Linguistics, language teaching objectives and the language learning process

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Linguistics has always been taken as the authoritative frame of reference for how language is represented as a pedagogic subject, and as approaches to linguistic description have changed so accordingly have approaches to language teaching. But the purposes that determine what aspects of language are to be abstracted as relevant for linguistic description do not correspond with those of language pedagogy. What linguistics provides are ways of specifying what is to be taught as the eventual learning objective in relative disregard of the learning process, a process that it is the essential purpose of pedagogy to promote. An alternative to this customary objective driven approach, would be to focus not on acquiring competence in a particular and separate L2 but on extending the general capability for using language as a communicative resource that learners have already acquired in their L1. Such an approach effectively makes the primary objective of pedagogy the development of the learning process itself.

Keywords: linguistics, pedagogic relevance, teaching objective, learning process, competence, capability

1. Introduction

My purpose in this short article is to reconsider issues about linguistics in relation to language pedagogy that have long been subject to discussion in the past. In this respect the article is a review of certain accepted ideas as a basis for further enquiry: *reculer pour mieux sauter*. This seems an appropriate thing to do in a contribution to this new journal. But, of course, reviews are rarely, if ever impartial, and mine is no exception. I look at these issues from a particular perspective: in taking them up, I present my own take on them. What I have to say is, of course, open to challenge, but then the article might have the appropriate effect of provoking the critical exploration about the relationship between linguistics and pedagogy that it is the purpose of this journal to promote.

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2. Linguistic description and pedagogic design

The relevance of the discipline of linguistics to the teaching of a foreign or second language as a pedagogic subject has always been a contentious matter. Language teachers have, on the whole, been skeptical of attempts to persuade them that linguistics can provide them with insights that can give them guidance in the design of practical classroom activities. And there are linguists that share their skepticism – Chomsky for one:

> ... I am, frankly, rather sceptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology. (Chomsky, 1966/71: 152–3)

Other linguists, however, had no such doubts. The very title of the book by *The linguistic sciences and language teaching* (Halliday et al., 1964) asserted the significance. It might be noted too that this title, rather than *Language teaching and the linguistic sciences,* can be said to imply a unilateral dependency. The basic assumption informing the book was that since language was the object of disciplinary enquiry that linguists were expertly engaged with, they were obviously qualified to pronounce on how language should be dealt with as a pedagogic subject:

> He [the language teacher] is not teaching linguistics. But he is teaching something which is the object of study of linguistics, and is described by linguistic methods. It is obviously desirable that the underlying description should be as good as possible, and this means that it should be based on sound linguistic principles. (Halliday et al., 1964: 66)

The obvious point to be made here is that it all depends on what linguistic methods are thought to yield a good description. The study of linguistics comes in many different, often conflicting, versions, each claiming its principles to be sound. Language is cast in the image of diverse theoretical concepts and methods of description. The 'something' that is the object of the study of linguistics is actually many very different things. So which of these things should be adopted as providing the obviously desirable description for language teachers?

Diverse though different approaches to linguistics may be, the principles and methods of all of them are themselves necessarily based on some kind of abstraction that puts them at a remove from language as it is actually experienced. Like any other discipline, linguistics deals with idealized constructs. Different approaches to linguistic description idealize the raw data of language as it is actually experienced and expressed so as to make it methodologically manageable for their particular purposes. Chomsky has been roundly criticized for his particular idealization on the grounds that it puts language at a remove from the social

contexts of its use, and from its essential function as a means of communication. But of course the study of language in its social context undertaken by Labov (1970) and of the communicative 'rules of use' proposed by Hymes (1972) are also based on idealization, necessarily partial accounts of language that presuppose norms of social knowledge and behavior that are conformed to by representative members of enclosed communities. One can of course argue the relative merits of different ways of idealizing, how one way gets closer than another to capturing the essentials of language, but all of them depend on paying selective attention to some aspects of language and disregarding others. There can be no escape from partiality, without it no meaningful statements in linguistics can be made at all.

So the methodology of a particular approach to linguistic description is designed to focus on those aspects of language that are relevant to purpose. The methodology of language teaching is designed on exactly the same principle. In linguistics you cannot deal with everything about a language all at once – the formal encoding rules of its phonology, morphology, syntax, its conventionalized patterns of normal usage, the customary way it is put to communicative use in native-speaking communities, and so on. And of course you cannot **teach** everything about a language all at once either. Here too methodology is a matter of selective restriction, and one which in this case is relevant to pedagogic purpose. The question is: on what criteria is such selection to be made?

