

BEYOND MERE COMMUNICATION

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This article argues that language teaching must involve the systematic development of discourses which will empower learners to use language effectively in particular situations. At present many language teachers concerned with teaching English as a second language (now generally referred to as English as an additional language in South Africa) operate within a communicative teaching paradigm and tend to be concerned chiefly with creating opportunities for enjoyable interaction. It is also significant that textbooks written for teachers in training and textbooks for learners within the outcomes-based approach adopted in South Africa have been more concerned with procedures than with the development of discourse. Illustrations from observed classroom practice or from textbooks are used to support these observations. This article argues that teachers have a responsibility for systematic development both of concepts (those which relate specifically to the area of language, as well as those which are mediated through language) and discourses so they can become strategic tools. In sum, in order for learners to be empowered to use language in the complex ways necessary for successful participation in a variety of contexts, they need to gain an understanding of what particular social contexts require and to be able to select and produce the appropriate social languages or discourses necessary.

Die skrywer van hierdie artikel voer aan dat taalonderrig die sistematiese ontwikkeling van diskoerse moet insluit ten einde leerders in staat te stel om taal effektief in spesifieke situasies te gebruik. Tans werk baie taalonderwysers wat Engels as tweede taal (tans algemeen bekend as Engels as addisionele taal in Suid-Afrika) onderrig, binne 'n kommunikatiewe onderrigparadigma en is meestal gemoeid met die skep van geleenthede vir genotvolle interaksie. Dit is ook opvallend dat handboeke wat geskryf is vir die opleiding van onderwysers en dié geskryf vir leerders binne die uitkomsgebaseerde benadering wat in Suid-Afrika aangeneem is, meer aandag gee aan prosedures as aan die ontwikkeling van diskoerse. Dit word geïllustreer deur waarnemings wat gemaak is binne die klaskamerpraktyk en vanuit handboeke. Die skrywer is van mening dat onderwysers verantwoordelik is vir die sistematiese ontwikkeling van konsepte (dié wat spesifiek verwant is aan taal, asook dié wat bemiddel word deur taal) asook diskoerse, sodat dit strategiese hulpmiddels kan word. Leerders moet dus verstaan wat sekere sosiale kontekste van hulle verg en moet in staat wees om die toepaslike sosiale taalgebruik of nodige diskoerse te kies en te hanteer. Dit sal leerders bemagtig om taal op komplekse maniere te gebruik ten einde suksesvol op te tree binne 'n verskeidenheid kontekste.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are very high expectations of language learning in a school context. In a multilingual society learners must be equipped to use languages so as to participate fully in society.

Language has to provide them with means of reflection and personal development. And they have to give them access to knowledge. Without adequate command of the dominant language or languages in their environment, learners are at a very serious disadvantage. Good language teaching and learning is of vital importance, then, for the success of education and to ensure that multilingualism is seen as an asset and not as a barrier to learning. Consider the underlying message in the following extract drawn from *The Borrowers* (Norton 1958: 65f).

'Can you read?' the boy said at last.
'Of course,' said Arrietty. 'Can't you?'
'No,' he stammered. 'I mean – yes. I mean I've just come from India.'
'What's that got to do with it?' Asked Arrietty.
'Well, if you're born in India, you're bilingual. And if you're bilingual, you can't read. Not so well.'
Arrietty stared up at him....
'Do you grow out of it?' She asked.
He moved a little and she felt the cold flick of his shadow.
'Oh yes,' he said, it wears off. My sisters were bilingual; now they aren't a bit. They could read any of those books upstairs in the schoolroom.'

Especially where English is the dominant additional language, it is vital that bilingualism/multilingualism should be seen as a resource, where new languages are added to enrich the learners' repertoire, not to supplant their own language.

The goals of language teaching have to be ambitious. What is less clear is the actual relation of these goals to practice. In key areas of language teaching in South African schools there is a mismatch between the elevated intentions of the curriculum and what happens in the classroom. This is not particularly the fault of the teachers. It is deeply rooted in practices which have implicit or explicit sanction from the education authorities. Four of them represent particular obstacles to the kind of empowerment good language teaching is supposed to deliver.

