

The Language Learner

as Language User

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It will generally be recognized that the aim of language teaching, the purpose of our pedagogy, is to develop in learners the ability to use language in a natural manner to achieve the same kind, if not the same range of outcomes that are associated with the use of the mother tongue. The range may be quantitatively confined to certain modes of interaction or to certain domains of use, restricted to instrumental rather than integrative purposes, but we assume that the **manner** in which learners will eventually conduct themselves, the **quality** of their linguistic behaviour, will have to correspond as closely as possible to normal criteria for effective communicative use.

It is worth noting, in passing, that there is nothing innovative in this assumption. The impression is sometimes given that communication as a pedagogic objective was revealed by inspired insight some time in the early seventies and called for a massive effort of apostolic conversion. But even in the dark ages of mechanistic drill and habit formation, the belief was that learners were being prepared to be proficient as language users. There may have been some difference of view as to what areas or aspects of use should constitute an appropriate pedagogic objective but essentially what was new in the proposals of the early seventies was that communicative ends should be directly confronted and incorporated into the very means of teaching: that teaching language for communication necessarily entailed teaching language as communication. The novelty resided not essentially in the re-definition of learning objectives but of the teaching approach most likely to be effective in achieving them.

Let us then assume that the task of language teachers, of whatever pedagogic persuasion, is to make language learners into language users. But, of course, in respect of the mother tongue, the learners are already language users. They bring to the learning task, therefore, the vast resource of past experience. The question for pedagogy is: how is this resource to be exploited so that the learners will extend the scope of their communicative ability to include the meaning potential of another language.

What then is the most effective way of mediating the development of the learner from first language user to second language user?

All sorts of ways have, of course, been proposed in response to this question, a multiplicity of methods making competing claims. It is, however, possible to discern two underlying and opposing perspectives on the teaching task and these can be described in reference to two aspects of the language ability.

One aspect is the familiar one of linguistic competence. To have ability in a language means to know the abstract system of that language, to know how syntactic and semantic meanings are signified in words singly, and in combination as constituents of sentences. This aspect of language ability is a **cognitive state**: abstract knowledge. The second aspect is an **executive process**: actualised as behaviour. It is the capacity for acting upon one's knowledge appropriately to achieve particular communicative outcomes. One aspect, then, is a kind of knowing; the other is a kind of doing which requires the language user to access elements of knowledge as and when they are needed. Now, to anticipate the charge that I am indulging once again in simplistic division into dualities, let me make it clear that I do not suggest that these aspects of ability are separate and unrelated. They enter into an interactive relationship whereby each modifies the other. What we know of the language constrains what we do with it and the doing will create conditions for the modification or extension of our knowledge. To account for language ability we need to pay heed to both aspects and the way they are related. There has been a tendency in the past to focus on one as being the primary and determining one of a pair. Thus, in a behaviourist view of language as espoused by Skinner, knowledge is represented as being directly determined by behaviour: competence is, as it were, a version of performance. In the cognitivist view as espoused by Chomsky, on the other hand, behaviour is represented as directly determined by knowledge: performance is, as it were, a version of competence.

And the same tendency of favouring one aspect of language ability at the expense of the other is evident also in approaches to language teaching and provides us with a way of characterising the two general pedagogic perspectives mentioned earlier. The first of these favours the executive aspect, focusses on doing, and assumes that the process of using the language provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for its effective learning. This we might, for convenience, call the **using to learn** view: a view which in general informs the "communicative approach" to teaching. Here, learning, the formal property of language, is seen as a corollary to use. In the second perspective, it is the cognitive aspect that is favoured; the

emphasis is on knowing and the assumption is that there are certain aspects of the language that have to be learned as a pre-condition for effective use, aspects which will not just be contingently acquired. This we might call the **learning to use** view, particularly associated with the so-called "structural approach" to teaching. Here use is seen as a corollary of learning the formal properties of language. I should now like to consider each of these a little more closely.

The **using to learn** view is the one that prevails in more recent proposals for pedagogy, and is currently of higher prestige among those who lay claim to enlightened thinking, the priests and acolytes of the communicative movement. In this view, the learner is encouraged to do things with the language, solve problems, engage in interaction, achieve purposeful outcomes of various kinds, and not be inhibited in this behaviour by a lack of knowledge of the language being used. Communicative fluency is favoured in preference to formal accuracy, eccentricities of usage are tolerated so as not to arrest the process of meaning negotiation and the expression of self. Such eccentricities, indeed, are not regarded negatively as evidence to be avoided but positively as evidence of creative learning and as such to be encouraged. The language that is introduced to activate learning is authentic as use. The learners, in order to realize this authenticity, are allowed the liberty of natural behaviour and are not constrained into un-natural correctness. Since the focus of attention is on the executive procedures for realizing language knowledge as communicative behaviour, the learners' own experience of language use in the mother tongue can be engaged. Their task is to apply familiar procedures to the unfamiliar knowledge resource of the new language. The teacher role, therefore, is not to act as a causative agent but as an enabling condition in the learning process. The teacher's task is to encourage the learners to access the new language in the same way as they access their own. In this respect, teaching adjusts to learning.

