

## Widdowson and Classroom Discourse

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### Abstract

Drawing on recent developments in linguistic description and applied linguistics, it can be concluded that learning a language necessitates getting to know something and being able to do something with that knowledge: *competence, and performance*. Structural approach to language description attaches importance to the former; communicative approach to the latter. Appropriate classroom discourse, for structural approach, is the one which facilitates the internalization process of systemic knowledge; no matter if the classroom discourse itself is *contrived* or *simplified*. For communicative approach, however, what matters is replicating the conditions of natural language learning in classroom. Here appropriate classroom discourse is the one which facilitates the attested language use in natural context. Simplification and contrivance are considered as deviance from *authentic* language use. Now the question is what type of classroom discourse is more appropriate and why? This is what the present paper endeavors to answer from Widdowsonian point of view.

### Language Use

In writings on discourse and artificial intelligence the term 'schema' appears in a different number of terminological guises. First Bartlett (1932), in his book *Remembering*, introduced it to account for his findings of certain experiments he carried out. In one of his experiments he asked a group of British students to read a North American Indian story, *The War of the Ghosts*, and then rewrite it as accurately as possible from memory. Interestingly the students changed the events of the story so that they corresponded more closely to their own conventional reality, which was very different from what represented in the original story. The discourse they derived from the story suited their own preconceived schematic expectations.

Schema, then, is a socio-cognitive construct which frames and scaffolds the organization of information in long-term memory and provides a basis for prediction. Schemas, in fact, are different varieties of stereotypic images that we map on to reality so that we can make sense of what is going on and recognize what *coherent pattern* (or cultural model) is at work (D Andrade 1995; D Andrade and Strauss 1992; Holland and Quinn 1987; Shore 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997).

In addition to patterns, schema/cultural model, in practice, provide explanation of these prototypes (Anglin 1977; Keil 1979, 1989). They mediate between linguistic signs and contextual features. Patterns are required to make sense within some kind of cause-effect model. When a child is learning, say, the word scarf, at first he associates the word only with the scarf in her mother's closet. Later he overextends the word beyond what is acceptable in the adults' world. But eventually he learns the full range of features he ought to consult in a context in order to call something a scarf. More importantly, as mentioned above, he also realizes that the

features associated with different contexts which trigger the application of a word *hang together* to form a *pattern* that specific sociocultural groups of people find significant. Such theories and models are rooted in the practices of sociocultural communities to which the user belongs.

However, it should be noticed that meanings of words are not *stable and general* at all. Rather, words have multiple and ever changing implications created for and adapted to specific contexts of use (Gee 1999). What is referred to, in the discourse interlocutors carry out, however, is not a matter of conformity to pre-existing rules of conduct as if instances of language use were only tokens of types of knowledge structure (Widdowson *ibid*). The concept of *competence* (whether systemic or communicative), according to Widdowson, does not appear to account for the ability to create meanings by exploiting the potential inherent in the language for continual modification in response to change. This creativity refers to ability to produce and understand *utterances* (in contrast with sentences) by using the resources of the systemic knowledge in association with features of context to make meaning, which is a function of the relationship between the two. These utterances cannot always be in direct correspondence with straight projection of systemic knowledge at all and, in this respect, cannot be always sanctioned by the system.

### **Relation between Systemic and Schematic Knowledge**

Let's, now, consider the relationship between systemic and schematic knowledge. Widdowson (1978) defines linguistic competence as knowledge of language systems, which are second order abstractions. This means that systemic knowledge, basically, cannot be projective of actual language behavior. Sentences are not produced or understood by a mere reference to linguistic knowledge, as structuralists suppose, simply because these abstractions have no *executive functions*. They must, in practice, act out an auxiliary role in the formation of utterances with appropriate communicative significance. Systemic knowledge needs to be associated with context of situation in order to realize meaning potentials of linguistic elements. Schema has nothing to do with the structure of sentences. Instead, it organizes utterances as a set of expectations derived from previous experiences which are mapped on to actual language behavior. Take the following example:

The angry mother shouted at .....

If asked to complete this expression, we would normally do it this way:

The angry mother shouted at her naughty child.

But less likely this way:

The angry mother shouted at work.

The reason why the first completion comes to mind more naturally is that the resulting utterance conforms more closely to our previous experiences. The power of schemata, to scaffold events in their own image, is clear enough to ignore meanings overtly indicated in the sentence if those meanings contradict the schematic interpretation of an expression as utterance. Therefore, we normally interpret an expression like:

Don't cheat or I won't fail you.

this way:

If you cheat I'll fail you.

The information we produce or comprehend must agree with a schema we have internalized as a normal condition in our social life. The language itself cannot express meaning; it must be associated with elements of context in order to realize its meaning. Language only helps the user to engage the intended schema. If it is clear, we will have a straightforward interpretation otherwise misunderstanding will likely be arisen. The crucial point to notice is that misunderstanding arises not from language ambiguity but from utterance ambiguity, and these are very different issues indeed. Context usually provides the user with necessary clues to engage the intended schema and, at the same time, filters alternative interpretations. Needless to say, utterance ambiguity does occur which necessitates clarification, anyhow. Take the following example:

A: Where is his office?