The first is Outcomes-based Education (OBE). In practice this pushes the teacher to focus on outcomes as achievable in linear and predetermined fashion, thereby overriding the far from systematic learning agendas of learners. The untidy process of organic development is misconceived as neat and orderly. A second obstacle to empowering language learning is the 'fun' principle. The notion that fruitful intellectual engagement is necessarily fun is often implicitly inverted so that what is fun is seen as necessarily fruitful intellectual engagement. A third obstacle is the practice, born in part of the need to demonstrate accountability, of treating skills and competencies as discrete items, existing apart from real situations. An aggravating factor is that speaking of language *skills* (implicitly a set of discrete competences) encourages the notion that they can be taught discretely. Finally, there is the problem of the hidden curriculum. If examinations demand command of minute surface detail, curricular practice will favour a focus on surface features of structure rather than a focus on function. These four obstacles warrant closer attention.

2. OBSTACLES TO EMPOWERMENT

2.1 *Language teaching and Outcomes-based Education*

However carefully it is planned, teaching a language is essentially an organic process, frequently serendipitous, strongly engaging the affective and the aesthetic. Like language learning, it is a strongly individual process, keyed to identity: past, present and future. There is, of course, a perennial need to give attention to the particular: to knowledge of grammar and lexis and usage. But knowing a language so that one can use it is very different from having a knowledge of it. The two are not irreconcilable; but they are not the same thing. Language teachers always work within that shifting tension.

OBE complicates that tension. It encourages determinist assumptions, hostile to individual learning agendas and to organic, exploratory processes. The OBE curriculum leaves little space for three key aspects of language learning. First, language development is not linear, as OBE assumes, but is a function of following and building on interest. One cannot say with assurance that particular aspects of language learning will take place at a particular point. The second point is related to this. As has frequently been argued and demonstrated, language input bears an oblique relation to language intake. Finally, language learning activities may have unforeseen outcomes.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Ridge, 2000: 30f), the fact that 'literacy' is ill-defined in OBE documents generates further obstacles to effective language teaching. With the exception of computer literacy the focus in the OBE curriculum is strongly on passive or receptive abilities. The 'definition' of critical literacy (*The ability to respond critically to the intentions, contents and possible effects of messages and text on the reader*) is a case in point (Department of Education, 1997: 25). This does not appear to take account of the ideological debates which relate to literacy, particularly as regards language as a site of power. At an obvious level, therefore, the description in the documents both takes texts as given rather than dynamic and leaves out the productive ability to use language consciously for the speaker or writer's own purposes. This makes it possible for learners to be subjected to a kind of indoctrination as they are schooled to process texts as objective. The agenda or particular function of the text as used in a particular situation is disregarded. Clearly, we shall have to do more than play the semantic game of renaming our classrooms 'learning centres' if we wish to empower learners to contest sites of power.

2.2 *Communicative Language Teaching and the Fun Principle*

In South Africa, the current teaching orthodoxy in schools, if only in mythology, is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Certainly this is the underlying assumption in approaches to OBE (see, for example, Wessels & Van der Berg, 1999).

One aspect which detracts from the serious purpose language teachers must have is that the 'fun' principle tends to obscure the need for learning to be the central purpose. At schools where my students have been doing their practical teaching, comment by teachers on forms of students tend to foreground the 'fun' learners had. Certainly, too, in discussions with students preparing lessons or during the reflective sessions on the lessons by the students, serious reflection on the lesson tends to be skewed by a strong need to emphasise the 'fun' aspects.

Where fun is the yardstick it is unlikely that the tasks or activities will take account of the need to give learners an ever-increasing understanding of the way a language works. Teachers create opportunities for learners to extend their repertoire when they make it possible for them to construct contexts and situations or learn to fit their language to contexts primarily created by others.

It is important to recognise that while some learners acquire a language incidentally, the majority of pupils will not. On the basis of careful research involving three communities, Shirley Brice Heath (1983: 352) argues that

[a]cademic success beyond the basis of readiness depends on becoming a contextualist who can predict and manoeuvre the scenes and situation by understanding the relatedness of parts to the outcome or the identity of the whole.

An understanding of the language called for in particular situations is vital if learners are to read and use with increasing sophistication the cues and clues to meaning this language offers. The language teacher has to find ways of enabling learners to acquire this understanding and competence. Successful address to the needs of learners cannot be achieved by a return to exercises which use discrete sentences to focus on specific language items and treat knowledge of these grammatical items as 'outcomes'. If the outcome is to be understanding, language teaching must always be contextualised and underlying concepts must be systematically developed. Bygate (1994) makes useful suggestions as to how whole-task rehearsal can lead to a development of performance. Here the teacher's model is one of the ways in which the demands of a task can become transparent.

The majority of our learners have limited opportunities to extend their knowledge of English, and so require more fine-tuned exposure and systematic opportunities to develop a more complex understanding of how language functions. The demands of equity make it essential that the advantages of the classroom be exploited.

