Facilitating Context Awareness in Language Learning

By Mandy Hobmeier

International student populations are frequently labeled "language learners", as a point of differentiation from "native speakers" or first language speakers. However, when joining any new discourse community, for example, college, and more specifically, college composition as a discipline, **all student populations are language learners. Context is key**. Even as instructors and researchers, we observe how much rhetorical situations and audience impact language comprehension and subsequent acquisition.

Thus, I have developed a classroom approach that aims to address this understanding. **As readers, thinkers, writers, and speakers, students are encouraged to become "context investigators."** This role empowers students to study language in context, an important skill for all students, and multilingual students in particular, who can lack cultural knowledge and can be underserved by reliance on limited tools such as translators, dictionaries, and thesauruses. **Below are a few suggestions as to how instructors can support students' language learning** in the classroom and cultivate helpful tools and strategies students can use in a variety of academic and professional contexts.

- **When assigning readings, encourage students to "read around" the reading.** This means prior to beginning the reading, looking into the author, date, and publisher as a start. Along with this initial step, students are introduced to the concept of the "Big 4": Situation, Audience, Purpose, Claim. These tools promote reading for context and also help students to think about their own ethos building and audience awareness in their own writing.

- **Encourage translation as a learning tool, rather than a static process.** "Translation" can have a very narrow meaning for students. To expand their thinking of contextual translation (beyond simply linguistic), we engage activities where students "translate" their writing into various genres, taking into account the limitations and expectations of each. For example, having students translate their claim into a 140 character Tweet, or reimagining their argument for a non-American audience, or even a specific demographic, like elementary school students. The act of translation helps them concretize their ideas and elevate their understanding of context through genre and audience.

- **Utilize online corpora as a research tool.** A corpus is a collection of written texts, and in recent years, computational linguistics has developed as a field to provide many useful online databases that are searchable and useable for research and personal use. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/) is comprised of billions of words tagged by context markers (spoken, academic, literature, etc.), year, and part of speech. As a tool, it can be searched to identify collocations, frequency of usage, commonality by context, along with many other useful functions that allow students to observe and study "language in context". This tool can be used in tandem with other resources like dictionaries to help students evolve their understanding of language and writing to be inclusive of context awareness.

MORE HELPFUL ONLINE RESOURCES

- The Purdue OWL (http://www.owl.purdue.edu)
- English Grammar Guide (edufind.com)
- Study Guides and Strategies (studygs.net)