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# The Role of Communication Context, Corpus-Based Grammar, and Scaffolded Interaction in ESL/EFL Instruction

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**Catherine Smith, PhD**

**Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics**

Department of English  
Troy University  
Troy, Alabama, USA

**Norman L. Butler**

**Doctor of Humanities Degree in Pedagogy**

Lecturer in English  
Department of Foreign Languages  
AGH University of Science and Technology  
Cracow, Poland

**Kimberly Grantham Griffith, PhD**

**Associate Professor**

Department of Professional Pedagogy  
College of Education and Human Services  
Lamar University  
Beaumont, Texas

**William Allan Kritsonis, PhD**

**Professor**

PhD Program in Educational Leadership  
Prairie View A&M University  
Member of the Texas A&M University System  
Distinguished Alumnus (2004)  
Central Washington University  
College of Education and Professional Studies  
Visiting Lecturer (2005)  
Oxford Round Table

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## ABSTRACT

**This article deals with modelling and specificity in K-12 teacher education to describe an approach in ESL/EFL teaching which is aimed at assisting teachers bridge the gap between declarative and procedural knowledge while addressing the complex requirements of their learners. It is concluded that descriptions of language variation across communication contexts, corpus-based descriptive grammar, and socio-cultural learning theory can be used to provide a specific map that bridges pedagogical theory and language classroom practice and social institution.**

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### Introduction

Accessing [information] is one thing, but then making a decision about what you're going to do with that information is another. I have tons of knowledge [...], but deciding what you actually want to do with it and how it fits into what you see with your students or in this specific class and what they particularly need is another thing. (Violet, ESL/Bilingual Education district coordinator; quoted in Dahlman 2006)

I saw [the teaching strategy modeled]. It wasn't just in text. Someone modeling it to me, this is what it's supposed to look like. It might not go exactly that way but this is a general sort of feeling about how it should happen. Whereas when you're just reading something in a text, it just doesn't sink in. (Helene, language volunteer in primary/secondary classrooms; quoted in Dahlman 2006)

In my experience, I've learned stuff and I've thought about it, everything that we've learned in class but then I don't use it for a really long time and then I forget about it ... there's so much other information coming in at the same time that it's hard to remember the stuff that was there from before. (Beryl, ESL tutor/instructor; quoted in Dahlman 2006)

The quotes above come from three pre-service teachers enrolled in a U.S. program for K-12 teaching licensure in ESL/foreign language. While completing their program, these post-baccalaureate students participated in a teacher cognition study conducted by Dr. Anne Dahlman (2006). The participants' statements about their pre-service teaching reflect challenges that K-12 teachers face as they learn how to connect pedagogical theory to classroom practice.

Dahlman's (2006) study yields three themes about K-12 teacher preparation which motivate this article: a) a discrepancy between declarative knowledge (pedagogical theory) and procedural knowledge (ability to apply theory to practice); b) complexity from classroom context variables<sup>1</sup>; and c) a lack of modeling and specificity in K-12 teacher education. This article

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<sup>1</sup> Classroom context variables includes novice teachers' emotional reactions to their students' needs, specifically the teachers' feelings of conflict which arise as a result of uncertainty about how a teaching strategy will affect their students' well-being and learning development.

draws on the last theme, modeling and specificity, to describe an approach to ESL/EFL teaching aimed at helping teacher's bridge the gap between declarative and procedural knowledge while addressing the complex needs of their students. Specifically, the approach integrates communication context, corpus-based descriptive grammar, and scaffolded language learning activities to support language development. Additionally, this article illustrates how current research in corpus linguistics and discourse analysis provides specific language models that complement abstract learning theories in K-12 teacher preparation.

