THE 12 Cs FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS:
THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN LEARNING

The "con" in context literally means "with" or "surrounding" text, that is, providing information in multiple ways to make language (text) more comprehensible by a range of meaningful interpersonal and situational cues. In general, the classroom setting has traditionally focused on context-reduced manipulation of text through lecture, reading, and writing. Contextual support should involve both individual attributes, such as prior knowledge and experiences; and external factors, such as how language is presented for understanding (Cummins, 1996).

This Bulletin examines the importance of context for English language learners to understand content based information. Following a brief discussion about two aspects of context, two points of view are considered: the teacher's role in increasing contextual support in the classroom and the teacher's role in developing strategies for learners to use contextual supports.

TWO ASPECTS ABOUT CONTEXT
1) Context is most effective when teachers allow English language learners to negotiate meaning (i.e., give feedback when they don't understand) and to become active participants in the learning process. Presenting information through context aids English language learners who are struggling with language in isolation to organize their thinking. It is an efficient way to illustrate and explain relationships, deliver effective lectures and demonstrations, perceive abstract concepts, provide linkages to content learning, and increase language use when vocabulary is limited.

2) Contextual support allows learners to "see" connections of ideas in oral and printed language, to access prior knowledge and experiences, and/or to develop new experiences prior to using language. Context helps learners connect content language cognitively, resulting in greater comprehension as a transition to more conceptually dense, grade-level use of language.

THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN INCREASING CONTEXTUAL SUPPORT
There are several ways teachers can provide contextual support:

I) Of special relevance to English language learners:
   a. use facial expressions and gestures to act out meanings, to dramatize, and to add appropriate emphasis to oral language;
   b. provide visual support through graphic organizers or webs when lecturing;
   c. use the KWL technique when introducing a new concept, theme, unit, etc., i.e., find out what the students know, what they want to know, and
what they have learned;
d. provide consistent outlines in presenting content information;
e. provide clear oral markers that will alert learners that a new topic or idea will be presented. Examples of these markers are: introductory summaries (Let me first explain/describe/talk about... The topic/subject/idea which I intend to discuss/explain/describe is important/valuable/significant because... etc.); numerical statements (e.g., There were two/four/many reasons/causes/results... etc.); development of an idea (e.g., in the first/second/third place. . . another reason/cause/explanation/development is... etc.); contrast of several ideas (e.g., on the one/other hand... but... however... although... etc.); result of ideas (e.g., therefore... consequently... as a result... etc.); transition of ideas (e.g., Let us think about/look at/consider, turn our attention to... etc.); and chronology of ideas (e.g., first... in the beginning... then... next... another... again... prior to... before... the former/latter... subsequently... finally... etc.);
II) Of general relevance to all learners:
a. how to listen/look for transition markers and connectors in speech and in writing that signal changes in thought or emphasis of important ideas;
b. how to use modality preference to understand the information, e.g., visual learners draw a picture or create a web with the information given; audio learners practice the information orally; tactile-kinesthetic learners use the new information through projects.
c. how to use the native language to help sort out concepts presented in English, and, if possible, confer with a colleague from the same culture to discuss the material in the native language;
d. how to ask a teacher or a friend, either during or after school, for clarification when something is misunderstood; or to seek out a fuller explanation of any unknown or incomprehensible concepts;
e. how to write down any words which are misunderstood, look them up in the dictionary later, or ask the teacher for clarification;
f. how to review previous homework notes prior to class;
g. how to try to relate the new information to prior knowledge or experience;
h. how to review after class or for a test by paraphrasing or summarizing the concepts learned by drawing a web or outline of the major points.
i. how to study with a friend(s).

Sources: