Examining Validity of Explicit Contextual Clues in Oral Tasks

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Introduction

• Authentic tasks should correspond to the TLU domain.
• Genuine texts may not elicit relevant speech for the TLU domain (Bachman & Palmer, 1996)
• Speech output depends on test-takers' input processing and task interactiveness (Lewkowicz, 2000)
• Task frameworks encompassing purpose, interactivity and context may improve task interactiveness (Douglas, 2000; Fulcher, 2000)
Context

- Context informs test-takers about the TLU domain
- Context is constructed by test-takers

**Contextual cues**

- setting
- participants
- purpose
- content
- language functions
Present study

Research questions:
1. Do participants perform better when they have explicit contextual cues in the task?
2. Is the effect on performance related to proficiency?
3. Does explicit context presence influence participants’ perceptions of the task?

Participants
- UACS students (N=60; F=42; M=18)
- High (N=28) and Low (N=32) proficiency

Inter-rater reliability (r=.75)

Materials
- Two CNC and two A/D tasks--each with and without contextual clues--total of eight tasks
- A survey questionnaire
Example of a task with explicit context

At the student organization meeting, you were presented with the proposal that your university should offer online classes in addition to traditional, classroom-based classes. The organization needs to decide whether to support the proposal, so the other members have asked you whether you agree or disagree with it. In your response, state whether you agree or disagree and explain why.

• **Setting:** student organization meeting
• **Participants:** organization members
• **Purpose:** to decide whether to support the proposal
• **Content:** online classes
• **Language:** express opinion.
Design

General linear model

• Dependent variable: score
• Within-subjects variable: context (present or absent)
• Between-subjects variables: proficiency (high or low); form (1-8)

Descriptive statistics was used for survey data analysis.
RQ1: Do participants perform better when they have explicit contextual cues in the task?

RQ 2: Is the effect on performance related to proficiency?

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<th>Source</th>
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<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
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### Between-Subjects Effects

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Proficiency level by context
Research question 3:
Does explicit context presence influence participants’ perceptions of the task?

What task do you think best reflects real life?
Context vs. No Context Comparison: Interesting
Context vs. No Context Comparison: Clear Topic

Bar Chart

- **Context**: not explicit, explicit

<table>
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<tr>
<td>No opinion</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Context vs. No Context Comparison: Clear Context
Context vs. No Context Comparison: Real-life

Bar Chart

- **Count**
  - **SA**: High count
  - **A**: Moderate count
  - **No opinion**: Low count
  - **D**: Low count
  - **SD**: Low count

- **Real-life task**
  - **context**: not explicit, explicit
Discourse Characteristics

• Discourse differences between context and no context task versions couldn’t be identified.
• Participants rarely included any of the contextual information in their responses.
• Highly proficient students recognized the context referring to it hypothetically at the beginning of their response:
  – “If my friend asked me...”
  – “If I should choose between...”
Discussion

• The immediate testing context preceded the hypothetical context established in the task.
• Participants focused on content/topic rather than context when they prepared their answers.
• Participants found more face valid the tasks that deal with a topic relevant to their life rather than those with explicit context.
Next Steps

• Look into whether the computer-based format influences participants’ interaction with the task context.

• Perform a focused corpus analysis of the responses to see whether there are significant differences in discourse characteristics (e.g., analyze uses of pronouns, modals, stance).

• Analyze the interaction between task type and context.
Conclusions

• Contextual clues are important because they provide more information about the TLU domain.
• However, they don’t seem to influence performance, and test-takers’ may not have the same perception of the context.