



The Practice of Contextualizing English Language Activities to Enhance Students’ Learning: The Case of Technology Villages at Hawassa University

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Abstract

The primary objective of this research was to investigate how English language teachers contextualize English language activities to align with their students' real-life situations. The study sought to answer key questions about how classroom teachers adapt activities from English language textbooks to their students' contexts and identify the factors hindering such contextualization. To achieve these objectives and address the research questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed. Data were collected from English language teachers and their students using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings revealed that teachers' practices in contextualizing activities were weak. Teachers often used textbook activities without modifications, did not prepare diverse instructional materials, and failed to employ varied instructional strategies in their lessons. Additionally, student grouping methods were problematic, and teachers provided insufficient and unvaried time for students to complete activities. Teachers cited several challenges hindering their ability to contextualize activities effectively, including time constraints, lack of knowledge, large class sizes, and insufficient professional support. Based on these findings, recommendations for improvement were proposed.

Key terms- *contextualization, contextualized instruction, differentiated instruction*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

The primary goal of classroom instruction is to facilitate student learning effectively. This objective is achieved when teachers make lessons accessible and relevant to their students. To ensure accessibility, teachers must plan their instruction based on students' backgrounds. Tailoring lessons in this way enables teachers to select activities that are both relevant and engaging. Activities rooted in the backgrounds and contexts of learners not only make learning meaningful but also help students construct the desired knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Therefore, teachers must create an environment where students engage with activities that are meaningful, enthusiastic, and contextualized.

One widely used approach in modern language classrooms is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which aims to enhance students' fluency and accuracy (Bachman, 1990; Mitchell, 1994). CLT emphasizes meaningful interaction, shifting the focus from strict accuracy to communication. Teachers design activities that foster meaningful exchanges, providing students with opportunities to negotiate

meaning and develop their communicative abilities (Richards, 2005). This approach inherently aligns with contextualized teaching by encouraging the use of authentic, real-world scenarios.

Education is inherently situational. Students do not acquire isolated facts and theories in an abstract vacuum; rather, they learn in connection with their prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Vygotsky (1978) argues that new learning builds upon existing knowledge, underscoring the importance of linking instruction to students' real-life contexts. Contextualized teaching achieves this by connecting classroom activities to students' cultures and interests, incorporating locally relevant materials and situations (Spring, 2010; Perin, 2011). For example, lessons that begin with familiar community scenarios or use local resources capture students' attention and foster active engagement.

Theoretical frameworks further emphasize the importance of contextualization. Constructivist educational theory posits that learners continuously build understanding through active engagement and experience (Baker et al., 2009). Constructivists

advocate for learning environments that prioritize experimentation, practical problem-solving, and real-world applications (Hare, 2010). This shift from traditional authoritarian teaching to interactive, contextualized instruction helps prepare students for future challenges. Additionally, motivational theory highlights the role of perceived value and self-efficacy in fostering engagement. Predmore (2005) notes that, contextualized teaching enhances interest and motivation by demonstrating the real-world relevance of lessons, encouraging students to connect their learning with personal experiences.

A practical extension of these principles is Problem-Centered Learning, which requires students to collaborate and solve real-life problems. By engaging in meaningful problem-solving exercises, students develop critical thinking, collaboration, and practical skills, recognizing the real-world utility of their learning.

While textbooks provide structured content, they often fail to cater to the diverse needs of students across different cultural and situational contexts. Teachers must adapt textbook activities to ensure relevance and

accessibility (Brown, 2002). Contextualized instruction involves modifying activities to reflect students' lives and local environments, fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing learning outcomes. Using relatable materials and examples helps students connect with the content, increasing motivation, engagement, and academic success (Mam et al., 2017; Rivet & Krajcik, 2008; Reyes et al., 2019).

Research confirms the benefits of contextualized activities, including improved participation, collaboration, and critical thinking. Teaching materials that are not adapted to align with students' cultural backgrounds or contexts can feel detached and irrelevant, diminishing motivation and engagement (Brown, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Littlewood, 2014; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Kumaravadivelu (2003) emphasizes that aligning materials with students' lived experiences makes learning more meaningful and effective, while Brown (2009) warns that generic lessons reduce students' willingness to participate, hindering skill acquisition. Similarly, Littlewood (2014) highlights the importance of tasks that reflect real-world scenarios,

bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Richards and Rodgers (2014) summarize that effective teaching practices involve adapting and modifying standard materials to better meet students' diverse needs and connect learning to real-world applications. Tailoring materials to students' cultural backgrounds, interests, and aspirations makes lessons more engaging and helps learners recognize the practical value of their education.