B: In the left corridor.

A: My left?

B: no mine.

Schematic knowledge organizes language in preparation for use. In relation to *propositional aspect* of meaning-what is being said- schema is functioning as a frame of reference. In relation to the *illocutionary act*, it helps us to understand what is being done- *rhetorical routines*. And in relation to the *perlocutionary force*, it helps us to predict the effect of illocutionary acts on the hearer or listener.

### **Generative Transformational Theory and Systemic Linguistics**

The above-mentioned view to language use, presented by Widdowson (1983), totally differs from both what is known as Chomskyan paradigm, generative transformational theory, and systemic linguistics presented by Halliday. In generative transformational theory, language acquisition is considered as a process of abstracting a language system, under the influence of an *innate device*, from an exposure to language use. The assumption is that the actual circumstances of use facilitates the internalization of the system but are not themselves *recorded* in any way. Halliday, on the other hand, connects language to context in a manner that sentences *absorb* aspects of context. Sentences, when used, contracts relations with the situational features of *field*, *mode*, and *style* which provide them with their actualized contextual meanings. In other words, sentences, in this view to language description, get *executive functions*. What Widdowson (1983) suggests, as a different model of language use, is that there is a contextual level within the knowledge of language itself. This level helps the user to prepare the language for use and this is where schematic knowledge comes to the scene. In this view knowledge of language contains two levels: the level of system, where we can call it *linguistic competence*, and the level of schema, where we can call it *communicative competence*.

In fact, although the proponents of notional/functional approach claim that communicative competence is the objective, as Widdowson (1990) reiterates, the rules that characterize the competence are not generally made explicit in practice. It is supposed that the rules will be

*induced* from examples. Normally notional/functional approach provides us with a collection of *correlations* between notional and functional labels, and linguistic expressions commonly connected with them. The difference, we have to make clear, between this and structural approach is not fundamentally of kind but of degree. Structural approach usually makes similar correlational pairings, pointing out, for example, that the interrogative generally functions as a request for information or action, that certain tenses are used in different notions of time, and so on. It may be accepted that notional/functional courses make more delicate distinctions, provide us with a more improved illustration of meaning potential inherent in linguistic forms, but these forms, we have to notice, are still represented as *symbols*, even though they are tagged broadly with functional brands. They are still treated and represented as *constituents* in knowledge system. It is still supposed that these constituents can be directly projected into use, that the elements of language usage as abstracted out of behavior, whether branded with notional/functional labels or not, are basically the same as elements of language use. But they are not the same indeed. They are completely different issues.

### **Appropriate Classroom Discourse**

#### **Structural View**

Structural linguists, traditionally, focus their attention on the internal properties of language. And those who have a structural pedagogic approach to language teaching, subsequently, do the same in language classrooms. Here items of language, words and sentences, are presented and practiced in a way which is planned to help the learner internalize them as forms containing meaning within themselves, as semantic container so to speak. Once learners achieve this semantic knowledge, they assume, then they can use it to do things pragmatically: to write, to read, to speak, to engage in communicative activities similar to their own mother tongue in short. The main task of pedagogy in this view, then, is to impart linguistic knowledge and from then on learners will be able to find out how they can do things with that knowledge for themselves. But, in this view, it is forgotten that language use is a matter of constructing and construing texts by *keying them into contexts* so as to realize discourse meaning—the message in the mind as intended by the text producer on the one hand, and as interpreted by the text receiver on the other hand. They approach language in a very different way from that of what people actually do with it in their social life. Consider the following example:

The doctor will be here in a quarter of an hour.

As a sentence, this poses no problem for understanding. We know what the words in the sentence denote; we know that THE DOCTOR denote a specific physician; that WILL BE HERE denotes that that physician (THE DOCTOR) in near future (A QUARTER AN HOUR) will be present at this place (HERE); that this sentence is in simple future; that the sentence is used in declarative mood and so forth.

What we don't know is the pragmatic meaning of this sentence, however. THE DOCTOR. Which doctor are we talking about? WILL BE HERE Where? IN A QUARTER OF AN HOUR When exactly? (Propositional reference) We don't know either what we are doing by saying such a sentence either. Are we informing? Warning? Threatening? What? (Illocutionary act) We don't

know what intending effect we are trying to bring about either. (Perlocutionary effect) What we are doing is focusing on linguistic elements in order to internalize them as codified conventional meaning within the language itself.

### **Communicative View**

Firstly, contrived classroom discourse, from communicative point of view to language, is misrepresentation of actual attested language use. So it cannot be, pedagogically, tenable. Secondly, learners have their own agenda as they move through different stages of their interlanguage. How it is possible to know if the contrived classroom discourse keys into this process, the proponents of communicative view to language claim. Classroom discourse is regulated by the teacher, whereas interlanguage is regulated unconsciously in the learner's mind. The former is a matter of input; the latter is a matter of intake. This issue, as Widdowson (2003) explains, has figured prominently in discussions about the design of foreign-language syllabus.

