

## Investigating Classroom Modes in Chinese EFL Classes

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**Abstract:** The current study endeavored to investigate micro contexts or modes in Chinese EFL classes. It undertook to identify which kinds of modes can be found in Chinese EFL classes. And a further question the author explored was: what is the relationship between pedagogic goals and interactional features in the modes. In the study, the database comprised transcripts of approximately 90 minutes of interaction video-recorded during three lessons in three EFL classrooms at the intermediate level. To answer the first research question, the author observed classroom video recordings, and attempted to identify various types of modes in Chinese EFL classes, the results of the research revealed that the three types: skills and systems mode, managerial mode and materials mode were found in the examination. Furthermore, this article addressed the research question two, examining the relationship between teaching purposes and teachers' use of language, by analyzing some extracts from Chinese EFL lessons based on some principles and theoretical underpinnings of conversation analysis (CA) methodology. The findings indicated that language teachers tended to use some communicative devices, such as repair and correction, non-corrective repetition, discourse markers, display questions to enable learners to engage in the lessons and grasp the target language so as to achieve the teaching purposes. It is hoped that the present study can serve to raise teachers' awareness of their classroom language use.

### 1. Introduction

In broad terms, the purpose of this chapter is to present some background about context and its omnipresence in language classrooms. More specifically, the introductory part falls into three main sections. The first section is designed to provide an overview and general orientation to the concept of context and accentuate the essential elements associated with the study of context. Also in this section, language classroom context is examined. Next, we do have access to the motivation and purpose of the study. Finally, and most importantly, the chapter is concluded with a depiction of the outline of the research. The process is particularly noteworthy for familiarizing the structure of the essay.

As Akman and Bazzanella (2003) have stated that the notion of context prevails in a body of diverse research domains, such as pragmatics, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, theory of communication, cognitive science and so forth. In particular, context plays a focal role in the spheres of pragmatics and linguistics. Given the importation and invocation of context in assorted studies. It can be of considerable value to examine the concept of context in more detail. According to the *Oxford English Language Dictionary*, context can be defined as the circumstances that form a particular situation in which something happens. It is important to note that the surrounding words or circumstances may well be necessary for thorough comprehension of what happens. As regards the above definition, Fitzpatrick (2012) has provided a further explication, the term 'circumstances' utilized in the definition is to imply the myriad factors that comprise context; the remaining part, however, highlights the purpose, that is knowledge of context is of most help in understanding something fully. In the similar vein, Riggenschach (2002) has seen context on the macro level and defined context as the setting and sociocultural environment. From the micro perspective, Riggenschach (2002) has expanded the consideration of context to describe context as the combination of the interlocutors, their relationship to one another, the genre (Is it an academic

## **2. Literature Review**

The notions of context and language classroom context have been treated in Chapter one, both of them have been discussed in general terms. In this chapter, the two concepts are examined in a comprehensive and systematic fashion. The main aim is to offer the valuable basis for the following research. It should be pointed out that the chapter takes into consideration the following sections: the focus at the beginning is on the presentation of the theoretical input on the nature of context and classroom context. Also, the chapter concentrates largely on the micro contexts or modes of lessons and traces the relationship between interactional features and pedagogical purposes in the modes. In the remainder of the chapter, gaps in previous studies are identified. Naturally, the questions addressed in the research are clarified. In later sections, the paper shall be looking at each dimension more fully.

### **2.1. Context Described**

The concept of context derives initially from the Latin *contexere*, which is meant to weave together, interweave, join together, compose. It could be argued, in fact, that the term ‘context’ in English has traditionally been described as ‘con-text’, which has been explained as the intrinsic relations between texts, that is to say, the words and the sentences before and after the specific sentence that one was looking at (Halliday and Hasan 1989). To capture a relatively wide-ranging conception of context, goes beyond what is said and written. The term ‘context of situation’ was registered by Malinowski as early as in 1923. Context in this sense can be thought of as a site, location, environment or milieu in which a text unfolds. In the same spirit, McGregor (2005) has described what context is, understood as the social setting within which any statement will, or presumably should, be interpreted. In support of this view, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) have also been emphatic that context entails the physical and temporal situation where the linguistic interaction takes place. With a focus on the notion of context of situation, Hymes proposed a more specific interpretation of the term in 1967, indicated that the context of situation might be defined as a set of constitutive parts. These are: the participants in the interaction, the action of the participants (including verbal action and non-verbal action), the typical means of interaction, the norms for relationships in the setting and other relevant features of the situation (refers to the surrounding objects and events), all of which are fundamentally interrelated.

Indeed, context is analyzed as a multilayered and intertwined construct, which is essential to provide information not only about the immediate environment but also about the total cultural background. As Chouinard and Cousins (2009) have noted that context can be seen as the site of confluence where event, culture and setting connect. Accordingly, Ben-Amos (1993) has identified another important kind of context, which is also fundamental to contextual analysis, namely ‘context of culture’. Following Ben-Amos, it is becoming more clear that context of culture comprises a relatively broad contextual circle which embraces all other possible core component parts, involving the shared knowledge of interactants, their conventions of conduct, beliefs and speech genres (such as an academic lecture or an ordinary conversation). It should be stressed that the term ‘shared knowledge’ (mentioned above) needs to be spelled out a little further. Shared knowledge refers to prior knowledge, which may be shared by interactants in a communicative exchange. Relevant prior knowledge is salient in conversational exchanges as it can create the appropriate context in which the utterances can be properly interpreted and understood (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000).