Building on these principles, this research explores how teachers in the technology villages of Hawassa University contextualize their teaching activities to align with their students' real-life contexts. By examining these practices, the study seeks to contribute to the growing understanding of contextualized instruction and its impact on student learning outcomes.

1.2.Statement of the problem

The global demand for English language proficiency has grown significantly due to its widespread use across various sectors such as education, diplomacy, politics, and economics. In Ethiopia, English has been a

core part of the education system since the inception of modern schooling (Abebe, 2012). Its importance is further underscored by its role in fostering international engagement and economic advancement (Amlaku, 2010). In recognition of this, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education has prioritized English language education, introducing it as a subject from grade one onward. English language textbooks are developed for each grade level and serve as primary resources in classrooms.

The primary goal of teaching and learning is to enable students to achieve meaningful and practical learning outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that instructional activities which are engaging, meaningful, and contextualized yield better learning outcomes than those that rely on rote memorization (Baker et al., 2009; Bond, 2004; Predmore, 2005). Contextualized instruction, which connects teaching materials to students' real-world experiences, encourages active engagement and fosters experiential learning. This approach helps students construct knowledge, develop skills, and apply what they learn in practical, real-life situations.

While the theoretical and empirical benefits of contextualized teaching are well-established, there is limited research on its application in English language instruction in Ethiopia. In particular, little is known about how teachers in the technology villages of Hawassa University contextualize English language activities to align with their students' real-life contexts. Given the increasing demand for English language skills and the critical role of effective teaching practices, this gap presents a significant challenge to improving student engagement and learning outcomes.

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the practices of English language teachers in the technology villages of Hawassa University. Specifically, it investigates how these teachers adapt and contextualize instructional activities to enhance learning and make lessons more relevant to their students' lives and future aspirations.

Research Questions:

1. How do teachers contextualize classroom activities to align with their students' contexts when teaching English?

2. What factors hinder teachers from contextualizing activities effectively?

1.3.Objectives of the research

Major Objective

The primary objective of this research was to investigate the practices of English language teachers in contextualizing language activities to their students' real-life situations.

Specific Objectives

- To examine the practices of classroom teachers in contextualizing activities in English language teaching.
- To identify the factors that impede teachers from contextualizing activities effectively.

1.4.Significance of the study

The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights and practical implications for various stakeholders:

Teacher Education Programs: The study offers a clear understanding of teachers' practices in contextualizing classroom activities, enabling teacher education programs to review and improve their training curricula.

Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations: The research provides first-

hand information on teachers' classroom practices, supporting initiatives to enhance the quality of English language teaching.

Teachers: The study raises awareness among teachers about their current practices, encouraging them to improve their methods in the future.

Curriculum Developers: The findings inform the development of alternative activities during textbook preparation and provide suggestions for presenting activities effectively in classrooms, particularly in teacher guides.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research method and design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Creswell et al. (2003) define a mixed-methods study as "a study that involves the collection or analysis of both quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study, where the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, assigned a priority, and integrated at one or more stages in the research process" (p. 212). This approach emphasizes that combining quantitative and qualitative data provides a more

comprehensive understanding of research problems than either method alone (Cohen et al., 2018).

2.2. Population of the Study

The research was conducted in five selected primary schools: Tabor, Ethiopia Tikdem, Alamura, Haik, and Gebeya Dar. The study population comprised teachers from these schools and their students.

2.3. Sample and Sampling

Respondents for the quantitative data were selected randomly, while respondents for qualitative data were chosen based on their willingness to participate. Five teachers from each school were randomly selected, resulting in a total of twenty-five teachers completing the questionnaire. From this group, two teachers per school were selected for semi-structured interviews, totaling ten participants.

Similarly, ten students were randomly selected from the classrooms of the sample teachers in each school. Consequently, fifty students per school participated, amounting to a total of 250 students who completed the questionnaire and participated in focus group discussions.

2.4.Sources of Data

Data for the research were collected from teachers, students, and teachers' lesson plans. Students were asked about their teachers' efforts to contextualize English language activities to real-life situations, how they felt about contextualized activities, and their experiences with activities presented directly from textbooks. Teachers were queried on their methods of adapting activities to fit their students' contexts. Additionally, textbooks and lesson plans were analyzed to understand how activities were designed and adapted to students' needs.

2.5. Instruments for Data Collection

Quantitative Data was gathered through a questionnaire utilizing a five-point Likert scale (5: Strongly Agree, 4: Agree, 3: Undecided, 2: Disagree, 1: Strongly Disagree) to assess teachers' and students' perspectives on contextualizing activities.

