

Context and Humor in Teaching Language Functions

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Abstract—This study aims at investigating the effects of context and humor on learning language functions for male and female students of first grade of high school. The sample of the study consisted of 89 male and 90 female students who were randomly assigned to four experimental groups and two control groups. The control group followed their schoolbook; however, the experimental groups received additional reading texts through which language functions were taught. The experimental groups' materials were of two kinds: context with humor (in which language functions were contextualized having traces of humor) and context without humor (in which language functions were just contextualized but without any humorous points). A pretest posttest control group design was chosen for this study. The data of the study were analyzed via a two-way ANOVA. The results showed that the experimental groups (male and female) for whom the language functions were taught in the form of context with humor outperformed the other groups. In addition, the results showed no difference between male and female participants' performance.

Index Terms—language functions, indirect speech acts, context, humor, gender

I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, teaching and learning language forms were a prominent trend in English learning. However, this has not continued forever. The communicative tendency has prevailed the preceding system. The concept of communicative language teaching has grown out of the notion that solely teaching grammar is not enough to prepare students for using the language independently. The theoretical and empirical study of interlanguage and intercultural pragmatics has grown significantly over the last two decades (Ellis, 1994). In the last past two decades, a substantial body of empirical research in interlanguage pragmatics has tried to describe how speech acts performed by non-native speakers of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds differ from the target language norms (Kasper, 1997; Rose & Kasper, 2001; Kondo, 2004).

Pragmatics is regarded as one of the most challenging aspects for language learners to grasp, and can only truly be learned with experience. This method of teaching proposes that students need to understand the meaning and the communicative function of a language in order to learn the language. Austin (1962) claimed that communication is a series of communicative acts that are used systematically to accomplish particular purposes, and that all utterances perform specific actions by having a specific meaning assigned to them. Those utterances and communicative acts are called speech acts.

Speech acts theory was originally put in the ground of pragmatics by Austin. Then, it was blossomed by Searl's work in that field. Austin (1962) classified speech acts into 3 types: the locutionary act, which is the literal meaning of an utterance; the illocutionary act, which is the intended meaning and the perlocutionary act/effect which is the effect of utterance on the hearer (Yule, 1996, p. 48). For example, somebody might say: I'm thirsty! (locution), meaning I want to drink something! (illocution) and the perlocutionary effect might be that someone gives you a drink.

Different types of speech acts can also be distinguished based on the structure. (Yule, 1996) stated that when an interrogative form is used to ask a question, it is described as a direct speech act. However, when an interrogative or a declarative form is treated as a request but not as a question or a statement, it is described as an indirect speech act. Halliday (1973) stated that a single sentence might embody many different functions simultaneously. Therefore, every speech act may contain more than one meaning.

The most important clue to the meaning of a word or sentence is context (Chastain, 1976). Verschueren (1999) identified four factors as ingredients of the communicative context: 1) Language users: utterer and interpreter; presented as focal points in context. 2) The mental world, 3) The social world, and 4) The physical world. Therefore, these four factors help in constructing meaning. This introduces the importance of providing sufficient input, especially for EFL learners, to have a chance to get familiar with different meanings of sentences. Before students can produce language,

they must have a language data base from which to generate the particular language needed to express what they want to say (Chastain, 1976; Krashen, 1998; Lao and Krashen, 2000).

Living abroad is not possible for all individuals to learn pragmatics knowledge and to develop their communicative competence, so those who live in an EFL context need sufficient pragmatics input. Material developers could do with considering the needs of Iranian EFL learners to learn various meanings of indirect speech acts. They can accommodate EFL learners with essential input in reading texts. Reading as a convenient way of conveying language knowledge can be employed to transfer information about principles of conversation.

The researchers believe that reading and reciting dialogs would not turn EFL students into English speakers. They suggest a new technique to develop EFL students' ability to learn language functions. The researchers pointed out the existence of contextualized language functions and the existence of sense of humor in reading texts. In addition, the effect of gender on learning language functions was investigated.

The following research questions guided the present study:

Q₁: Do humorized and contextualized language functions have any effects on learning language functions?

Q₂: Does gender affect learning humorized and contextualized language functions?

To the best knowledge of the researchers, this is the first attempt in Iran to determine whether or not incorporate language functions in humorous context improves students' language functions knowledge.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

A. *Pragmatics and Speech Acts*

Pragmatics is the study of the ability of natural language speakers to communicate more than that which is explicitly stated. One of the most comprehensive definitions of pragmatics is presented by Crystal (1985): "pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication." (p. 240). Paradis (1998) that language is not just the language system, but linguistic competence plus pragmatic competence. The ability to understand another speaker's intended meaning is called pragmatic competence. Indeed, pragmatics basically concerns appropriateness of forms of language and, in a more elaborate definition, appropriateness of meaning in social contexts.

Kasper (1997) stated that communicative action includes not only speech acts but also participation in conversation, engaging in different types of discourse and sustaining interaction in complex speech events. Speech act is "the action or intent that a speaker accomplishes when using language in context, the meaning of which is inferred by hearers" (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2003, p. 595). We use the term speech act to describe actions such as 'requesting,' 'commanding,' 'questioning,' or 'informing.' Leech (1983) divided pragmatics research into two sub-branches: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. To have a successful communication, he claimed that the speaker needs to make informed decisions on both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects.

B. *Pragmatics and Humor*

The success of a conversation depends upon the various speakers' approach to the interaction. The way in which people try to make conversations work is sometimes called the cooperative principle. Verschueren (1999) stated that successful communication, or the successful transfer of meaning, is thus seen as a process by which a state of mutual knowledge of a communicative intention is attained, with the help of principles of co-operation. Grice (1975) proposed that in ordinary conversation, speakers and hearers share a cooperative principle. Speakers shape their utterances to be understood by hearers. The principle can be implemented by four underlying rules or maxims. These conversational maxims are also sometimes named Grice's or Gricean maxims. They are the maxims of *quality*, *quantity*, *relevance* and *manner*.

- Quality: speakers should be truthful.
- Quantity: a contribution should be as informative as is required
- Relevance: speakers' contributions should relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange.
- Manner: speakers' contributions should be perspicuous: clear, orderly and brief,

According to Lin-qiong (2007), violating Gricean maxims may produce humorous utterances, when speakers offer false information (violating maxims of quality), when they offer more or less information than is required (violating maxims of quantity), when they offer irrelevant information (violating maxims of relation), and when they may not consider the basic maxim of perspicuous (violating maxims of manner). These violations create humorous effects in their conversations.

Dynel (2008) supported the premise that humor does not conform to the cooperative principle (CP) and its maxims. The interdependence of humor and CP inspired many researchers to carry out studies in this field (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994; Verschueren, 1999; Lin-qiong, 2007; Dynel, 2008).

Falk (1973) declared that "since pragmatics involves human beings, as well as the utterances that they produce, so conversational principles can be violated under certain circumstances, e. g.: in a commercial program" (p. 266). Lin-qiong (2007) believes that a lesser degree of relevance between these utterances shows the unexpectedness of the response utterance, which is exactly how the humorous effect is created. Humor is socially permitted violations of

cultural norms. In violating the cultural and conversational norms, therefore, one becomes familiar with the norms themselves. Thus, it can be used to teach pragmatics norms of language and culture through examples of such violations.

Ziv (1988) confirmed the significant role of humor in teaching. Humor has been proved to serve to illustrate, reinforce and make more comprehensible the material being taught (Powell and Anderson, 1985). Some other advantages of humor in the classroom are mentioned as motivating students and increasing their interest, reducing anxiety, capturing their attention, and in general facilitating learning (Powell and Anderson, 1985; Askilson, 2005).

C. Pragmatics and Gender

The speakers often prefer indirect speech acts so that they do not infringe the hearer's face. 'Will you open the window, please?' and 'Open the window!' The latter statement would be absolutely unacceptable in some contexts. Leech (1983) considered politeness as an acceptable explanation why people use indirect speech in conveying what they mean.