The traditional assumption, made explicit in the quotation from Halliday et al., is that the way language is conceptualized in the discipline of linguistics should also serve as the basis for designing the language as a pedagogic subject. The history of the teaching of English as a foreign language is a succession of shifts of pedagogic allegiance from one version of linguistic description to another (see Howatt with Widdowson, 2004) and the teaching of other foreign languages has generally followed suit. Thus a linguistics that focused on syntax informed the structural approach to language teaching, that which turned its attention to contextual use then informed the communicative approach, and so on. More recently corpus linguistics has been taken as providing the authoritative criteria for subject design, with the promotion of the idea that the language to be taught should be the 'real' or 'authentic' language that is attested as actually produced by its native speakers.

The object of linguistic description, however this is defined, is the knowledge and behavior, the competence, of users identified as native speakers of the language concerned. This object may well be seen as corresponding to the **objective** of teaching – what it is deemed desirable for the learners to eventually achieve. But even if one accepts that this is a relevant and realistic objective, the crucial pedagogic question is what has to be done to activate the **process** of learning that will lead to its achievement.

It is this question that has generally been disregarded in the promotion over recent years of the idea I have already alluded to – that what is taught in language courses should approximate to the 'real' or 'authentic' language produced by its native speakers, and which corpus linguistics can now describe in detail. This authenticity doctrine was most explicitly and influentially expounded by the late John Sinclair in the form of a number of precepts for language teachers, the first of which is 'Present real examples only' (Sinclair, 1997: 30), that is to say, samples of language usage attested as having been actually produced by native speakers of the language. This and the other precepts derive directly from the description of the language which is assumed to be the ultimate objective of learners to achieve. It is made quite explicit that they are unconnected with the learning process they need to engage in to achieve it:

> The precepts center on data, and arise from observations about the nature of language. They are not concerned with psychological or pedagogical approaches to language teaching. (Sinclair, 1997: 30)

Here then we have precepts for language teachers that paradoxically have nothing to do with the psychology of learning or the pedagogy of teaching. They are based on the assumption that the reality of native speaker usage is directly transferable and learnable in foreign language classrooms (for further discussion see Widdowson, 2003). The validity of the precepts would indeed seem to depend on the belief that language pedagogy is really only a matter of teaching a selection of corpus data for the learner to accumulate. Elsewhere Sinclair advises teachers that:

> (…) it should not ever be necessary for students to 'unlearn' anything they have been taught. They cannot be taught everything at once, and because our knowledge of the textual detail of language has been so vague, they have been taught half-truths, generalities which apply only in some circumstances.
> (Sinclair, 1991: 499–500)

But as teachers know full well, language learning, like learning anything else, is a developmental process which will always involve some kind of unlearning as knowledge and behavior are revised and adapted to accommodate new experience. And we need to note that representing the language of a corpus as authentic is itself a half-truth, in that it is dissociated from the contexts that are needed to authenticate it as communication, and represents a generality which only applies to the circumstances from which the corpus data derives.

3. The objective and process of language learning

The design of the language subject, then, has obviously to consider not only the objective but the **process** of learning. This is the case, of course, whatever the objective: it is one thing to specify a destination but quite another to work out the best routes for getting there. These are pedagogically plotted by grading language along a scale of what is deemed to be relatively difficult for learners to take in. So the methodology of pedagogy, like that of linguistics, also abstracts on the principle of selective significance but with reference to quite different criteria. Linguistic descriptions may indicate a learning destination, what language learners are directed to aspire to, but it cannot give any guidance about the directions they could or should take to successfully arrive there.

So where might such guidance be found? On the face of it, the most obvious source is that area of enquiry that is expressly and explicitly concerned with the learning process, namely the study of second language acquisition (SLA). Research on 'How languages are learnt' – the title of a best selling handbook for teachers (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) – has been going on for nearly fifty years and its published findings are enough to fill a sizable library. If there is any guidance for teachers as to how to activate the learning process in their classrooms, they surely need to look no further. But here too the primary focus is on the objective. In mainstream SLA, although different tributaries have marked its course over the years, learning has generally been conceived of as the progressive acquisition of native speaker competence through different stages of interlanguage (Ellis, 2015). Successful learning is assessed in terms of conformity to this competence norm. When learners do not conform, this is seen as an interim phase in their progressive transition from L1 to L2, from one steady state to another. The assumption is that this progression is regulated by various cognitive factors which, encouraged by teacher intervention, naturally direct learners towards conformity.