Qualitative Data was collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis:

- Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with teachers to validate the responses from the questionnaire.
- Focus Group Discussions: Held with students to further substantiate their responses from the questionnaire.
- Classroom Observations: Observed teachers' actual classroom practices to triangulate the data from both teachers and students.
- Document Analysis: Analyzed textbooks and teachers' lesson plans to explore how activities were adapted.

2.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including the calculation of means and percentages from the Likert scale responses. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to provide deeper insights into the research questions.

2.7. Pilot Test

A pilot study was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire items for quantitative data. The results showed a strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.844.

3. Data presentation and analysis

Table 1. Teachers' responses on their practice of contextualization

No	Contextualization practices		Rating scales					Total
			5	4	3	2	1	
1	I use activities in the textbooks as they are	No.	6	13	2	2	2	25
		%	24	52	8	8	8	100
2	I adapt the activities in the textbooks into contexts of my students	No.	-	2	3	13	7	25
		%	-	8	12	52	28	100
3	I prepare additional activities based on the background of their students	No.	4	4	1	12	4	25
		%	16	16	4	48	16	100
4	I give a chance for students to discuss activities in a group	No.	-	4	1	15	5	25
		%	-	16	4	60	20	100
5	I allow the students to express their ideas freely	No.	2	2	2	13	6	25
		%	8	8	8	52	24	100
6	I prepare instructional materials based on the real-life of students	No.	3	4	2	11	5	25
		%	12	16	8	44	20	100
7	I use various instructional strategies to facilitate the learning of students	No.	-	4	1	15	5	25
		%	-	16	4	60	20	100
8	I modify my activities if students engagement is low	No.	-	3	2	14	6	25
		%	-	12	8	56	24	100

Table 2. Students' responses on their teachers' contextualization of activities

No.	Contextualization practices		Rating scales					Total
			5	4	3	2	1	
1	Teachers adapt the activities in the textbooks into contexts of their students	No.	2	18	20	140	70	250
		%	0.8	7.2	8	56	28	100
2	Teachers use activities in the textbooks as they are	No.	60	130	20	20	20	25
		%	24	52	8	8	8	100
3	Teachers design additional activities based on the background of their students	No.	40	40	10	120	40	25
		%	16	16	4	48	16	100
4	Teachers give chance for students to discuss activities in a group	No.	10	30	10	150	50	250
		%	4	12	4	60	20	100
5	Teachers allow the students to express their ideas freely	No.	10	30	10	135	65	250
		%	4	12	4	54	26	100
6	Teachers prepare instructional materials based on the real-life of students	No.	25	45	15	115	50	250
		%	10	18	6	46	20	100
7	Teachers use various instructional strategies to facilitate the learning of students	No.	-	40	10	151	49	250
		%	-	16	4	60.4	19.6	100
8	Teachers modify their activities if students engagement is low	No.	5	30	20	135	60	250
		%	2	12	8	54	24	100

3.1. Teachers' practice of contextualizing classroom activities

The data in Table 1 illustrates teachers' responses regarding their practices of contextualizing classroom activities. Responses to questions 1 and 2 revealed that most teachers used textbook activities

without modification. A majority (52%) agreed that they were not contextualizing activities, while 24% strongly agreed. Only 8% strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement. Similarly, for the question on adapting textbook activities, 52% disagreed, and 28% strongly disagreed, indicating that contextualization was not commonly practiced. The responses confirmed that teachers relied heavily on activities as designed by textbook developers without modification to suit students' backgrounds.

An analysis of teachers' lesson plans corroborated these findings. Teachers planned their lessons using textbook activities without designing or modifying them. Lesson plans often referenced textbook page and activity numbers, indicating that activities were used as-is.

Classroom observations further supported these findings. Teachers instructed students to open their textbooks and work on activities with minimal explanation or adaptation. Students often struggled to engage with these activities. No attempts to modify or adapt activities to students' levels or contexts were observed.

When asked about their adaptation practices, teachers affirmed their questionnaire

responses and the classroom observations. They cited a lack of time as the primary reason for not contextualizing activities. Teachers reported teaching six periods daily, five days a week, leaving no time for collaboration or lesson modification. Additionally, large class sizes (often exceeding 80 students) made it difficult to understand individual students' backgrounds or adjust lessons accordingly. Teachers also mentioned insufficient knowledge and professional support as barriers to effective contextualization.

3.2. Students' Perspectives

The students' responses aligned with those of the teachers. As shown in Table 2, most students reported that their teachers did not contextualize activities. During focus group discussions, students explained that their teachers primarily assigned textbook activities as classroom tasks or homework without modification. They noted that some activities felt unfamiliar or irrelevant, which hindered their classroom participation.