Swales (1990), Cope and Kalantzis (1993), Martin (1993) and Christie and Martin (1997) are among those who see explicit teaching of genres as an effective means of developing both receptive and productive knowledge of the situated practices of a language. A genre approach invites exploration of the cultural context of texts, including the practices which characterise different social groups. The analysis of target situations, for instance, allows learners to arrive at knowledge of the specific configurations or patterns that are characteristic of specific kinds of communicative situations. Here we are talking about shared assumptions which have to be honoured when one, say, participates in small group discussion, reports on a scientific experiment, answers a comprehension test, or writes a letter of complaint. Most learners need to acquire this kind of pragmatic competence in order to operate successfully in school-related activities. At worst some learners may fail because they are not aware of the implicit demands made in particular learning or communicative situations. Of course, a genre approach also has its dangers. New Rhetoric studies go so far as to accuse detailed analysis of genres of serving to 'freeze frame' what is dynamic and constantly evolving (Luke, 1994: viii).

While there are some exceptions, teaching is still being done on the basis of discrete lessons. Even lessons which supposedly form part of a series are presented in isolation from one another.

The example below is taken from a book primarily designed for student teachers during their initial teacher education. The book tackles a great deal and has much to commend it but the illustrative lessons tend to work discretely. Ironically, this is a way of ensuring that old patterns of teaching survive. The extract forms part of a series of daily planners. In this case, the desired outcome is the development of bottom-up reading comprehension skills. In this particular extract the passage forms part of Daily Planner 8: Finding Information.

Extract A

Activity 2

Music of the San and the Khoi-khoi

San (Bushman) people used natural materials to make their musical instruments. They even tied cocoons and seed pods round their ankles and wrists. These rattled when they danced. The San shooting-bow was adapted and used as a musical instrument with a resonator temporarily attached, and played by beating the string with a light stick. Today, they also use commercially manufactured materials such as paraffin tins and brass wire.

The Khoi-khoi played on flutes made of different lengths of reeds. They also made 'drums' by stretching animal skins over clay pots or large metal containers, which acted as resonators, and which were beaten with the hands. The Khoi-khoi learnt to use the San music bow called a gorah. This unique instrument is a 'wind-bow,' and is sounded by breathing.

(All about South Africa – K-TV)

Working in pairs or in groups, they should look for the following information:

1. What is another name for the San?
2. Why did they tie cocoons and seeds round their ankles?
3. What commercially manufactured materials can be used for the San's instruments?
4. What were the Khoi-khoi's flutes made of?
5. Describe a gorah.

The groups compare their answers before they report back to the facilitator, who helps and corrects.

(Wessels & Van den Berg, 1999: 223)

Here we see the elusiveness of practice aimed at integration or systematic development. The lessons are connected at a surface level only, and each one has a discrete purpose so that there is no cumulative effect. The focus is on the technical ability to find information. There is no real reason to find information other than to answer the questions. The text is also ill-suited to this purpose. It was produced by *K-TV* presumably as a basis for a visual presentation, so crucial vehicles for conveying information are excluded in treating it as printed text.

There are a number of difficulties which would hinder the genuine development of the ability to glean information. No context is given to help readers place the discussion. The heading, which might have helped, is misleading: the passage is about musical instruments not about music. Secondly, within the text the denigratory term *Bushman* is used as if it were an

alternative to the term *San*. This is underscored by the first question which asks *What is another name for the San?* Third, the text is not cohesive. For example, in the first paragraph there is no discourse marker to indicate that the past tense in the first three sentences relates to a bygone era, balanced against the fourth sentence which places itself in the present using the word 'now'. Fourth, the discourse marker, 'even', in the second sentence is misleading. It suggests the climax of a series, but the first sentence mentions no other things that they used to make music. Fifth, the passage is vague. The description of the adaptation of the shooting-bow does not aid visualisation. The low frequency word 'resonator' is not glossed or paraphrased and there is no way of inferring its meaning. As it stands, a number of other words of widely different meanings could be substituted for it. In the description of the musical instruments used by the Khoi, the term 'resonator' does become a little clearer, but the text still depends on top-down skills to access its full meaning. Finally, the gorah is not mentioned at all in the paragraph on the San, but is described as 'the San music bow' in the paragraph on the Khoi-Khoi. One might have expected the way to be prepared for this.

2.4 *The Problem of the Hidden Agenda*

A comment made by one of the teachers on one of our students during a recent practice teaching session illustrates how teachers of considerable knowledge and ability can be a hindrance to the development of competence:

I would never go into a classroom without knowing exactly what every word of a poem means.... I find it distressing that students doing practice teaching actually leave lines out – let alone words. How are the learners to have a thorough knowledge of the poems?

