

The role of contexts of use in the study of learner language

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This paper will explore the application of the notion of 'context of use' of linguistic forms in relation to learning a second language. By 'context of use' I mean the total environment in which a particular linguistic form (word, syntactic structure, or discourse structure) is appropriate. This includes not only Halliday's "Context of situation", which is usually taken as global to a text as a whole, but also includes the referential context: the situation that the utterance is expressing.

Over the last few years, I have been studying the process of acquisition of syntactic features in learners of English using a syntactically parsed corpus of learner English from Spanish university students, graded by proficiency levels (e.g., O'Donnell 2013, 2015). One point that I have learnt from these studies is that one needs to distinguish two steps of the second language acquisition process: learning *how* to produce a form (syntactic competence) and learning *when* to produce the form (functional competence). In most cases, learners quickly learn how to produce a form, but then spend years mastering exactly in what contexts the given form should appropriately be used.

To give an example, learners of English from any L1 background have little trouble learning how to produce a syntactically correct noun phrase using a definite article such as *the cats*. However, they then spend years working out in which referential contexts the article is required or not. Similarly, most European languages have a constructed present perfect structure (*I have eaten*), and learners from these mother tongues can produce the English form without much trouble. However, the contexts of use of the present perfect differ subtly from language to language, and thus the learner is faced with the task of learning the contexts where the form is appropriate, expanding into new contexts of use not used by the mother tongue, or contracting away from some of the contexts used by the mother tongue.

In our prior study of errors made by Spanish learners of English (MacDonald et al, 2011), where we classified over 16,000 errors, we did not distinguish between formal and functional errors. For instance, *determiner-noun-agreement* errors (a formal error) were grouped under the same super-category with *article-present-not-required* errors (most of which are context-of-use errors). Also, lexical form errors (spelling errors, malformation errors) and lexical use errors (word-choice errors) were both together under vocabulary errors.

As a result of the insight that form and context of use errors present very different problems for language learners, we are reconfiguring our language studies with this form-function division as central to our error coding, and are placing more emphasis on identifying exactly which contexts of use are critical for each L1-L2 pair. In a sense, we are returning to the basic premises of Contrastive Analysis (Lado 1957), identifying the contexts of use of each syntactic form in the mother tongue and in English, and identifying the mismatches, which

are then potentially critical problems for the learners. For instance, in relation to the use of the present-perfect by Spanish learners of English, some of the relevant contexts of use are shown below. (Note: usage of this form in Latin America varies from that in Spain). One would expect a higher number of errors in the two contexts of use which result in different realisations for the two languages (marked by an "X").

	Spanish	English	
Same day past with no implied effect on present	At 5pm: He desayunado esta mañana	At 5pm: (I ate breakfast this morning)	X
Past happening with effect on present	Me he roto el brazo y no puedo trabajar	I've broken my arm and I cannot work	Past happening with effect on present
Achievements in still open period	Este año ya hemos construido 20 casas	We have build 20 houses so far this year	Achievements in still open period
Life achievements	He vivido en cinco países distintos	I have lived in five different countries	Life achievements
X	(Es la primera vez que como sushi)	This is the first time that I've eaten sushi	Specifying first time

For related work, see Ntouvis (2016) who explores the degree of misuse of tense-aspect combinations by EFL students, but this work does not identify in which contexts of use the errors are occurring.

One critique of Contrastive Analysis has been that not all inter-lingual differences lead to problems for the learner. However, our study is driven by our error analysis: we have identified those linguistic features which produce the most errors, and we then, within each of these areas, explore the reasons behind each error, identifying the contexts of use that are problematic for the learner. Firstly, we have identified the 10 most critical (frequent) error types in our corpus, and for each of these types, we are going through the errors, tagging them with more delicate features identifying the contexts of use in which the error is made. In this way, we are identifying the critical contexts of use in which most of these errors occur. Pedagogically speaking, our goal then becomes to make our learners aware of these problematic contexts of use. For instance, after re-coding our *article-present-not-required* errors, it became clear that the most frequent context for these errors related to generic reference (in particular, reference to generic abstract entities, and generic plural reference), and we have since put teaching material in place to make students aware of these two problematic contexts.

This paper will firstly present ideas behind using context of use in the exploration of the development of learner English. The talk will then outline the

results we have uncovered in relation to four studies either completed or in progress :

- *Article inclusion*: Dotti and O'Donnell (2012) examined those errors where articles were wrongly included in a noun phrase, coding more delicately in terms of the referential context, showing that the vast majority of errors involve generic plurals, generic abstract nouns, and percentages.
- *Quantification*: O'Donnell (2015) explored the uses of nominal quantification in the learner corpus, exploring which referential contexts produce most problems for the learners (e.g., 'some' should not be used in negated clauses).
- *Prepositions*: Gonzalez Díaz (in prep.) is examining cases of wrong preposition selection by Spanish learners of English, coding them in terms of the source preposition (back-translating the English into Spanish), to identify which Spanish prepositions prove the most problematic in translation into English. Later work will look more concretely at which more specific referential contexts produce these problems (e.g., Spanish "en" can be translated as "in", "on", "by", "at" and "into" amongst others, and she believes that provision of the explicit contexts where each alternative is appropriate will help the learners).
- *Verb phrase errors*: Flores (in prep.) is studying to what degree errors in the verb phrase are errors of form (e.g., *I have shoot*) compared to context of use errors (e.g., use of present perfect where not appropriate).

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