A major hindrance to this progression is the influence of the learners' own L1, which is generally held responsible for many of the non-conformities learners persist in producing. This being so, the task of teaching is to find ways of countering this negative influence so as to remove this impediment to the acquisition of competence. But this, of course, is to assume that what counts as successful learning is only that which conforms to what is taught as the objective. The pedagogy of foreign language teaching, as generally conceived, is objective driven. This is not to say that process is disregarded, indeed it is the purpose of methodology to activate it, and course books are full of activities of all kinds designed to motivate and encourage learning. My point is that the process is essentially objective driven in that it is directed at getting learners to progressively acquire native-like competence in a particular language, assumed to be well-defined. What is assessed is the

extent to which teachers succeed in doing this, the extent to which what is learnt corresponds with what has been taught. It is not the process of learning itself that is tested but the outcome of teaching.

What if we take a different perspective and think of learning in dissociation from this fixed objective? Why is it, we might then ask, that learners keep on producing non-conformist language when they are continually told by teachers not to do so, when it is in their own interests to conform to avoid the penalties of failure? There is surely some influence at work which subverts the influence of teachers. It seems clear that what language learners do is what we all do when we encounter something unfamiliar – we seek to make sense of it by relating it to our familiar experience. That, in general, is what learning means. The influence of the learners' own experience of language may impede their progression towards the prescribed teaching objective, but without it there can be no learning at all.

From this perspective, learner non-conformities can be seen as instinctive attempts to deforeignize the foreign language by using it as a communicative resource in the same kind of way as they would use their own language. Imposing conformity on learners in effect alienates them from their L1 experience and makes the L2 all the more foreign. This effect is further exacerbated when learners are denied access to this experience by the customary practice of monolingual teaching. This, it is assumed, is necessary to focus attention on the L2 so as to offset the disruptive interference of the L1. In effect, however, it has the effect of impeding natural learning. In this respect, one might say that many, if not most, of the problems that learners encounter are in effect teacher induced (for further discussion see Widdowson, 2003, 2020).

If we consider what learners are actually doing when they produce their incompetent 'erroneous' language, it seems clear that they are seeking to respond to the communicative demands of the various classroom activities prescribed for them by making do with whatever language resource they have at their disposal. They are of course mindful of the teacher-imposed condition that they are not allowed to draw on the resource of their own language, but this then finds its way quite naturally into the L2 they produce. The essential point is that they are putting the L2 to use as best they can, and in so doing, while their language may not conform to the required norm of correctness it does conform to the conditions of normal communicative use.

Looked at from this point of view, learners can be said to be enacting a role other than the submissively subordinate one of teachees that has been assigned to them – a user role which involves using the data of another language to extend their repertoire. In so doing the language they produce may reveal them as incompetent teachees, but can also be taken to be evidence that they are acting upon, and developing, a more general lingual capability. If learning is conceived of like

this there is, or should be, no discontinuity between L1 and L2. To put it another way, learning can be seen as a process of translanguaging (Garcia & Li Wei, 2014), of acting on an existing capability to extend communicative resources. Such a concept of learning is, I would argue, informed by 'the nature of language' which Sinclair refers to in support of his precepts. But I do not think that it is the nature of language to be confined to how it is manifested in the 'authentic' usage of the native speakers of a particular language, but rather that language gets differently authenticated by its users in all manner of ways, that it is of its nature an intrinsically variable, adaptive, emergent process. And this quite naturally is the nature of the language learning process also.

But this is not of course the kind of learning process that is encouraged by orthodox objective-oriented teaching. On the contrary, such teaching has the effect of suppressing it. It is as if learning were just a reflex of teaching and could not happen without it, whereas in reality it is a natural process that goes on all the time without the intervention of teachers. As I have already indicated, the problem is that it is only the learning approved by pedagogic authority that is given recognition.