### **The Role of Context, Grammar, and Scaffolding**

*Communication Context.* An understanding of how language varies across communication contexts plays an important role in successful language learning. Many language teachers conceptualize language as a set of systems (i.e., sounds, vocabulary, and grammar). However, they may not conceptualize language as a social event (i.e., topic, speaker roles, purpose's, medium). Thus, they may not understand that the language systems (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) vary significantly according to communication context variables (e.g., speaker role, communication purpose), or that language instruction should be sensitive to this variation in order to be accurate and effective. Language input (e.g., dialogs, readings) should portray the natural language variation that exists as a result of communication context. Likewise, language practice activities should offer opportunities to practice language variation. This helps learners develop a language repertoire that is robust enough to support successful communication across a variety of communication contexts (e.g., casual conversation, academic writing).

*Corpus-Based Descriptive Grammar.* A corpus-based descriptive grammar is an essential tool in providing grammar instruction that is representative of natural language use and language variation across communication contexts. Corpus-based descriptive grammar is a new innovation in ESL/EFL teaching that has been available only since the publication of the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al 1999). This grammar is based on an empirically collected language data set of over 40 million words that represents a balanced corpus of spoken and written texts in both American and British English. Computer technology was used to analyze the texts to describe how English is actually used by native speakers across communication contexts. Using frequency counts and several thousand authentic examples of language use, the *Longman Grammar* describes not only what is possible in English but what is most likely in different communication contexts. Most current ESL/EFL instruction relies on traditional grammar, which presents one single and narrowly defined view of English as a fixed, unchanging system. Also, traditional grammar inappropriately imposes Latin grammatical categories to describe English, which is a Germanic language. Using a corpus-based descriptive grammar equips ESL/EFL teachers with accurate information on English structural patterns and language functions at the word, phrase, clause, and discourse level, which can be used in both language instruction and assessment. Also, since corpus-based descriptive grammar describes how English is actually used, it shows teachers what is common in English, what is possible in, English, and what is changing in the language system. Descriptive grammar is not based on a theory, and it is usually easy to teach and learn, but student teachers are often surprised to see the extent to which the language system is in a state of change and fluctuation.

*Scaffolded Language Learning Activities.* Understanding how to use communication context and descriptive grammar within a sociocultural theoretical framework forms a third component of effective ESL/EFL teaching. The basic premise of sociocultural theory is that learning occurs through social interaction between a novice and a more knowledgeable person (Vygotsky 1978). “Sociocultural theory views speaking and thinking as tightly interwoven. Speaking (and writing) mediate thinking, which means that people can gain control over their mental processes as a consequence of internalizing what others say to them and what they say to others” (Lightbown and Spada 2006: 47). More recent development of sociocultural theory is that learning can occur through interaction not only with a more knowledgeable person but with other novices and properly designed materials (i.e., input) as well.

In addition to the basic premise that interaction (speaking/writing) is the origin of learning is the notion that scaffolding also plays an essential role in language curriculum and materials design. Many teachers understand the importance of repetition in language learning, but scaffolding moves beyond this. Scaffolding has been defined in several ways (e.g., providing missing vocabulary, providing missing parts of sentences). Here, scaffolding is defined in terms of language learning activities that apply three main categories of standards to language input/output activities (based on Zukowski/Faust et al 1996): a) controlled exposure to contextualized language building blocks (i.e., semantically related vocabulary sets and discourse related clause or phrase sets); b) sequenced language practice from word level to discourse level; and c) integrated language skills practice from receptive skills (i.e., reading, listening) to productive skills (i.e., speaking, writing). These standards for language materials design move learners step-by-step from word-level communication to discourse-level communication, and empower learners with language tools and communication strategies.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Together, descriptions of language variation across communication contexts, corpus-based descriptive grammar, and socio-cultural learning theory can be used to provide a specific map that bridges pedagogical theory and language classroom practice. The specific standards can be used to develop and organize language materials or curriculum for diverse learning scenarios. They provide concrete and accurate models of authentic language use and sequenced input/output activities that move learners from word-level communication to discourse-level communication. When combined with themes and topics that are of interest to students, these components enable learners to perform at a more advanced level than they would with traditional language learning activities.

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