



Aspects of Language Teaching

语言教学面面观

H. G. Widdowson



上海外语教育出版社



牛津应用语言学丛书

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出 版 前 言

这是一部论述当今语言教学中最引人注目的一些问题的专著,特别是对教学理论与教学实践的关系问题进行了系统、深入的探讨。作者 H·G·威多森为伦敦大学教育学院的对外英语教授,著名的应用语言学家。

本书内容分为三大部分:第一部分“语言讲授的理论与实践”从宏观理论上探讨了语言教学作为原则指导下的职业活动的本质,评析了理论与实践相互依赖的关系。首先,语言教学可以被看作一项在教学原则指导下解决问题的活动,作者从这一角度出发,列举了各主要流派的观点。其次,教学理论对教学实践有着指导作用。作者指出,授课虽然是一种自觉的探索过程,但课堂授课活动都是在某种理论或原则的指导下进行的。教学的成功在于理论的正确指导,在于教师采用与理论相适应的教学手段,并根据特定学生群体具体情况发挥个人的创造性。否认理论的指导作用是非职业性的行为。作者继而指出,教学的过程既是传授知识的过程,也是对教学理论的实验过程和教师提高讲授能力的过程。理想的教学过程就是以上三者相辅相成、紧密结合的过程。作者认为,高效教学的前提之一是预先确定教学指导思想,以此确定施教原则,语言教学必须向学生提供指导,否则教育就没有存在的必要。作者强调了采取分析性思维方式或者说批判性思维方式的重要性;教育的目的是将理论应用于实践;语言教学的环境像社会环境那样在变化,理论并不能给教学以完全的指导,因此必须对教学过程进行批评性的评估,从而满足理论发展的需要。

当然,强调理论的指导作用并不否认经验或习惯性做法的价值,只是应先检验和应用,不能人云亦云。作者也着重指出了教师在教学中所起作用 and 确定教学的职业地位的重要性。作者专门用一个章节探讨了对教师的教育以及提高教师

业务能力的问题,阐述了教师需要具备的素质。强调只有受过系统教育、具有语言教学意识和业务能力的教师才有可能搞好语言教学。语言教师必须不断提高业务能力以达到职业水准,必须发挥个人的创造性。

第二部分“语言面面观”对语言的本质进行批判性的探讨。作者阐述了语言教学理论与语言教学实践的相关性,分析了单词、语法和语境之间的关系,介绍了语言描述的两种方法——从语义学角度出发的描述法和从语用学角度出发的描述法以及两者的关系。

第三部分“教学面面观”探讨了教学法问题,介绍了因存在关于语言描述的不同观点而导致的不同语言教学法及其相互间关系,重点对传统的教学法与新兴的教学法作了比较和评价,讨论了拟定教学大纲的原则、标准等问题,指出教学法的中心任务是找到最有效的学习框架。作者也探讨了教师的权威性和学习者的自主性问题,指出个人行为只有在一定的范围内才有意义,让学习者进行任其自然的语言学习未必能达到目的。

值得一提的是作者对书中阐述的教学理论所持的明智态度。作者强调,教学理论是多样化的,读者并不一定要立即接受作者阐述的理论,重要的是采用分析批判的思维方式,既用理论指导实践,也用实践来完善理论。本书希望引出的正是这种思维方法。作者指出,关键问题并不是要不要指导思想,而是如何巧妙地运用指导思想对学习过程提供指导。语言在发展,语言教学法也因此要发生变化,理论的发展是无止境的,因此需要将原则指导下的语言教学的研究过程继续进行下去。

