

TEACHING LANGUAGE AS COMMUNICATION

H.G. Widdowson
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Perhaps Professor H.G. Widdowson has had more direct influence on modern ESP course writers than anyone else. He is now also having a great, though maybe indirect, impact on designers of other types of courses and on methodologists in general. His thoughts of the first two thirds of the decade on foreign language teaching have been decanted and collected in Teaching Language as Communication. Some of these thoughts are further explored in the book.

In the early 70's, Henry Widdowson wrote a series of articles, some of them with Dr. J.P.B. Allen, on three related topics: English for science and technology, discourse analysis, and communicative teaching. The main themes of these articles were:

- a) When a scientist uses a sentence, he does not only express a proposition (i.e. he does not only predicate something of a given subject); but in doing so, he also performs an act - such as defining, generalizing, or classifying.
- b) Knowledge of a language involves, besides an ability to compose grammatically correct sentences, a capacity to use sentences in combination.
- c) The teaching of how English is used to realize coherent sequences of acts can be achieved by relating it to the teaching of other subjects.

In chapters 1 and 2 of Teaching Language as Communication, we find the results of the development of themes a) and b) and a substantiation of the proposal expressed in c). Suggestions for its implementation are the matter of chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 3 is a discussion of language skills. It is based on a comprehensive model of communication, and it incorporates the theoretical terms of reference established in the first two chapters. The discussion can be traced back to Widdowson's work on reading as interaction, which has been among his main concerns since the mid 70's.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the distinction which Henry Widdowson has drawn between usage and use (as aspects of performance). The theoretical corollaries and their pedagogical implications are also considered.

Chapter 2 is devoted to discourse. The view is adopted that sentences are means of expressing propositions, and that "in the expressing of a proposition we perform an illocutionary act of some sort."

Propositions and the expressing of propositions are, as it were, the building blocks of discourse. They are put together by different means. A coherent piece of discourse is one where the illocutionary acts (which propositions are used to perform) are related. Besides these relations among acts, we often find cohesion achieved via formal (syntactic and semantic) links between sentences and their parts.

Chapter 2 is for the theoretician of language teaching the most interesting one. It deals with matters in the area where Henry Widdowson has most profitably applied developments of other disciplines, from philosophy to sociolinguistics. Yet it is also the area where he has made more original and illuminating contributions. The matter is intrinsically rather complex. Its handling requires an interlocking set of fine distinctions. But the chapter is so well written that its reading is not difficult at all.

For the importance and honest clarity of Chapter 2, one can in the near future expect criticisms of Widdowson's theory that lead to developments in our knowledge of discourse. Once things are clearly laid down, for example, it is not difficult to see that in Widdowson's conception, the sequence of acts performed in expressing a series of propositions has an effect only on the processability of the text they constitute. This implies that the acts performed do not affect the argumentative value of the propositions expressed. For instance, a definition, for Widdowson, is an act which, in certain contexts, can be processed more readily than, say, identification. But it is inevitable to infer that the truth of the definition and the truth of the identification would depend on the same factors. Further, one act being true would have the same effect as the other on subsequent acts (in so far as the validity of the argumentation is concerned). This conception has, I think, shortcomings, but it has opened the field to further explorations.

In Chapter 3, a classification of linguistic skills and communicative abilities is made in three ways: with reference to medium, to mode, and to manner. Medium is the actual physical means whereby the language system is manifested; we have the aural and the visual media. Mode is "the way in which the language system is realized as use in acts of communication"; Manner is "the kind of social activity involved in communication". This scheme is the starting point for the development of a view of reading as retrospective and prospective interpretation process of assimilation and discrimination. This conceptualization is presented with a practical objective in mind: to characterize basic types of comprehension questions.

The most common kind of questions tend to equate the significance of all the propositions in a text. "Not only do questions of this sort fail to direct the learner towards a discovery of the main point of the passage but they may actually discourage him from acquiring the ability to do so. They can be quite legitimately used to develop the assimilating process but they need to be supplemented by questions, or other forms of exercise, which will develop the discriminating process."

Chapter 3 ends with a consideration of the role of non-verbal devices in written communication. It is suggested that "we can make use of the learners' knowledge of non-verbal aspects of discourse, and of their ability to interpret them, as a means of linking their communicative abilities in their own language to a realization of these abilities in the language they are learning."

In Chapter 4 an approach to the teaching of reading is presented. Though some versions of the approach appeared as conference papers before the publication of the book, it was probably conceived at the time the book was being written. The approach stems from the work previously done by Allen and Widdowson as writers of the first book in the FOCUS series and as editors of the next titles.

After a discussion of some of the problems which have considerably worried course designers for the last four or five years - such as that of authenticity - Widdowson proposes the following of a gradual approximation procedure. "This involves the development of a series of simple accounts of increasing complexity by reference to two sources: a linguistic source in the form of a set of sentences, and a non-linguistic source in the form of a diagrammatic representation of information."

Different types of questions are discussed by reference to the various aspects of gradual approximation. The format of exercises that embody such questions is considered. This is complemented by an analysis of exercises from the point of view of learner participation.

In Chapter 5, Widdowson "tried to give systematic consideration to certain common types of exercise and then explored a number of alternative ways of proceeding, ways which attempted to cast the notions introduced in the first part of the book into practical pedagogic form." He is mainly concerned with the use of writing exercises in the preparation stage and in the exploitation stage of reading passages.

In Chapter 6, Widdowson summarizes, "I have spent some time demonstrating how the procedures that have been proposed in this book put into practice the three principles of rational appeal, integration and control."

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