### **2.2. Different Types of Modes in Language Classroom**

#### **2.2.1. Skills and Systems Mode**

Basically, form-focused instruction is the locus of skills and systems mode. Just as its name implies, form-focused instruction can be defined as any pedagogical activity which intends to overtly draw learners’ attention to linguistic forms; it should be mentioned that the term ‘forms’ in this expression refers to phonological, lexical, grammatical and pragmalinguistic aspects of language (Ellis 2001). To take the argument further, Ellis (2001) has added that the primary aim of

the focus-on-forms instruction is to learn preselected linguistic forms, and in such a learning process, learners are required to view language primarily as an 'object' to be learned and practice repetitively and to function as students rather than users of the language.

As regards skills and systems mode, there has been a number of recent attempts to explore some of the key features of this type of language classroom context (e.g. Seedhouse 2004; Walsh 2006). These have centered on the interrelatedness of language use and teaching purposes. Consider teaching objective, Seedhouse (2004) has been emphatic that form-and-accuracy context is characterized by a pedagogical focus on language forms and accuracy. More specifically, in this kind of context, pedagogic purposes can be decomposed into three principal parts: first, providing learners with language practice in relation to a particular language system (phonology, grammar, vocabulary, discourse) or language skill (listening, reading, writing, speaking); second, developing specific learner strategies; third, enabling learners to manipulate target linguistic forms accurately (Walsh 2006). As stated above, pedagogic goals and interactional features are inextricably linked, as the pedagogical focuses vary, the interaction patterns may vary. In what follows, the interactional features in skills and systems mode need to be taken into account.

### **2.2.2. Classroom Context Mode**

Generally speaking, the pedagogical focus in this type of classroom context is mostly on meaning and fluency, more specifically, the attention is given to the expression of personal meanings rather than language forms, to promote oral fluency rather than accuracy and precision (Seedhouse 2004). In classroom context mode, the teacher's aim is to maximize the opportunities for communicative interactions presented by the classroom instructional environment and the classroom speech community itself (Seedhouse 2004). Shedding light on pedagogic goals, Walsh (2006) has briefly summarized three main teaching goals in classroom context mode. These are: (1) teachers can provide learners with effective assistance that enables learners to express themselves clearly; (2) to establish a context for interaction; (3) teachers can engage learners in communicative activities, aims to promote their oral fluency. Mindful of the aforementioned pedagogic purposes, the interactional organization in this kind of context may become less controlled and rigid than that of form-and-accuracy context (Seedhouse 2004). What it means is that learners participation is of utmost importance in this kind of context. Learners' roles shift from recipients of knowledge to communicators. The turn-taking and choice of topic can be directed by the learners who manage the interactions themselves. The teacher, by contrast, plays a less prominent role, acts as a facilitator to listen and support the interaction and give assistance when it is necessary in the communication process (Walsh 2006). Thus, it is, in a sense, the classroom context mode can be seen as a learner-centered classroom setting (Anton 1999). For this, Anton (1999) has further mentioned, central to the learner-centered model of instruction is the matters of information sharing and meaning negotiation, students are provided with ample opportunities to interact with each other, and to express their personal feelings and meanings freely.

## **3. Research Methodology**

The chapter is organized in six main sections. The research questions of the present study are very clearly represented and fully explicated in the opening section. The classroom observation method and the SETT framework are presented in section two and section three, respectively. The fourth section, which contains two vital aspects, is designed to provide an overview of what conversation analysis (hereafter CA) is, and offer a description and clarification of some of the key areas of CA methodology. It is fair to say, that CA's perspective and concepts treated in this chapter is aimed principally at providing a foundation for data analysis in the subsequent chapter. Section 5 mostly considers the context of the research and the approach to data collection. In the final section in this chapter, ethical issues are taken into account.

### **3.1. Research Questions**

Studies in micro contexts or modes have increased noticeably during the last decades. Recall

from Chapter two, previous studies have concerned themselves primarily with ESL classrooms, relatively less attention has been given to EFL classrooms, especially with regard to Chinese EFL classrooms. Therefore, the current study is conducted in the context of EFL classes in China, with the intent of looking into the micro contexts or modes in Chinese EFL classes, and at the same time examining the relationship between language use and teaching purposes in the modes. To this end, the current study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What kinds of modes can be found in Chinese EFL classes?
- 2) What is the relationship between pedagogic goals and interactional features in the modes?

Broadly described, classroom observation is well-suited to address the first research question. By observing the videotapes of teacher-learner interactions to detect various types of modes in Chinese EFL classes. It should be mentioned that the research question one serves as the primary building block for the research question two. In other words, the second research question proposed predicated on the first one. Conversation analytic approach is used to answer the research question two. Analyzing the transcripts fairly and objectively. In the analysis focusing in particular on evaluating language use (teacher talk) in relation to the teachers' stated pedagogic goals. In later sections, the research methods of the study will be discussed in much depth.

### **3.2. Classroom Observation Method**

In this study, class observation shown to be the best for tackling the first research question; through hours' observing to identify the modes in Chinese EFL classes. To put it at its most basic, classroom observation as a research approach, which is to watch what is actually going on during teaching and learning. In particular, classroom observation method can be twofold: one is quantitative observation, and the other one is qualitative observation (Croll 1986; Foster 1996; Wragg 2002). To explain, the principal focus of quantitative approach might be on the counting and recording of events (Wragg 2002). That is to say, the results of such kind of observations are typically expressed in numerical terms as percentages or averages that in turn may lay the foundation for statistical analyses (Croll 1986). In contrast with quantitative approach, qualitative method emphasizes on a more detailed analysis of classroom behavior, and the results of such observations are normally described by means of field-notes and narrative accounts (Croll 1986). For the purpose of the present study, investigating modes in Chinese EFL classes, as mentioned above. The latter one, qualitative approach was adopted in the study to record the observation factually, accurately and thoroughly. Additionally, the study adopted an 'overt observation', which means the people in the situation are aware that they are being studied (Patton 2002: 269).

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