作者阐述的观点有力度、有权威性,得到了所有主张保持语言讲授和教师教育职业水准的学者的公认,在学术界享有很高的威望。

本书的读者对象为从事语言教学的教师 and 研究人员、高校英语专业高年级学生及研究生。

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A number of the chapters of this book have developed from presentations at conferences and published papers. Chapter 2 started life as a plenary address at the 11th Annual Ontario TESL Conference in Toronto in November 1983. Chapters 3 and 4 grew out of a paper originally commissioned by the Council of Europe and submitted in September 1986. An earlier version of Chapter 6 was read at the Fifth National LEND conference in Rimini in November 1985, and appeared in print in a collection of papers edited by William Rutherford and Michael Sharwood-Smith entitled *Grammar and Second Language Teaching* published by Newbury House in 1988. Chapter 9 is an elaboration of a paper written for a book called *Language Syllabuses: The State of the Art* edited by M L Tickoo and published in 1987 by the Regional English Language Centre in Singapore. Parts of Chapter 10 began as a presentation entitled *Design Principles for a Communicative Grammar*, given at a TESOL symposium and subsequently published in an ELT Document (124) edited by Christopher Brumfit. The original for Chapter 11 was a plenary address at the IATEFL Annual Conference in Brighton, April 1986. It was published in *English Language Teaching Journal* Volume 41, Number 2 just one year later.

I am grateful to all those people who have given me the opportunity to make my thoughts public in talk and print.

I would like to express my appreciation, too, to all those colleagues and students who have stimulated and guided my thinking over the years by pertinent observation and critical comment and who have supported me, more than they know, by their approval and the sense of community that they provide. I should like to make particular mention of Simon Murison-Bowie, not only because of the valuable comments he made on an earlier draft of this book, but also for twenty years of companionship in the profession.

The content of this book, then, owes a great deal to the ideas of many other people. Its compilation owes a great deal to one person, Sybil Spence. For her unfailing patience, dedication and care in preparing copy for publication I am extremely grateful.

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W. Somerset Maugham, 'The Unconquered', *Complete Short Stories* (Heinemann 1951)

Preface

This book has been made out of a number of papers written over the past five years or so. Most of them were originally prepared as conference presentations, some appeared subsequently in print. My first intention was simply to put them together as a compilation with a minimum of additional comment. Then I saw that there were matters which called for further expounding and for explicit cross-reference. So I went to work elaborating and linking. The papers grew into chapters. And as chapters, they carry the implicit claim that they constitute parts of a reasonably coherent and uniform whole.

But this manner of composition leaves its traces. The original papers were designed for particular occasions and purposes as self-contained statements. Certain ideas and arguments naturally appear therefore in several places, variously emphasized and formulated as appropriate to the perspectives of different discussions. When the papers are brought together and fashioned as chapters they cease to be separate episodes and become elements in a sequence. While recurrence is necessary for the independence of each paper as such, when it appears in chapters, which are linked in *interdependent* continuity, it can read like needless repetition. What I have done is to pare away some of the repetition while retaining recurrence where I feel it is necessary to restate ideas in demonstration of their more specific relevance to the chapters concerned.

The chapters are assembled into three parts, each of which deals with a central theme. The first of these perhaps calls for particular comment because it sets the key, so to speak, for the discussion in the rest of the book. In it I enquire into the nature of language teaching as a professional enterprise. What does the process of teaching actually involve? What do teachers need to know in theory and what procedures do they need to employ in practice to actualize that knowledge as effective action? How can they learn from experience? These questions have to do with

the education of teachers and their status as professional people. They are questions which I have raised on occasions elsewhere, but I make no apology for giving them prominence here. They take precedence over all others within the scope of this book. Unless they are seriously considered, proposals for general curriculum change or particular classroom techniques are effectively meaningless, for such proposals have to be mediated by teachers and such mediation presupposes a degree of awareness and expertise which only a thoroughgoing and continuing teacher education can provide.

This might seem an obvious point, but it is one which those responsible for determining current educational policy in Britain, for example, seem to have some difficulty in grasping. They are busy planning a National Curriculum which necessarily requires a degree of professionalism for which little provision is being made. Teachers tend to be referred to as if they were factory workers to be provided with minimal practical skills and required to pick up on the job whatever extra expertise is necessary to keep the pedagogic production line going. The result is that teachers' morale declines with their status. Many leave a profession officially treated with such disdain. Furthermore, expedient stop-gap attempts to provide for the lack of qualified teachers only make matters worse. I read in my newspaper today (6 July 1989), for example, of a teacher with only rudimentary French and no German being engaged to teach both languages in a secondary school. I read that it has been calculated that 25 per cent of teaching in British secondary schools is being carried out by teachers with an inadequate knowledge of the subject. Those in authority seem not to be particularly troubled by this situation. So long as there are people available to stand in front of classes it does not seem to matter very much about their competence as teachers. If it is expedient and cheap to employ licensed teachers rather than qualified ones then this solution will be preferred whatever the consequences for education.