Spolsky (1998) believed that "when offered an equal educational opportunity, there seems to be a tendency for women to be more sensitive than men to the status norms of language" (p. 38). Lakoff (1975) identified some features of women's language: polite forms e.g. would you please...I'd really appreciate it if...; hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation; and lack of a sense of humor e.g. poor at telling jokes. Therefore, females tend to use indirect utterances and more standard forms of English (Brown, 2000).

D. Pragmatics and Input

Pragmatics includes the study of power, gender, race, identity, and their interactions with individual speech acts. This shows the importance of providing considerable input for EFL learners. Uso-Juan (2007) stated that "in a FL setting learners' opportunities to be in contact with authentic situations in the target language are limited or absent and, therefore, the chance to develop their pragmatic competence depends on the quantity and quality of the pragmatic input presented to them in the classroom" (p. 224). Linguists investigated various modes of input based strategy to teach pragmatics in the classroom, such as presenting materials through written discourse (Salazar, 2007; Uso-Juan, 2007), teacher's description and explanation (Kasper, 1997; Glasgow, 2008) and audiovisual materials (Alcon, 2005; Fernandez and Fontecha, 2008; Fernandez-Guerra, 2008).

Uso-Juan (2007) believed that presenting materials in a simplistic way without including contextually rich information does not provide learners with enough appropriate input to promote learners' communication. Similarly, Riley (1981) noticed that isolated de-contextualized objects or concepts are unsuitable tools for the description of the dynamics of communication. Kumaravadivelu (2003) pointed out that "linguistic input to learners should be presented in units of text, or what we now call discourse, so that learners can benefit from the interactive effect of various components and contexts" (p. 214). Humorous material, as input in the classroom through oral and written form, can be used to promote linguistic competence of learners (Schmitz, 2002).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of Iranian EFL students who study in the first grade of senior high school in Mahabad, West Azerbaijan. They all have learnt English in an EFL context and English was considered as their third language. In this study, independent variables were contextualization and gender. The independent variable of contextualization was discussed through three levels: context with humor, context without humor, and traditional texts; dependent variable was learning language functions. By considering the gender variable, the researcher did the study in two different schools. There were three male groups and three female groups. Therefore six groups of students were organized to conduct this study; four experimental groups (two male and two female groups) and two control groups (one male and one female group).

B. Instrument

Presumably, reading non-contextualized and prefabricated dialogs does not make the same communicative demands on the learner as engaging in conversation. In order to answer the question of the study, the researchers wrote written texts based on the content and order of language functions presented in English Book 1 (Birjandi, Soheili, Nowroozi, and Mahmoodi, 2008). Acknowledging that simplified input and context can play a role in making input comprehensible (Ellis, 1994), the researcher proposed using an interesting story through which language functions could be introduced. The story of an Iranian schoolboy who tried to learn English in an English speaking country was the main core subject of the reading texts. Through that English learning journey, that boy, being unaware of metapragmatic and sociopragmatic knowledge of English, violated the maxims of conversation which in turn caused the production of humor.

The researcher used a multiple-choice test to identify the extent of English-language pragmatics knowledge of participants. This information was later used in analyzing the data. The multiple-choice test contained a total of 17 items.

C. Procedure

The purpose of the experiment was to investigate whether embedding language functions in context and humor help students learn them better. Language functions are provided in high school textbooks in non-contextualized conditions. The researcher suggested presenting and teaching the language functions in a different way; using context and humor. Context may provide more information about the time and place of using language functions. Context helps students visualize the story which in turn improves comprehension. In addition, humor can be employed in the context to make it more interesting and unusual from the available non-contextualized dialogs. In this study, humor was employed as a tool to stimulate learners' interest and to raise their attention on application of language functions.

The design proposed for this study was pretest posttest control group design. In the first session of the class, all participants of six classes took a pretest before they have received any instruction. The materials of the study were taught through six weeks.