Here the poem is being studied to meet external assessment criteria. In the process the 'original' context of the poem and its new 'context' are ignored. Poetry is contorted into a 'neutral' text, which can be precisely and accurately defined as if it were a set of facts. Every part of it can be explained. If we were to explore the inextricably connected components or aspects of communicative social interaction use (Hymes 1974; Ochs et al. 1996), we could identify the ways in which the teacher coerces learners into acceptance of her interpretation. She does not allow the poem to be situated in the concrete and imaginative realities of the learners' understanding or knowledge of social and cultural interaction. Where the teacher asks questions, they do not invite engagement, but involve what Benton and Fox describe as 'Guess what's in the teacher's head'. Here the desired outcome is closely determined by the agenda of the teacher. Using the terms developed by Rosenblatt (1978), *aesthetic* reading becomes *effere*nt reading. The way language is used can make it a means of limiting or even closing down possibilities for the other 'participants' in the communicative situation.

A second illustration shows another way in which the *sociocultural aspect*, that is, the personal, social and cultural knowledge about sign systems, activities, the material world, and politics (See Gee, 1999: 83) is ignored in the narrow interests of discrete teaching. In one lesson I observed, given by a student, the song *I am a Genie in a bottle* was used as a means of discussing metaphor. In this case the primary concern was technical knowledge of how a metaphor works. The sexually suggestive flavour of the song and the particular view of women it represents was ignored. The focus was on the figure of speech alone. The words of the title were used in disembodied fashion to construct a technical definition of metaphor (implied comparison) as opposed to the overt comparison to be found in a simile. There was

no exploration of why the songwriter might have chosen this form of language or of the wider semiotics.

There are other ways in which teaching favours a focus on surface forms. Before I offer illustrations of this I think it is important to contest the crude, binary distinctions which suggest that form and meaning are separate concerns. The simple sentences *I will/shall go to Moscow tomorrow; I am going to Moscow tomorrow; I go to Moscow tomorrow* reflect varying degrees of definiteness. Batstone (1995: 203) provides an excellent example of how the form of the first verb in the sentence *Sheila's saying she doesn't want to come* affects meaning. The interpretation he and his friends arrived at was that the present progressive aspect 'is saying' as opposed to the 'present simple' shows that Sheila could be persuaded to change her mind. He argues that the use of the present tense in the supporting clause lends support to this view: 'It expresses a kind of psychological closeness, so that what Sheila says is relevant and current' (ibid).

Widdowson (1998: 706f) highlights the way in which sentences used to demonstrate particular structures (*This is a pen. This is a desk*) are instances of 'pragmatically meaningless' language. We do not normally use language to point out what is self-evident. This, incidentally is what is wrong with basal readers whose word text replicates or duplicates what is there in the pictures already (e.g. *This is a ball. The ball is red.*)

In any language context, the shared or familiar knowledge is usually left out - unless to relieve some kind of social awkwardness or carry out a social ritual. Hayakawa (1978: 81-82) offers a useful illustration in his discussion entitled *The value of unoriginal remarks*. Here he shows how what appears to be pragmatically meaningless language serves to overcome prejudice and fear. In wartime America, he, a Japanese, is viewed with hostility at the train station by the other passengers. Hayakawa breaks the ice by pointing out the obvious, that it is 'too bad' that the train is late on a cold night, and how difficult it is to travel with a small child in such circumstances. He finds out how old the child is and comments that he is big and strong for his age. Again there is agreement. After several more exchanges of a similar kind, the wall of suspicion is broken down.

Consider too this extract from a conversation in the first interval of a concert. The obvious stated in selfconsciously correct sentences. Here the meaning is not in what is said.

'It's quite chilly in the hall, isn't it?'

'It is, isn't it.'

'I really enjoyed that last movement, didn't you?'

'Oh, yes I certainly did.'

In classrooms a focus on form often leads to misconceptions. Learners are generally given the idea that direct and reported discourse (as is the case with active and passive voice) have a very similar discourse function. This gives rise to exercises in which, for example, the direct discourse in cartoons is translated (in mechanical fashion using the 'rules') into reported speech. An argument that authentic, engaging material, which takes account of the need to be learner-centred has been chosen would be valid. However, the limp prose which emerges as a result of the exercise can not be seen as serving any purpose other than a pedagogic one. What is almost invariably forgotten is that even situations where a verbatim account is called for rarely require more than selections from the encounter. Imagine a situation where a

teenager has been talking to a close friend. The lengthy conversation is likely to be reduced to one or two lines in reply to 'What does she have to say?' There are complex reasons for this – not the least is that the target audience will have changed and so too the complex aspects which underlie the demands of particular situations.

