergoing significant changes due to the changing society and demand for expertise. Much of the change occurring in the education sector is inspired by societal

dynamics and pressure from the corporate world. As a result, the main goal of educational change is to improve learning outcomes by producing graduates who are more competent and can fit in and contribute to the development of society. This study has found that the success of change in the education sector is highly dependent on a wide range of contextual factors, such as teachers, students, culture, technology, resource availability, and the internal environment, in which learning occurs. As established in this study, the contextual factors have overlapping influences on educational change, hence the need to consider them jointly when conceiving and implementing educational changes. As illustrated in this study, however, educational changes tend to ignore the contextual factors affecting change outcomes or are sometimes considered only partially. Therefore, the observed lack of consideration of the contextual factors adversely impacts the outcomes of the implemented changes. For a change to be successful, policymakers and change planners need to carefully study and understand the context of the change and the contextual factors involved, especially the people affected by it (e.g. learners, teachers, and school leaders). The people are the starting point of the change process, and as Fullan (2007) and Wedell (2009) stated, educational change depends on the teachers and learners and what they think of it.

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