1. Experimental Group 1

Male and female students in this group, henceforth EG1, received reading texts (Appendix I) in which these language functions introduced in English book 1 were used in conversations by different characters of the story. The teachers first read the text. By reading the text, learners learned when to use what language functions to whom and where to employ it. Then the teachers wrote intended language functions (those language functions introduced in English book 1) on the board without any explicit instruction on the time and place of using language functions and they put them into practice. Then, the teachers asked two volunteers to practice the language functions in front of the class. Afterwards, it was other students' turns to practice the language functions two by two all at the same time. To end up practicing each lesson, the teacher practiced the language functions with the whole class (all students as one interlocutor and the teacher as another one).

2. Experimental Group 2

This group, henceforth EG2, experienced reading the same story which was handed over to EG1, but with some additional statements and explanations. Context with humor reading texts were submitted to this group (Appendix II). Humor, as a result of violating conversational maxims operated as a tool to instruct pragmatic rules. In other words, it was employed to sensitize students to appropriate language forms and functions. In this study, humor was used as a new form of input enhancement instead of using underlined or bold sentences to catch students' attention on the intended materials. Like EG1, this group carried out the conversation practice process. However, the teachers equipped students of this group with explicit instruction on the grammatical accuracy and appropriateness of language functions. To summarize the procedure, it can be said that the teachers presented the input, raised students' attention on humorous sentences, explained the formula, and then engaged students in practicing.

3. Control Group

Participants of this study, CG, followed their school book. They did not receive any extra reading texts. Practicing the restricted dialogs of their textbook (Appendix III) is the only similar point between this group and EG1 and EG2. They were not equipped with any kind of instruction.

Before reading each passage, all participants of the experimental groups were instructed to read for the purpose of acting out the conversation which was followed by the reading text. After six sessions, the same pre-test was given to the same participants. The time interval between the administrations of these two tests – pre and posttest – was long enough for assessing six passages. It was assumed that the participants would not remember the content of the pretest. After the required data were collected, they were analyzed using the version 18.0 of SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software. Then a two-way ANOVA was calculated to assess which of the three levels of independent variable is the better predictor of both male and female Iranian EFL learners' achievement of pragmatic knowledge. Analysis of the data falls into two categories:

1. The effect of context and humor on learning language functions of Iranian EFL learners.
2. The effect of gender on learning language functions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

In order to test both research questions, a two-way ANOVA for between subjects was used, and the effects of the group factor (i.e. traditional, context without humor and context with humor) and gender (i.e. male and female), and their interaction were tested.

The results of Table 4.1 show that there were neither significant main effects for both the gender and group factors nor significant interaction effect between the gender and group in the pretest. In other words, p-values were more than 0.05 for these relationships (0.92, 0.64 and 0.99 respectively). It is acceptable that before the treatment all groups were similar to each other with no difference.

TABLE 4.1
ANOVA FOR THE PRETEST

Dependent Variable: pretest total scores

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	2.684 ^a	5	.537	.185	.968
Intercept	13127.855	1	13127.855	4530.209	.000
GENDER	.031	1	.031	.011	.917
GROUP	2.595	2	1.297	.448	.640
GENDER * GROUP	.058	2	.029	.010	.990
Error	501.328	173	2.898		
Total	13633.000	179			
Corrected Total	504.011	178			

a. R Squared = .005 (Adjusted R Squared = -.023)

The results can be summarized this way:

1. There was not any significant main effect of the gender factor: $F(1, 173) = 0.01$; NS.
2. There was not any significant main effect of the group factor: $F(2, 173) = 0.45$; NS.
3. There was not any significant interaction between the gender and group factors: $F(1, 173) = 0.01$; NS.

The next table (Table 4.2) shows that there was a significant main effect for group in the posttest. In other words, the group main effect was significant beyond the 0.05 level. Therefore, the performances of the three groups were different from each other. Despite the main effect for this factor, there was neither any significant main effect for gender nor any significant interaction between the gender and group factors. The p-values were 0.36 and 0.97 respectively.

