

Book Reviews

Understanding Language Classroom Contexts: The Starting Point for Change*

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Wedell, M., & Malderez, A. (2013). *Understanding Language Classroom Contexts: The Starting Point for Change*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

238 pages

ISBN: PB: 9781441133076

HB: 9781441198372

ePUB: 9781441102454

ePDF: 9781441160591

Professors Martin Wedell and Angi Malderez (University of Leeds, United Kingdom) are known for their works in fields such as planning, designing and implementing programmes, evaluation, and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) teacher education. Their sustained work in examining factors influencing the adaptation of global changes to fit local contexts is also evidenced in the book they published in 2013, with the purpose of providing frameworks for understanding language classrooms so that changes can be the result of informed decisions.

The authors start by asserting that “the book explores and illustrates how what happens in a language classroom is both influenced by and an influence on the contexts in which it is situated” (Wedell & Malderez, 2013, p. 1). In view of this position, the book gathers general principles concerning education and links them to the particularities of languages classrooms, with special emphasis on ELT (English Language Teaching) and TESOL. In doing so, references are made throughout its contents to illustrate what happens in different parts of the world and how changes implemented or expected are connected to an array of circumstances which cannot always be modified by teachers’ decisions and actions.

* How to cite this review (APA 6th ed.):

Cárdenas, M. L. (2015). Review of the book *Understanding language classroom contexts: The starting point for change*, by M. Wedell & A. Malderez. *HOW*, 22(2), 135-138.

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The book comprises ten chapters along which we get acquainted with definitions, discussions, contrasts, common assumptions, and debatable variables that have a bearing on our understanding of change as well as on the possibilities different agents can have to make it possible in given educational settings. They are: 1) Components of contexts, 2) Exploring culture, 3) Language and languages in education, 4) From cultures to methods, 5) From methods to approaches, 6) Teachers as learners: As part of and creators of their contexts, 7) Teachers and learners: As “products” of their context, 8) Schools and classrooms: Physical and cultural contexts, 9) Planning and implementing classroom change, and 10) Conclusions: On understanding language classroom contexts.

Those chapters take us from a framework to start describing the visible and invisible features of a context, address macro and micro scenarios, connect the components of contexts, and close with practical tasks. Rather than providing the answers to common concerns we face when planning, implementing or evaluating change, the book is full of questions and ideas to help the reader think about how the complexity of educational issues might affect change as well as our own contexts. Interestingly, and in tune with the authors’ commitment to avoid recipes and to foster awareness and a critical view, questions are used—to my understanding—following the Socratic Method. This makes the reading interactive and serves as a means to explain, compare, show controversial matters, and suggest ideas for reading follow-up.

The reader can also find several vignettes that appear as descriptions of situations, projects or reflections to illustrate the matters under discussion. Besides, chapters end up with tasks that invite both looking back at their contents and moving forward by focusing on our classroom realities. Perhaps teacher educators would expect more tasks sparingly presented along the chapters so that they could be used as course materials. However, the vignettes, tasks, and the mini-projects can work for that purpose.

Wedell and Malderez’ examination of language classroom contexts also goes along with a study conducted by Sharkey (2004) with elementary ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) teachers. She found that teachers’ knowledge of their context was the filter through which all curriculum choices and project prospects were evaluated. Teachers’ knowledge can have a bearing in three ways, namely: 1) As a way to establish trust and legitimacy; 2) As a way of articulating needs and concerns regarding projects; and 3) As a way of detecting and critiquing the political aspects that impact our work.

We find in Wedell and Malderez’ book a source that fits the objectives of teacher educators, undergraduate and postgraduate TESOL/ELT, applied linguistics, language teacher education or educational leadership and management programmes, and educational change managers. In all these fields we are compelled to accomplish and uphold consistency. In education in general, and in the curriculum in particular, policy statements leading to change need to care for

pragmatic conditions during planning, implementation, and evaluation. Hence, we need the active engagement and mutual aid of different participants. To this end, Henderson and Hawthorne (2000) point out that collaboration means sharing knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, and practices. It is precisely through collaborative engagement that change can take place and that a deeper examination of its complexity can be carried out.

The authors remark that “the people in any classroom are members of one or more cultures. These affect their beliefs and behaviours, thus creating a unique classroom culture (even if its ‘uniqueness’ is not always visible)” (Wedell & Malderez, 2013, p. 57). Their conception of ‘uniqueness’ is present in the whole book, and thus gives due value to the role of teacher knowledge and voice. As claimed at conferences as well as in scholarly publications, teacher knowledge and voice are not always taken into consideration in discourse used by policy makers to mandate change (see, for example, the claims of the following Colombian scholars: González, 2007; Guerrero, 2009; Cárdenas, 2010; Quintero, 2012; Fandiño, 2012; Correa & Usma, 2013). “As for change, it relates to the perspectives from which educators see their own implementation and the duration of their innovations. [...] Policies alone do not produce innovation. This is when language teachers need to show themselves as able to question and to transform practices, beliefs and habits, even in situations of difficulty” (Quintero, 2012, p. 2). Consequently, “teachers need to take part in the decision-making of English language teaching and learning [...] to take control as activists of the multidimensional characteristic of innovation” (Quintero, 2012, p. 3). These arguments, together with the epistemological and pedagogical frameworks presented by Wedell and Malderez, comprise steering forces for our understanding of change and, hopefully, for those interested in reading their book in depth.

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