

Teaching Language as Communication

H.G. Widdowson

Teaching Language as Communication

H.G. Widdowson has played an important and pioneering role in the development of communicative language teaching theory. This book develops a rational approach to the teaching of language as communication based on a careful consideration of the nature of language and of the language user's activities. It provides a lucid guide through a subject which is often confused and misrepresented, while providing a stimulus to all language teachers to investigate the ideas that inform their own practices.

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Contents

Introduction

ix

CHAPTER 1 USAGE AND USE

1.1 Correctness and appropriacy	1
1.2 Usage and use as aspects of performance	2
1.3 Usage and use in classroom presentation	4
1.4 Aspects of meaning: signification and value	10
1.5 Usage and use in the design of language teaching materials	12
1.6 Selecting areas of use for teaching language	15
1.7 Summary and conclusion	18
Notes and references	20

CHAPTER 2 DISCOURSE

2.1 Sentence, proposition and illocutionary act	22
2.2 Cohesion and propositional development	24
2.3 Coherence and illocutionary development	27
2.4 The relationship between propositional and illocutionary development	29
2.5 Procedures of interpretation	31
2.6 Deriving discourse from sentences: an example	32
2.6.1 Propositional development: achieving cohesion	33
2.6.2 Illocutionary development: achieving coherence	38
2.7 Conventions of coherence	44
2.8 Deriving discourse by arrangement: another example	45
2.9 Summary and conclusion	51
Notes and references	55

CHAPTER 3 LINGUISTIC SKILLS AND COMMUNICATIVE ABILITIES

3.1 The four skills	57
3.2 Activities associated with spoken language	58
3.3 Activities associated with written language	61
3.4 Reciprocal and non-reciprocal activities	64
3.5 Linguistic skills and communicative abilities	67
3.6 Retrospective and prospective interpretation	69
3.7 Assimilation and discrimination	71
3.8 Non-verbal communication	73

Contents vii

3.9 Summary and conclusion	74
Notes and references	75

CHAPTER 4 COMPREHENDING AND READING

4.1 Preview	77
4.2 The reading passage as dependent exemplification	77
4.3 The reading passage as independent 'comprehension piece'	79
4.3.1 Extracts: the problem of authenticity	79
4.3.2 Extracts: the comprehending problem	81
4.3.2.1 Priming glossaries	82
4.3.2.2 Prompting glossaries	86
4.3.3 Simplified versions	88
4.3.4 Simple accounts	89
4.4 Gradual approximation	91
4.5 Comprehension questions: forms and functions	94
4.5.1 Types of question by reference to form	95
4.5.2 Types of question by reference to function	100
4.5.2.1 Usage reference	100
4.5.2.2 Use inference	102
4.6 Other reading exercises	105
Notes and references	109

CHAPTER 5 COMPOSING AND WRITING

5.1 Preview	111
5.2 Types of grammar exercise	112
5.3 Exercises in usage and use	115
5.3.1 Composing sentences in passages	115
5.3.2 Using the contexts of the reading passage	117
5.4 Preparation exercises	119
5.5 Exploitation exercises	123
5.5.1 Gradual approximation: sentence to discourse units	124
5.5.2 Gradual approximation: act to discourse units	126
5.5.2.1 Focus on single illocutionary acts	126
5.5.2.2 Relationships between pairs of acts	130
5.5.2.3 Extension to larger discourse units	134
5.5.3 Rhetorical transformation of discourse units	140
5.5.4 Information transfer	141
5.6 Summary and conclusion	142
Notes and references	143

CHAPTER 6 TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

6.1 Preview: the need for integration	144
6.2 The discourse to discourse scheme	145
6.3 Types of procedure	146
6.3.1 Demonstration: rhetorical transformation by gradual approximation	146
6.3.2 Demonstration: rhetorical transformation by illocutionary change	152

viii Contents

6.3.3 Demonstration: information transfer	154
6.4 Principles of approach	158
6.4.1 Rational appeal: the use of translation	158
6.4.2 Integration and control	160
6.5 Summary and conclusion	162
Notes and references	163
Index	165

Introduction

This book is an attempt to clarify certain issues that seem to me to arise from adopting a communicative approach to the teaching of language. I have in mind, in particular, the teaching of English to speakers of other languages. Over recent years I (and a number of others) have advocated such an approach in principle and have tried to put it into practice in the preparation of teaching materials. In principle and practice, however, there always seemed to be loose ends of one sort or another: inconsistencies, unexamined assumptions, unresolved difficulties. My aim in this book was to sort out some of the things that I had been saying, consider their implications more closely, and see if they might be ordered into a coherent account. I wanted to try to think things through.

The 'communicative' approach is, of course, very much in vogue at present. As with all matters of fashion, the problem is that popular approbation tends to conceal the need for critical examination. There seems to be an assumption in some quarters, for example, that language is automatically taught as communication by the simple expedient of concentrating on 'notions' or 'functions' rather than on sentences. But people do not communicate by expressing isolated notions or fulfilling isolated functions any more than they do so by uttering isolated sentence patterns. We do not progress very far in our pedagogy by simply replacing abstract isolates of a linguistic kind by those of a cognitive or behavioural kind. If we are seriously interested in an approach to language teaching which will develop the ability to communicate, then we must accept the commitment to investigate the whole complex business of communication and the practical consequences of adopting it as a teaching aim. Such a commitment involves, I believe, a consideration of the nature of discourse and of the abilities that are engaged in creating it. This is the main concern of the first part of this book. The commitment involves, too, an attempt to think out the possible pedagogic procedures which will lead the learner towards the ability to handle discourse. The second part of the book represents such an attempt. I do not claim that in either part I have done any more than open up a number of possibilities. Our present state of knowledge about