In the light of such attitudes it is particularly important to assert the professional status of teaching. But the assertion of status has to be supported by a corresponding commitment on the part of teachers to standards of professionalism. These standards, as I argue in Part 1, depend on a continual process of self-education through an evaluation of practice in reference to theory. Unless teaching is informed by principled pragmatism in this way, it can make no claim to be a serious professional

activity. It becomes hack work. I would argue that teachers who reject theory as being irrelevant to practice not only misunderstand the nature of their work, but at the same time undermine the profession. Furthermore they lend support in this way to the enemies of education and so ultimately act against their own interests.

Part 1, then, investigates the nature of language teaching in general as a principled professional activity. It deals with the interdependence of theory and practice and the appropriate exploitation of ideas. Part 2 then looks at one theoretical area which it seems reasonable to suppose is relevant to language teaching, namely enquiries into the nature of language. Here I look at the relationship between words, grammar, and context, at how meaning is encoded semantically within the linguistic system on the one hand and achieved pragmatically by contextual negotiation on the other. I then seek to show in Part 3 how these perspectives on language description lead to different approaches to the teaching of language. Thus Parts 2 and 3 are intended to exemplify the kind of critical enquiry which, as I argue in Part 1, should direct the work of language teachers. I say the *kind* of critical enquiry. It would run counter to my own position to suggest that the teachers' professional salvation depends on their accepting the ideas and arguments proposed in these pages.

For the validity of ideas and arguments is always relative. To begin with, whether they are acceptable or not will depend on the extent to which one accepts beliefs of a general ideological kind on which they are based. I have already expressed one belief of this sort, namely that to deny the relevance of theory is unprofessional practice. If readers do not accept this belief there is no point in their reading this book—or any other book on the principles of language teaching. There are two other and related beliefs which direct the thinking of these chapters and, by the same token, limit their validity for other minds. It would be as well for me to make them explicit too.

First there is the belief in the importance of analytic thought. It seems to me that it is the purpose of education (teacher education included) to develop ways of applying the intellect to experience, of pushing rational enquiry as far as it will go. This is not to deny the value of experience but only to say that this value is not intrinsic to experience itself but is derived from it by reflection. Experience, one might say, is the sensation which the

mind must make sense of. It provides the data for analysis. This should not be taken to mean that all experience is explicable by reference to reason. Heaven forbid that this should be so. But we can only really tell what is genuinely inexplicable when explanation fails. To accept that something is mysterious and beyond the reach of reason before trying to subject it to rational analysis is simply to diminish the mystery and make it commonplace. So, in reference to this book, one can acknowledge that there are aspects of language teaching which will remain mysterious, that, in the last analysis, teaching is an art depending on the intuitive flair of individual personalities. In the last analysis, agreed: for it is only as a consequence of analysis that one can arrive at such a conclusion. Of course, there will be differences of opinion about which aspects of teaching should be analysed and about the validity of the analysis. All enquiry, as I have said, is limited by preconceived assumptions, and readers are likely to have some of their own which are at variance with mine. That is all to the good. Readers may then be induced to review their own position by the kind of critical thinking it is the purpose of this book to provoke.