3.3. Group Discussions and Student Engagement

The goal of developing activities is to facilitate active engagement and

independent knowledge construction among students. This requires ample time, structured group discussions, and active teacher support. However, data revealed that teachers were not managing group discussions effectively or checking individual student participation. A significant portion of respondents, 48% of teachers and 60% of students, expressed dissatisfaction with the management of group discussions. Furthermore, 56% of teachers and 54% of students disagreed that student engagement was appraised or activities were amended based on engagement levels.

Classroom observations confirmed these issues. While students were assigned to pre-established groups (e.g., Groups 1-5), teachers did not evaluate the quality of group discussions or individual participation. Target language elements were not adequately assessed, and activities were not adjusted accordingly.

3.4. Instructional Media and Strategies

Using instructional media tailored to students' backgrounds is a key aspect of contextualization. However, teachers and students reported weak practices in this area.

About 44% of teachers and 46% of students disagreed that instructional media were utilized effectively. Only a small percentage (16% of teachers and 18% of students) agreed that instructional media were used to contextualize activities.

Observations indicated that teachers relied on textbook-provided pictures, charts, and photographs. Occasionally, teachers enlarged these materials for visibility but rarely created additional resources. Teachers cited a lack of raw materials and prepared content as major obstacles.

Regarding instructional strategies, 60% of teachers and 60.4% of students rated their use as weak. Teachers primarily employed explanation and question-and-answer methods, regardless of activity type. Lesson plan analyses and classroom observations confirmed a lack of diverse instructional strategies.

3.5. Factors Hindering Contextualization

During semi-structured interviews, teachers highlighted several challenges that negatively impacted their ability to contextualize activities:

Time Constraints: Heavy teaching workloads left little time for lesson modification or collaboration with colleagues.

Large Class Sizes: Managing large groups made it difficult to identify and address individual students' needs.

Insufficient Knowledge: Teachers lacked adequate training in contextualization techniques.

Lack of Professional Support: Limited opportunities for professional development and collaboration hindered progress.

4. Discussion, conclusions, recommendations

4.1. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant challenges in the contextualization of instructional activities by teachers, which are consistent with existing literature on the topic. Teachers' over-reliance on textbook-based activities, without adaptation to students' backgrounds, contributed to a lack of motivation and engagement, and hindered the development of practical skills. This aligns with research by Brown (2009) and Kumaravadivelu (2003), who emphasize that decontextualized materials often fail to

capture students' interest or connect to their real-life experiences, which negatively impacts their learning outcomes.

Empirical evidence supports the assertion that instructional activities lacking contextual relevance fail to engage students effectively. According to Mam et al. (2017), activities that are not tailored to the cultural or situational context of the students often lead to decreased motivation and participation. This study's findings echo that sentiment, where students struggled to relate to textbook activities, which often felt irrelevant to their lives. As Richards and Rodgers (2014) highlight, a lack of contextualization makes learning feel generic, reducing students' willingness to actively engage in the learning process.

This lack of engagement, as reported in this study, has been linked to poor academic outcomes. Research by Rivet and Krajcik (2008) found that students who engage in meaningful, contextualized activities are more likely to retain knowledge and apply it effectively in real-world contexts. In contrast, the absence of such contextualization results in passive learning environments where students struggle to

internalize or transfer their knowledge to practical situations (Littlewood, 2014).

The findings of this study also suggest that teachers did not adequately implement constructivist principles, which emphasize building on students' prior knowledge and providing opportunities for real-world problem-solving. This aligns with the work of Vygotsky (1978), who argues that learning should build on existing knowledge and be situated within students' real-world experiences. Despite the theoretical foundation of constructivism, this study finds that many teachers failed to understand or utilize students' preexisting knowledge, which limited the effectiveness of their instructional practices.

This finding is consistent with research by Hare (2010), which suggests that teachers often lack the necessary training to implement constructivist strategies effectively. As a result, teachers tend to rely on traditional, teacher-centered approaches that fail to engage students in active problem-solving or reflective discussions. The limited use of such methods in this study mirrors findings by Perin (2011), who reported that many teachers struggle to integrate real-world problems into their

teaching, thereby missing opportunities for meaningful, student-centered learning.

The study identified several barriers to effective contextualization, which are well-documented in the literature.