Teachers have been ambivalent in their attitude to grammar. While emphasising the centrality of meaning, they focus on structures rather than functions. However, as Kilfoil (1990: 21) has pointed out, 'If both the syllabus writers and the textbook writers vacillate on the grammar issue, how must the teacher feel?' Van der Merwe (1994) reveals similar uncertainties among teachers.

Understanding discrete sentences is a matter of semantic decoding. This knowledge alone will not allow us to understand language in use (Widdowson 1990:102) Put simply, we are able to arrive at agreed understandings of discourse because what we read or hear is interpreted within current understandings. The implication for teaching is that meaning can only be taught by embedding sentences in what Gee (1999: 34) calls "the conversational sea in which it swims".

An understanding of grammar is vital so we can use the cues and clues it offers to meaning with increasing sophistication. The problem is to find a means of teaching that information that empowers learners rather than providing an occasion for classroom activities. But looking for solutions to complex questions quite often leads to more questions than it provides answers. One thing is clear: successful address to the needs of learners cannot be achieved by a return to exercises which use discrete sentences to focus on specific language items and treat knowledge of these grammatical items as 'outcomes'. As Dik (1991: 247) puts it:

The language system ... is not considered as an autonomous set of rules and principles, the uses of which can only be considered in a secondary phase; rather it is assumed that the rules and principles comprising the language system can only be adequately understood when they are analyzed in terms of the conditions of use. In this sense the study of language use (pragmatics) precedes the study of formal and semantic properties of linguistic expressions.

The outcome must be understanding of the ways in which language can be used. However, creating activities which capture and explore the interactive, culturally embedded functions of language is far from easy.

November et al. (1998) have shown how integration of activities can be achieved. However, even they ask learners to engage in language exercises without providing a sense of why a particular form should be used:

Extract B

D

Look at the drawing of a space station. Now look at the clues below and write sentences in the passive voice, for example:

exercise / take / on a special machine

Exercise is taken on a special machine.

The drawing referred to is carefully labelled making it possible to write the required sentences. In a sense the learners are making meaning – a clear context for their sentences is provided. However, why (apart from doing a class exercise) the sentences in the passive form would be appropriate is not explained. The cluster of activities, labelled A, B ... G is clearly described, but is in fact only thematically related to space. There is no deeper coherence. C is a grid which requires learners to enter the names of the planets. Once this has been done the word *universe* emerges as a new word to be recognised by the learners, almost all of whom would surely know it already. D is the exercise involving the creation of sentences in the passive voice. E invites learners to think up a name for a new feature on the moon or for a newly discovered planet. The whole unit is keyed to procedural knowledge and not to the development of discursive competence.

3. CONCLUSION

This article has looked at some of the obstacles to language development: obstacles that limit learner participation in classrooms, and so, in the long term, full participation in society. If these obstacles are not acknowledged and addressed, language teaching will not help ‘learners claim the right to speak outside the classroom’ (Peirce, 1993: 26).

We will need to move beyond a reductionist view of communication. This will require taking account of several recent lines of enquiry. I have referred to the work of Bygate (1994), Batstone (1995) and Widdowson (1990; 1998) which has examined the ways in which the role of form in making meaning can be explored. Peter Skehan (1995: 100-106) takes a possibly complementary approach. He describes communication as being achieved by means of an information processing system in which there are limited attentional capacities. He suggests that there are cognitive demands, linguistic criteria, time pressure and unpredictability for the learners to contend with. The learner calls on his or her existing competences, previous experience, skill in using time-creating devices, means of influencing the communicative encounter and ability to plan. A further challenge lies in the genre approaches of people like Swales (1990), Cope and Kalantzis (1993), Martin (1993) and Christie and Martin (1997) which were mentioned earlier. These lines of enquiry suggest the complexity of communication and of learning to communicate well. If our aim is the empowerment of learners, we have to teach in ways which do not bar access to that complexity. In this connection, Van Lier (1998) argues that awareness-raising is not sufficient. It must be accompanied by action/collaboration and reflection.

Reflection is not for the learner alone. Along with the work of Larsen-Freeman (1997), Van Lier’s study suggests ways in which complexity theory could provide the means of developing rigorous procedures for researching language learning processes in classroom settings. The more complex the situation, the more important it is for the teacher to become involved in research to unpack it. There is no room for complacency in the learning organisation. The teacher must be a researcher.

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