Such an approach to pedagogy has powerful and influential friends. Both in its focus on the pragmatic features of language and its perspective on methodology as a learner-centered activity, it is consistent with recent developments in the theoretical study of language. Here we see a shift from a concern with the formal properties of language to the pragmatic conditions for the achievement of meaning in social contexts, and at the same time a realisation that such a shift of focus calls for a corresponding change of perspective which gives primacy to the role of involved participant and denies the special status of the analyst as expert witness. If we are to describe the reality of language use, it is argued, then we need to account for it as experienced by the user rather than as observed by the analyst from some

detached point of vantage.

The **using to learn** view of pedagogy, then, with its sociological, humanistic orientation to language use corresponds quite closely to an approach to language study currently in vogue. The **learning to use** view, on the other hand, has a dull old-fashioned look about it. We move from the avant-garde to the démodé. In this view, the learners need to have their attention drawn to the formal properties of the language, to have their learning directed by means of imposed patterns of behaviour whereby they internalize linguistic components and operate sub-skills for subsequent use. The assumption here is that there is a body of language knowledge and a set of manipulative skills that can, and indeed must, be internalized in dissociation from the actual natural contexts of their realization. The emphasis, therefore, is on correctness and control; on artifice and authority. The learner, of course, participated but on the teacher's terms, as learner not as user, the learning being a reflexive response to teaching and not a natural concomitant to using. The rules which operate in the classroom are constitutive rather than relative in character, and in consequence are non-negotiable. Since the focus of attention is on what is new to learners (the particular properties of a different language), they have less opportunity to engage executive experience, and will indeed be discouraged from doing so in the interests of error avoidance. Their task is to follow teaching directives as closely as possible and to acquire knowledge by gradual accretion. The teacher is the causative agent of learning effect. Learning adjusts to teaching.

The enlightened ones do not think much of this learning to use perspective. It is stigmatized as a relic of the dark ages of structuralist linguistics and behavioural psychology. Its friends are all dead or out of favour. Those who practice it (even more those who commend it) run the risk of scorn. And yet...

It will not do to be dismissive. Much damage has been caused in our profession by uncritical condemnation and acclaim, by the exercise of prejudice rather than careful thought. Inspired by the spirit of the times we are no doubt disposed to accept the **using to learn** perspective as self-evidently the one that deserves favour. This alone should alert us to the need for a closer appraisal of both, and to warn us against an unreasoned acceptance of either.

With this in mind, two issues arise on which the two perspectives most obviously differ. The first issue is that of **authenticity**. How far should classroom language reflect the ways in which language is used naturally in the world outside? This raises the question of how the **subject** of language teaching is to be defined. The second issue concerns **authority** and has to do with the roles that it is

appropriate for the protagonists in the classroom encounter to adopt, with matters of initiative, intervention and control. The question raised here is how the **learning** of the subject is to be most effectively induced.

Authenticity is much favoured by the using to learn school of thought. There are two arguments that can be advanced in its support. The first is sociolinguistically inspired and relates to the objective of learning. It takes the following form. Learners have to be prepared for natural language use by using language naturally in the classroom, that is to say, the kind of behaviour they enact has to be a sort of rehearsal for reality. One cannot expect learners to do things with language that they have not learnt to do during their course. They need to be initiated into the required patterns of communicative behaviour. The second argument is psycholinguistically inspired and relates not to the language to be learned but to the actual process of learning. The assumption here is that it is naturalistic language behaviour rather than an artificial focussing on form which will trigger off the natural acquisition process, so that authenticity of language behaviour, the striving for communicative outcomes, will necessarily (and naturally) provide the conditions for the internalization of the language system as knowledge.

The first argument first. It rests on the assumption that unless learners are rehearsed in the parts they have to play as users, then they will be incapable of performance when the time comes. Their future behaviour, as it were, has to be scripted in advance. The difficulty with this assumption, it seems to me, is that it conflates the two aspects of language ability that I referred to earlier. It misrepresents the executive process of language use as a cognitive state. The central issue of the **relationship** between knowledge and behaviour is avoided by effacing the distinction between them. Knowledge is of its nature a generalization of particular instances, and abstraction from actuality, a state of mind. In behaviour, linguistic and otherwise, we use it as a point of reference to take bearings from and there must always be procedural problem solving work involved in realizing what we know as what we do. In other words, the executive aspect of ability is a matter of expedient adjustment and will involve some negotiation, some dialectical process, whereby we relate the abstract conception to the actual instance. What we know does not determine what we do; it simply provides us with convenient guidelines for action. Language is not rule-governed but rule-referenced behaviour. So learners can never be pre-programmed for their encounters with actual reality. All they can be provided with is systemic knowledge of the language and schematic knowledge of the world as shaped by the conventions of particular cultures, and, crucially, with

opportunities to realize these kinds of knowledge, of their nature generalized and stereotypic, for the negotiation of particular meanings.