1. **Lack of Time:** One of the most commonly cited barriers to contextualization is the lack of time for lesson planning and activity modification. This finding mirrors the work of Bond (2004), who noted that teachers often face time constraints that prevent them from adapting materials to meet the diverse needs of their students. Similarly, large class sizes can exacerbate this issue by reducing the time available for individualized instruction (Brown, 2002).
2. **Large Class Sizes:** The challenge of large class sizes in adapting materials is supported by studies such as those by Kumaravadivelu (2003), who found that managing diverse student needs in overcrowded classrooms limits teachers' ability to personalize lessons. Large classes also make it difficult to foster interactive and engaging learning environments, as teachers struggle to

provide individualized attention or modify activities for relevance.

3. **Insufficient Knowledge and Skills:** The study's finding that teachers lacked the necessary training to contextualize materials effectively is consistent with existing literature. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), teachers often lack the professional development opportunities needed to acquire the skills to modify standard textbooks in meaningful ways. This lack of training often results in the continued use of generic, one-size-fits-all teaching materials, which do not adequately address the diverse needs of students.
4. **Lack of Professional Support:** The absence of professional support and resources, as identified in this study, also aligns with the findings of Brown (2009), who noted that teachers often lack guidance and resources to support effective contextualization practices. Without access to professional development, collaboration with peers, or instructional resources, teachers are left to rely on traditional teaching methods that may not be suitable for all students.

4.2. Conclusion

Incorporating contextualized activities into the teaching of English language learners is essential for improving engagement, motivation, and skill development. By addressing the barriers identified in this study—such as large class sizes, lack of time, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient resources—teachers will be better equipped to create meaningful learning experiences that resonate with students' real-life contexts. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can improve the quality of English language teaching and contribute to more effective and relevant learning outcomes for students.

4.3. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the practice of contextualizing English language activities in the classrooms of Hawassa University, and more broadly, across similar educational contexts:

To address the gap in teachers' knowledge and skills regarding contextualized instruction, it is essential to offer targeted professional development programs. These programs should focus on equipping

teachers with the necessary tools and strategies for adapting textbook activities to the cultural and contextual needs of their students. Such training should include:

- Workshops on constructivist teaching methods, real-world problem-solving techniques, and student-centered teaching approaches.
- Training on how to incorporate students' prior knowledge and experiences into lesson plans.
- Practical guidance on modifying and creating instructional materials that are culturally relevant and meaningful.

Teachers need ongoing opportunities to develop their pedagogical skills, ensuring that they are not only familiar with theory but also able to implement contextualization practices in the classroom.

Large class sizes were identified as a significant barrier to effective contextualization. To improve teachers' ability to adapt and individualize instruction, schools should consider reducing class sizes. Smaller classes would allow for more personalized attention and greater opportunities for student-teacher interaction. This change would also enable teachers to manage student needs more effectively, foster more meaningful participation, and

create an environment conducive to active learning.

To support teachers in contextualizing activities, the curriculum should include flexible guidelines that allow for adaptation based on students' real-life contexts. Teachers should be encouraged to use local resources, incorporate community-based activities, and engage students in real-world scenarios that reflect their social, cultural, and economic environments. Educational institutions should provide adequate resources, such as supplementary teaching materials, technological tools, and access to cultural references, that assist in the process of contextualization.

Teachers should be encouraged to collaborate with their colleagues in sharing best practices for contextualizing instruction. Professional learning communities (PLCs) can be established, where teachers meet regularly to discuss challenges, share successful strategies, and develop joint approaches to contextualized teaching. These collaborative opportunities can help build a sense of community and provide teachers with the support they need to implement effective teaching practices. Mentoring programs can also pair experienced teachers with those who may

need additional guidance, further fostering professional growth and skill development.

One of the main obstacles identified was the lack of time for lesson planning and contextualization. Educational institutions and policymakers should consider adjusting the workload of teachers to provide dedicated time for planning, adapting materials, and reflecting on instructional practices. This could involve reducing administrative burdens, providing more planning periods, and creating a school culture that values thoughtful preparation and curriculum adaptation.

To ensure that activities are meaningful and engaging, teachers should actively seek student feedback on the relevance of lessons. This can be achieved through regular surveys, informal class discussions, or focus groups. By understanding students' perspectives on what is relevant to them, teachers can further tailor activities to meet their needs and interests. Student feedback will also help teachers reflect on the effectiveness of their contextualization efforts, allowing for continuous improvement.

Policymakers should recognize the importance of contextualized teaching and make it a priority at the national and institutional levels. Educational policies should promote and incentivize the use of contextualized instructional practices in teacher training programs and schools. Additionally, allocating funding for resources that support contextualization, such as teaching aids, technology, and professional development, is essential. The Ministry of Education can play a key role in facilitating these changes by providing clear guidelines and encouraging schools to adopt best practices for contextualization.

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