Finally, much of the argument in this book is based on a belief in the need for preconceived ideas as a condition for effective language teaching and learning. Teaching and learning: the order is significant. For the preconceived ideas are used by the teacher to control the learning process. They define pedagogic principles. This view is not, I know, a popular one. The notion of teacher control is anathema in many quarters. It sounds illiberal. It smacks of prescription and even perhaps suggests the suppression of human rights. The view which prevails in many places is one which holds that the description of language use and the promotion of language learning should proceed *without* preconceived ideas, because otherwise the language behaviour of real people, users and learners, is cramped into conformity and so misrepresented on the one hand, inhibited on the other. Instead, it is argued, we should let the people speak, as it were, for themselves. If they are learners we should let them find their own natural way as they go, instead of confining them to an itinerary fixed in advance. This is a seductive doctrine and one of which it would be wise to be wary. As I have already suggested, all enquiry presupposes a purpose of one sort or another and so is primed by a set of ideas. Otherwise, there is no way in which one can make sense of experience. Language learning is no

different. There must always be some points of reference to give direction to the process and it is the teachers' task to provide them. The idea that learners will learn efficiently for themselves if they are left alone is, I believe, misconceived. If natural learning was so effective there would be no need for education at all. Classrooms exist to provide opportunities which would otherwise be denied by controlling conditions for learning which would not otherwise take place. Pedagogy presupposes control and control presupposes preconceived ideas. The central question is how this control is to be exercised tactically, tightened, or relaxed so as to facilitate the learning process: how preconceived ideas are to be evaluated and modified to accommodate unpredictable developments in the classroom. It is when control is inflexible and ideas fixed that they become constraints on learning. Otherwise they are necessary conditions. It is in the setting up of such conditions that teachers apply their special knowledge and expertise and discharge their professional responsibility.

It is because learners do not learn effectively without the intervention of properly educated teachers that we need to insist on the proper professional standards and status of teaching. It is to those who take the profession of language teaching seriously in this way that this book is addressed and dedicated.

HGW

London, July 1989

Note

On the matter of controversial pronominals, I have either sought to avoid them by plurality, or to imply dual or neutral reference by the random distribution of *he*, *she*, and so on. If I have lapsed I can only hope that readers will neutrally eke out my imperfections with their thoughts.

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1 Introduction

General matters of principle

The purpose of this first part of the book is to establish a perspective on language teaching. It provides a conceptual setting for what follows in the succeeding chapters.

This perspective aims to present teaching as a self-conscious enquiring enterprise whereby classroom activities are referred to theoretical principles of one sort or another. These principles essentially define the subject: they are the bearings that teachers need to take in order to plot their course. The theory which provides such bearings may come from a variety of sources: from experience or experiment, from sudden inspirational insight, from the archives of conventional wisdom. But wherever it comes from, the theory needs to be made explicit and public if its relevance to pedagogy is to be effectively assessed.

This is not to deny that individual teachers may be highly effective in making their own way by an intuitive sense of direction. The effectiveness of teaching cannot be equated with its rational accountability. In any classroom there will always be aspects of the classroom encounter, the play of personality, the tactics of expedient interaction, which will defy the reduction to generality.

But if we are to talk about pedagogy, individual effort must be referred to more general ideas, otherwise there is no way for experience to be communicated, no way in which others can derive benefit from the particular successes of the individual. What principles do is to make private experience publicly accessible, open to discussion and capable of wider relevance. In our case, they enable us to claim that there is indeed a pedagogy of language teaching and a profession which practises it.

So an insistence on the importance of principle in no way denies the value of experience or customary practices but simply requires that they are subjected to evaluation, and not just taken

on trust. Experience of itself has no significance but can only have significance attributed to it. Custom of itself is no surety of effective action. It may of course turn out that there are after all good independent reasons for respecting the intuitive judgments which come from long experience. But it does not seem sensible to accept them unless they can be given rational sanction. The contexts of language teaching, like the more general social contexts within which they are located, are continually changing, continually challenging habitual ways of thinking and the patterns of past certainty. Unless there is a corresponding process of critical appraisal, there can be no adaptation, no adjustment to change.

Principle and technique

Principles are abstractions. They have to be actualized as techniques in the particular circumstances of different classrooms. The teaching task is to see that the techniques that are used are effective in promoting learning objectives, so they have to be designed to account for specific contexts of instruction. A technique may be consistent with a principle but ineffective for a particular group of learners. This may be a case of inadequate actualization, and this would call for a change of technique. On the other hand, of course, it may be that the principle itself needs to be questioned. How can the teachers tell?