The happenings in the classroom have clearly to be such that will promote the learning of stereotypic knowledge and the executive procedures whereby particular meanings are realized by reference to it. But I see no compelling reason why such happenings should be authentic if by that is meant that they should be a reproduction of reality which exists outside the classroom. Indeed, it seems to me that there are good reasons why they should not be authentic in this sense. Actual language behaviour in normal contexts of use is tangled and untidy, and although the first language learner manages to abstract regularities from it, this is only as a result of massive exposure and in the course of gradual cognitive growth and social integration. The whole justification of pedagogy rests on the belief that such slow natural processes can be improved upon, that the classroom can be used to organize learning by focussing the learners' attention on what they need to know and providing practice in what they need to do. The classroom is a place for contrivance. I see no point in pretending otherwise.

But the contrivance has obviously to be such that it will draw the learner into positive engagement, will appeal to a sense of purpose, while focussing on the salient features of language use, on the relationship between rules defining knowledge and the executive procedures which realize these rules as behaviour. The classroom activities to be contrived, therefore, would be directed not primarily at the **simulation** of particular contexts of interaction but at the **replication** of more general **conditions** of interaction by setting tasks of various kinds which induce the learner to negotiate procedural outcomes by reference to systemic knowledge of the language in association with schematic knowledge of the world. Such tasks would call for a focussing on form, but as a communicative resource, as a potential to be realized for some purposeful outcome.

A proposal which insists on contrivance, on the focussing on form, runs counter of course to the second argument for authenticity - that it allows for the unconstrained growth of natural acquisition. The assumption here (which leads us too into the question of authenticity) is that any doctoring of data is likely to interfere with the learners' instinctive discovery procedures and distort his development. Since we do not know how learners learn the argument runs, the best course is to create as natural an environment as possible and let them get on with it. Such an assumption rests on the belief that second language learners are psychically programmed to follow an acquisition development of the language system which

is resistant to outside influence and, being natural, necessarily leads to permanent achievement, as distinct from the temporary effects that might be brought about by learning under the influence of instruction. But in spite of strident claims to the contrary, the grounds for such belief are not well-established and it would be prudent to be sceptical. It is true that there is evidence for natural acquisition sequences that persist in spite of instructional influence, but there is also evidence that involvement in authentic communicative activities and massive doses of comprehensible input do not in fact lead to the internalization of the language system. So it would seem that language acquisition is not necessarily a function of natural language use.

But there is another problem apart from all this. It has to do with the learner's sense of security. Although it is true that we do not know very much about the process of learning, we do know that it can be severely inhibited by anxiety. The first language learner acquires language in association with the gradual realization of conceptual and social order; the language provides for integration and security; it defines individual identity and social role. But a second language comes from outside, a challenge to the settled world of what is familiar, calling for effort, readjustment, and, like all other school subjects, posing the threat of failure. In these circumstances only the most self-assured are likely to have the confidence to set out into the authentic unknown without the aid of maps. The rest will feel the need for the assurance of safe passage and protection and security of reliable guidance. But when does guidance become compulsion, when does control become confinement? This second argument for authenticity leads us inevitably to the question of authority.

It is obvious that there is no direct equation between teaching and learning: learners use the teaching input to activate their own learning processes, and when all is said and done, learning must ultimately be a matter for the individual's own initiative. But initiative can only be effectively exercised within a context of constraint, the individual has no identity without society, and eccentricity is only recognized in relation to accepted conventions. The argument for authority is essentially the same as the argument against authenticity. Both in language use and in language learning execution needs to be referred to cognition, contingent procedural activities need to be related to given frames of reference. Such frames of reference for language use take the form of systemic rules of the language itself or schematic conventions of their social use, and for language learning, they take the form of pedagogic contrivance devised by authority which defines types of

classroom task. These frames are sorts of stereotype, convenient fictions. They do not **determine** behaviour: they are always variously realized and there is always room for individual manoeuvre, for the negotiation of particular and unpredictable ways to meaning and learning. We can never depend entirely upon these stereotypic frames of reference: on the other hand, we can never entirely do without them.

What then, to return to the question I posed at the beginning, is the most effective way of mediating the development of the learner from the first to second language user? We must recognize, I think, that neither the **using to learn** nor the **learning to use** view is satisfactory on its own: we need a synthesis. The procedural negotiation and allowance for learner initiative favoured by the first have to be informed by the controls which are favoured by the second, which accordingly must be flexible enough to accommodate them. A dull conclusion, you may say; a craven compromise. But such a synthesis which I would claim to be rationally founded and not just expedient seems to me to offer the best way of guiding our learners towards achieving the ability to authenticate language as use for themselves and gradually, as a consequence, so develop as to be ultimately independent of pedagogic authority.