So while teachers are casting learners in the role of teachees, trying to get them to acquire another and different language by the imposition of conformity, learners are instinctively trying to extend the language they have already got. It would seem sensible to suggest that pedagogy should look for a *rapprochement* of some kind, especially since orthodox teacher-centred pedagogy cannot claim to have a record of unqualified success. Rather the opposite: the methods and approaches that have been proposed as radical innovations over the years – the direct method, the lexical approach, the communicative approach, task-based teaching and so on – each might be said to represent, to quote T.S. Eliot, "a wholely new start and a different kind of failure." The failure is usually associated with the unsatisfactory grades that learners get in formal assessment. I would suggest on the contrary that it is the teaching that has failed.

4. The learning process as objective: An alternative approach

Teaching has failed, I would argue, because it is fixated on the objective of teaching competence in **a particular language** with relative disregard of the natural process of learning **language**. Foreign language teaching and learning – the order of words itself implying a unilateral dependency – is generally taken to mean the learning of a specific L2 – a separate language like French, Arabic, Greek, English – each quite different from the L1 but all alike in being foreign. An alternative pedagogy would define the subject as teaching language, not teaching a language,

which would mean that teaching would accommodate to learning and not the other way round, and defining the pedagogic objective in reference to the learning process as the development of the capability for languaging.

How might this alternative way of thinking work out in actual practice? One might propose that the first phase of language courses would focus on language awareness, whereby the learners existing linguistic experience is exploited to develop an active understanding of the nature of language in general. Language awareness has, of course, long been a well discussed topic and there is an extensive literature exploring its implications for language pedagogy and language education more generally (see Garrett & Cots, 2017). The case for its significance for the particular approach to language teaching proposed here is one I myself argued many years ago (Widdowson, 1997), and this present article might be read as a development of that earlier discussion.

What I am proposing here is that classroom activities would be designed to get learners to discover how encoding and communicative conventions of their own language compare with those of other, unfamiliar, languages, but how the differences can be related to common general principles of language formation and use. One topic, for example, might be pronominal systems, how they encode concepts 1st 2nd and 3rd person participation in different ways, how they are used to signal how users position themselves in relation to others, how variation in pragmatic use reflects socio-cultural shifts in attitude, and over time can result in changes in the encoded system itself and so on. It is easy to see how such a topic, seemingly narrow at first sight, can raise issues of wider significance about the essentials of human language, how it relates to cognition and communication, how and why in its manifestations as separate languages it is both a stable communal construct and at the same time continuously in flux.

In this first phase the subject being taught is in essence pedagogical linguistics but it takes its bearings from general linguistics not the descriptive linguistics of a particular language. In subsequent phases, the range of exemplification could then be reduced to give primary focus to just those languages which are to be put to active use as a communicative resource. Then learners are provided with opportunities to act on their understanding by engaging in activities which require them to make use of whatever linguistic resources they have available as best they can to achieve a satisfactory communicative outcome. These activities would bear a superficial resemblance to those of task-based language teaching, TBLT, (Ellis, 2003), but there are crucial differences. To begin with, the linguistic resource is not confined to the L2. And then the tasks are obviously not designed to meet CAF specifications (complexity, accuracy, fluency) (Housen & Kuiken, 2009) since what counts as a satisfactory outcome of an activity has nothing to do with how complex, accurate or fluent the language is in reference to the prescribed

norms of the L2. What counts is how successfully learners have managed to cope with the situation. The tasks would be designed to make increasing demands on the learners, but on their capability not their competence.

The language used in these activities has its own authenticity – not the authenticity of native speaker usage but that of communicative use. For what they require the learners to do is what all language users naturally do – use what language they have at their disposal to get their meaning across to suit their purposes in the contexts they find themselves in. This, for example, is what non-native speaking users of English as a lingua franca (ELF) do, and what users of so-called 'foreigner talk' in any other language do. Learner language with all its 'incompetent' non-conformities is in this respect user language and as such is just as authentic as that of native speakers.

In the alternative approach to language pedagogy I have outlined here, the objective is not distinct from the process of learning: the development of the process **is** the objective. But this is now defined not as the acquisition of competence in another and different language, but the development of a more general lingual capability which learners can continue to exercise as users beyond the end of teaching, adapting and extending their language resource to cope with the communicative contingencies that arise in the different, largely unpredictable contexts they encounter.

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