TABLE 4.2
ANOVA FOR THE POSTTEST

Dependent Variable: posttest total scores

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	163.462 ^a	5	32.692	6.008	.000
Intercept	20510.988	1	20510.988	3769.152	.000
GENDER	4.634	1	4.634	.852	.357
GROUP	158.109	2	79.055	14.527	.000
GENDER * GROUP	.304	2	.152	.028	.972
Error	941.432	173	5.442		
Total	21635.000	179			
Corrected Total	1104.894	178			

a. R Squared = .148 (Adjusted R Squared = .123)

The results can be summarized this way:

1. There was not any significant main effect of the gender factor: $F(1, 173) = 0.85$; NS.
2. There was a significant main effect of the group factor: $F(2, 173) = 14.53$; $p < 0.05$.
3. There was not any significant interaction between the gender and group factors: $F(1, 173) = 0.03$; NS.

When there is a significant difference among the means and it is needed to identify precisely where that difference lies, a post-hoc comparison is possible. Post-hoc test was done for the group factor because this factor had three levels and there was a significant effect for this factor. The Tukey test was utilized for the post-hoc analysis which is shown in Table 4.3

TABLE 4.3
RESULTS OF THE TUKEY TEST FOR POST-HOC ANALYSIS AMONG THE SIX GROUPS

Tukey HSD

Dependent Variable	(I) students groups	(J) students groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
pretest total scores	traditional	context without humor	.21	.309	.776	-.52	.94
		context with humor	-.07	.309	.970	-.80	.66
	context without humor	traditional	-.21	.309	.776	-.94	.52
		context with humor	-.28	.308	.629	-1.01	.45
	context with humor	traditional	.07	.309	.970	-.66	.80
		context without humor	.28	.308	.629	-.45	1.01
posttest total scores	traditional	context without humor	-.64	.425	.294	-1.64	.37
		context with humor	-2.24*	.425	.000	-3.24	-1.23
	context without humor	traditional	.64	.425	.294	-.37	1.64
		context with humor	-1.60*	.423	.001	-2.60	-.60
	context with humor	traditional	2.24*	.425	.000	1.23	3.24
		context without humor	1.60*	.423	.001	.60	2.60

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 4.3 shows that there was not a significant difference between the traditional and context without humor groups, but the context with humor group was significantly different from both the traditional and context without humor groups. Therefore, the performance of the students in the group, which was provided with humorous text, was significantly different from the other two groups. The results are also shown through the following profile plots. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show the profile of the gender and group for both pretest and posttest. It can be observed that there was no interaction between the two factors.