The teachers' dilemma is the same as that of the researcher outside the classroom. The researcher has a hypothesis and sets up experiments to test it. If these do not yield results which support the hypothesis, it may either be because the experiments were ineffectively designed, in which case the researcher will design some more, or because the hypothesis was invalid as formulated in the first place, in which case the researcher will reformulate it, and then work out what new experiments are needed to test it. Language teachers can be seen as involved in very much the same sort of process—their principles correspond to hypotheses, their techniques to experiments. Teachers too are faced with methodological decisions as to where adjustments are to be made in the matching up of abstraction with actuality.

Teaching as a research activity

Teaching, then, can be conceived of as a research activity

whereby experimental techniques of instruction are designed to correspond with hypothetical principles of pedagogy, with provision made for mutual adjustment so as to bring validity of principle into as close an alignment as possible with the utility of technique.

But of course teachers have extra commitments. They cannot just assume the researcher role and use students as experimental subjects, observing how they learn under varying conditions with detached interest to satisfy an intellectual curiosity. The teacher's business is to *induce* learning and the techniques that are used have to work to that end. In effect, teachers become intervening variables in their own experiments. Their research has to be applied in the very process of enquiry: it has to be directly accountable in terms of practical pay-off.

This being so, we can regard the classroom as the context for two related kinds of activity. In one, techniques are devised with regard to their practical effectiveness in the promotion of learning. They are directed at the benefit of learners. This we might call the instructional activity, with the teacher engaged as participant mediating the techniques concerned. In the other activity, techniques are related to principles with a view to enquiring into the relationship between the two. Here they are directed at the benefit of the teachers' own understanding of their craft. This we might call the experimental activity, with the teacher acting as observer manipulating the techniques concerned.

Thus the experimental activity and the instructional activity are reciprocally enhanced, and the most effective pedagogy is one in which the two act together, each informing and reinforcing the other. In this way, teaching which provides for learner development serves the cause of teacher development at the same time. It fulfils a dual educational purpose.

The view of pedagogy proposed here, then, makes teachers responsible for defining their own problems and providing their own solutions. Research from outside, whether descriptive, experimental or speculative, cannot therefore be directly transposed to the classroom context. It does, however, have a crucial role to play in two respects, theoretically and methodologically. Theoretically, it can serve as a source of ideas and insights which are of potential relevance for the formulation of principles: ideas emerging from disciplines devoted to the study of language and learning which might bear upon the definition of language as

subject. Methodologically, it can provide precept and example of what is involved in critical enquiry, of how intuition can be subjected to conceptual and empirical evaluation. It can raise consciousness of the whole process of continuing self-appraisal.

Some people will perhaps feel uneasy about the definition of pedagogy as operational research in which experience is pressed into partnership with principled enquiry. It may seem too much like confinement, a denial of individual enterprise and the constraining of intuition into patterns of conformity. It looks as if it might cramp the teacher's style. This raises an issue which is of general relevance to the matters discussed in this book. It has to do with the relationship between individual initiative and conventional constraint, with the limits social conditions put on the freedom of thought and action. This is, of course, an issue of much wider social and political significance which it is not part of my brief to explore. But it finds expression in current ideas and attitudes within the theoretical and practical domains of language study, language teaching and language teacher education. Since these *are* within my brief in this book, the issue warrants consideration here.

The limits of initiative

In very general terms, what has characterized recent tendencies in the theoretical study and the practical teaching of language has been a distrust of authority and of the rules and conventions through which it is exercised. Thus in the theoretical study of language the deference previously accorded to analysis and explanation by the informed observer has been questioned in favour of an uncommitted approach to enquiry, without preconception and without privilege, into the ways in which participants negotiate their own conditions for achieving their purposes. And in language teaching, the idea that the teacher should direct the progress of learners has been questioned on the grounds that such direction impedes the natural process of learning. In both theoretical and practical domains, therefore, the exercise of authority is seen to result in the artificial manipulation of the actuality of experience. The description of language use is thereby distorted. The development of language learning is thereby disrupted.

While acknowledging the danger of ideas casting reality in their own image and serving the cause of suppression, one needs