The syllabus defines the content of what is to be taught as eventual objective and what process or order should be followed to achieve it. The objective sets conditions on the selection of language to be taught; but how it is to be sequentially graded depends on how the process is regarded. The familiar conventional practice is to order language items along a continuum of increasing linguistic difficulty on the assumption that simpler items will be easier and will be expended and combined to make more multipart structures and meanings. But the question is that what if the natural process of learning does not follow this based on reason sequence? What if the learner's interlanguage takes a dissimilar path?

The point is that the design of language instruction, so far, has not been based on any empirically secure theory of language learning. This does not mean that there has not been plenty of research on the question of course. On the contrary, second language studies are replete with it in journals and books. They have studied different factors affecting second language acquisition. However, they have not provided any conclusive findings upon which we can adjust our classroom discourse according to the learner's interlanguage. And what is more, it does not seem to be forthcoming in near future at all. Research on second language acquisition mostly tries to understand the complexity of factors which affect language learning in general and may extrapolate from particular cases to do so. But the validity of findings is bound to be limited to the particular conditions from which they are drawn. They present some of the essential points and bearings by which teachers can guide a course, but they cannot specify and determine the direction of the course itself. The account that second language acquisition gives of the process of learning is based on an idealized notion of native-speaker competence. But the concept of interlanguage presupposes transitional phases from defined competence in the first language to another in the second language. Native-speaker competence is elusive of definition. As Cook (1999) reiterates researchers in second language acquisition talk about degrees of success and failure in achieving this competence without providing any specification as to what it actually consist of. Even if such specification were to be provided, it is not clear why we shouldn't achieve such native-speaker competence differently or why different processes should be rejected altogether.

### **Accommodation of Two Opposing Approaches**

As indicated, neither approach takes into account *the procedural activities*, which necessitates mutual adjustment of systemic and schematic knowledge for the realization of discursal value, and which can provide the learner with the opportunity to learn the language through using it.

The problem of meaning negotiation in a *natural way*- namely learner in the role of user- is that the learner relies *too much* on the schematic knowledge and avoids an engagement with the systemic features of the foreign language. This reliance obviously cannot trigger internalization process as a more strategic resource by the learner. The initiative of task-based learning bears on this matter. Tasks, as activators of language use for learning, will be successful to the extent that they engage the learner in conceptual and communicative activities which they feel worthwhile in their own right (Prabhu 1987).

To solve the problem, then, we need a pedagogy by which the learner is required to use the language to work out a non-linguistic problem he considers meaningful. Such pedagogy makes it necessary to accommodate two key rules of *repetition* and *purpose*, which in combination provide for the internalization of language as a resource for use. This reconciliation can be realized by a *methodological compromise* where repetition becomes not a mechanical activity but a function of purpose; where the conflict between *form* and *meaning* changes into complementary processes that provide the ground for effective language learning (Widdowson 2003).

Learning a language, in reality, takes place through relating knowledge summarized and formulated from past experience as, systems, schemata, formulae, to concrete occurrences by procedural problem solving activities. This means that in course design and methodology for the teaching of language, the criteria are not exclusively obtained from language teaching theories, but from general pedagogy. Learning English can be purposeful only to extent that the activities it is used for are purposeful in the actual learning process. It should be integrally linked with areas of activity which have already been defined and which stand for the learner's objectives. Contrivance, hence, is not something reprehensible to be avoided. For it is very essence of language pedagogy. Language, as experienced by its users, cannot be directly equated with English as a subject to be taught in classroom. It cannot be equated with the partial account of its explanation by linguists either. Applied linguistics is not in the business of advising, but of pointing thins out (Widdowson *ibid*).

## **Conclusion**

In defining classroom discourse, we have to approximate as closely to reality as possible. With the *authenticity* principle, we have to replicate the conditions of language use, and with the *autonomy* principle, we have to replicate the conditions of natural language learning. In neither case, however, classroom can be a place where these conditions may be created by contrivance to make classroom discourse genuine and learning more effective. Classroom discourse differs from real discourse in different ways; it consists of a few periods a week with undetermined intervals. It is juxtaposed with other subjects. These conditions make it impossible to replicate language use. Regarding *natural learning*, pedagogically it is suspect. The natural learning of a particular language depends on varieties of complicated factors. What people learn in these naturally occurring conditions is one thing but what they are capable of learning in different situations is another matter indeed. Education, in a sense, is that it should provide opportunities to develop this learning by creating conditions which naturally *do not happen*. Education is to induce kinds and ways of learning that would not otherwise occur. And this is, in its very nature, *artificial* indeed. It means that no matter how exactly we know about the natural learning process, it would not tell us what kinds of learning and what methods will be the most effective ones in language classrooms (Widdowson 1990).

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