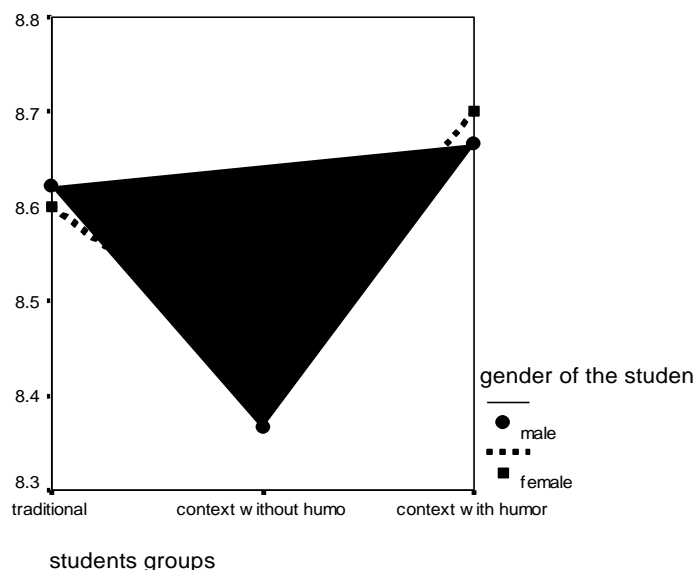


Figure 4.1 Estimated Marginal Means of pretest total scores

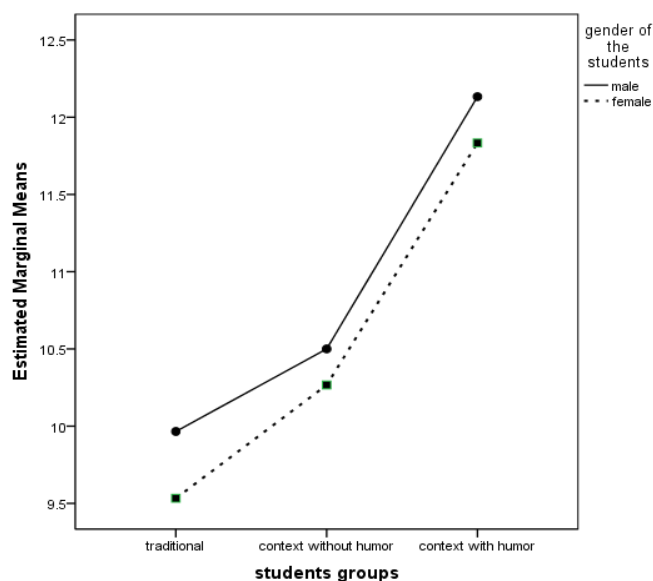


Figure 4.2 Estimated Marginal Means of posttest total scores

B. Discussion

This study tried to investigate whether context and humor had any effect on learning language functions. Moreover, it strived to explore whether learning language functions through context and humor differed between males and females.

According to Richards and Schmidt (1985), “communication occurs in a context that offers help to comprehension through such things as the situation and setting, visual clue, gestures and actions” (p. 117). Spencer-Oatey (2005) stated that doing pragmatics crucially requires context. Nunan (1999) also noted that texts can provide clues in constructing the original meanings of speakers or writers. Embedding a conversation exchange in an appropriate situational context can make it communicatively coherent even it lacks linguistic cohesion (Kumaravadevelu, 2003).

Humor can enhance learning and creativity. It can be employed to capture students’ attention, to feed up their attention, and to hold their attention (Goodman, 1983, p.4). Language of humor is accepted as a rich source for

improving educational purposes (Powell and Anderson, 1985; Deneire, 1995; Skinner, 2001; Schmitz, 2002; Askilson, 2005). Skinner (2001) emphasized the importance of having pedagogical purpose in employing humor. In other words, that kind of humor that is reasonable and informed.

Learning language functions through context (with or without humor) helped learners of this study to have a schema about the story. The independent variable of contextualization had three levels; contextualized language functions, contextualized language functions with humor, and non-contextualized language functions. The results showed that context with humor had a significant effect on learning language functions. However, the effect of context without humor on learning language functions was relatively low. In addition, the effect of non-contextualized language functions was not meaningful.

Females pay more attention to the norms of language (Lakoff, 1975; Spolsky, 1998; Brown, 2000). Therefore, the researchers presumed that they learn language functions much better than males. Contrary to what was expected, no statistically effect of gender was found on the results. So it is concluded that language functions embedded in humorous contexts improved male and female's pragmatic knowledge to the same degree. The findings also showed that there was not a significant interaction between contextualization and gender.

V. CONCLUSION

In instructional settings, opportunities for learner exposure to sociopragmatic information are scant, since usually non-contextualized examples of particular speech act dominate the school curriculum. The present study supports the claim that learners' exposure to rich and contextually appropriate input is a prerequisite for the development of their pragmatic competence in the target language (Kasper, 2001). This study may be helpful for material developers to consider EFL learners' needs and to present materials in a way to help learners enjoy learning.

The scope of the current research was to investigate the effect of context and humor on learning language functions. Given that the research scope is rather limited and is defined to address the research questions under investigation, this study may point to a number of possible directions for future research.

First, to remedy the methodological limitations in the current study, data elicited in a controlled setting via a multiple-choice test, further research should aim at collecting data of communicative speech acts via other methods such as Discourse Completion Task (DCT), role plays, interviews, etc. Second, more researches need to be conducted to investigate the effects of authentic materials, such as film and real-life documents on learning language functions. Third, this study can be replicated to examine whether the same findings can be found with students in different contexts or in different learning stages. Finally, participant' ideas can be taken into consideration, too. The researchers can ask for the opinions of participants in order to see which method they find useful.

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