



Teaching Language as Communication

语言教学交际法

H. G. Widdowson



上海外语教育出版社



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牛津应用语言学丛书

Teaching Language as Communication

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H. G. Widdowson 著

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出 版 前 言

本书是一部介绍和评述语言教学新兴方法——交际法的学术专著,出版于1978年,至1996年已重印9次。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。威多森是交际法的创始人之一,他在充分考虑语言的性质及其实际使用的基础上倡导了一种更为合理和有效的语言教学方法——交际法。本书对这一方法的理论依据和实践方法作了系统、详尽的阐述,澄清了有关的疑问和误解。

所谓交际法教学,按作者的定义是一种既培养学习者语言能力又培养其交际能力的教学方法。传统的教学法存在着一些观念上的误区,比如认为学语言就是学习语言系统成分的正确用法,读者在此基础上自然会掌握实际应用语言的能力,却不明白除此之外还应学会语言在不同场合的恰当应用。按作者的观点,掌握一门语言意味着既掌握其词汇、句法,又会在语言交际中进行恰当的应用。多年来,作者一直在探索能将上述两者结合起来的交际法语言教学理论并将其付诸于实践;他在本书中将有关交际法的观点进行了归纳、综合和深层次的探讨。本书是作者八年研究成果的结晶。

值得一提的是,在交际法广为流行之际,作者对其推广持非常负责任的慎重态度。他明确指出,撰写本书的目的并不是盲目推荐交际法,而是提出关于此种教学法理论和实践的个人观点供人们评价和研究;本书不是下结论,而是提设想。一方面,作者认为交际法的教学理论尚未达到完善的境界,对其可行性仍应进行恰如其分的评估。既然人们确实对这种以注重培养交际能力的教学法感兴趣,那么就应该对复杂的交际问题和使用这种教学法可能会带来的后果进行周密的研究和剖析,不对它进行深入研究就加以推广和应用是不负责任的态度。作者也指

出了有些人对交际法存在的错误理解,比如认为只要注重“观念”和“功能”而不是注重词语、句法自然就是交际法教学等。另一方面,作者认为对语言使用的研究目前尚处于初期阶段,人们对话语形成的方式、不同修辞活动特点的确定等要素都了解甚少。

关于语言使用法的教学已积累了不少有参考价值的经验,可是对语言使用的教学原则却几乎找不到理论依据,因此必须谨慎处事,交际法的完善尚待进一步的实践和时日的验证。

作者谦虚地指出,本书所表达的观点并不是交际法的系统理论,并不是盖棺论定,而是抛砖引玉,让人们了解交际法的理论基础及其现实意义,并在此基础上一起来进行批评性的研究,使之成为完善的教学理论和教学方法。作者特别强调了教师所能起的作用,指出语言教学既是理论性的也是实践性的职业,交际法的完善特别有待于教师在教学实践中对其理论和实施方法加以充实和完善。

总之,本书的论述系统、全面,既有理论阐述又有对实践问题的探讨,是一部关于语言教学交际法的专门性学术著作,为从事教学法研究和语言教学的教师、学生和研究人员提供了简明扼要的指导。

本社编辑部

Introduction

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

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

x Introduction

language and language learning is such that it would be irresponsible to be anything but tentative. But it would be even more irresponsible to avoid investigation and to pretend that there are no problems.

So this book is not in any way intended as propaganda for a new 'communicative' orthodoxy in language teaching. It is, on the contrary, an appeal for critical investigation into the bases of a belief and its practical implications. I am not trying to present a conclusive case but to start an inquiry.

There are, it seems to me, two ways of looking at publication. The first, which one might dub the classical view, regards appearance in print as the final public revelation of carefully rehearsed ideas made as definitive and as precise as possible. The aim is for universality and permanence and one proceeds towards publication with cautious circumspection. This classical view is the one expressed by Alexander Pope in his curt recommendation to other, and lesser, poets: 'Keep your piece nine years!' The other view, the romantic, is less concerned with completeness, is much less cautious and circumspect, and regards publication, more cavalierly perhaps, as a device for public speculation. The aim here is to stimulate interest by exposure, to suggest rather than to specify, to allow the public access to personal thinking. It is this second view that I subscribe to in publishing this book. I accept, therefore, that its contents are transitional and transient. They are meant as a personal consideration of issues that seem to me to stand in need of examination at the moment.

When I say that this book is personal, I do not want to imply that I have produced it in isolation from the ideas of others. Quite the reverse. Over the past eight years I have had the benefit of continuing discussions with the staff and students in the Department of Linguistics at Edinburgh and most of what is worthwhile in this book derives directly or indirectly from them. Now, as I am about to leave Edinburgh for London, I should like to express my sense of personal and professional debt to that department. I must make particular mention of Patrick Allen with whom I have worked in developing the *English in Focus* series, which has been, and continues to be, an attempt to produce practical teaching materials in accordance with the kind of approach I explore here. The authors of particular titles in the series—Eric Glendinning, Elizabeth Laird, Joan Maclean, Alan Mountford and Ian Pearson—have all made valuable contributions to this development and have given me ideas that I would not have thought of on my own. Other people whose influence I would particularly like to acknowledge are Tony Howatt, who was kind enough to read through an earlier draft of the book and made many valuable suggestions for improvement, Guy Aston, Christopher Candlin, Malcolm Coulthard, John Sinclair, Hugh Trappes-Lomax, Sandy Urquhart and David Wilkins. None of

these people will agree with everything I say, of course; some might be quite appalled at the effect of their influence; all of them would very likely have made a better job of various parts of this book.

A different kind of influence altogether has been that of my wife. It is equally important, although I do not acknowledge it openly as often as I ought.

H. G. Widdowson
Edinburgh
March 1977

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语言教学面面观 |
| Widdowson, H.G. | <i>Teaching Language as Communication</i>
语言教学交际法 |

Contents

Introduction	ix
CHAPTER 1 USAGE AND USE	
1.1 Correctness and appropriacy	1
1.2 Usage and use as aspects of performance	2
1.3 Usage and use in classroom presentation	4
1.4 Aspects of meaning: signification and value	10
1.5 Usage and use in the design of language teaching materials	12
1.6 Selecting areas of use for teaching language	15
1.7 Summary and conclusion	18
Notes and references	20
CHAPTER 2 DISCOURSE	
2.1 Sentence, proposition and illocutionary act	22
2.2 Cohesion and propositional development	24
2.3 Coherence and illocutionary development	27
2.4 The relationship between propositional and illocutionary development	29
2.5 Procedures of interpretation	31
2.6 Deriving discourse from sentences: an example	32
2.6.1 Propositional development: achieving cohesion	33
2.6.2 Illocutionary development: achieving coherence	38
2.7 Conventions of coherence	44
2.8 Deriving discourse by arrangement: another example	45
2.9 Summary and conclusion	51
Notes and references	55
CHAPTER 3 LINGUISTIC SKILLS AND COMMUNICATIVE ABILITIES	
3.1 The four skills	57
3.2 Activities associated with spoken language	58
3.3 Activities associated with written language	61
3.4 Reciprocal and non-reciprocal activities	64
3.5 Linguistic skills and communicative abilities	67
3.6 Retrospective and prospective interpretation	69
3.7 Assimilation and discrimination	71
3.8 Non-verbal communication	73

3.9 Summary and conclusion	74
Notes and references	75
CHAPTER 4 COMPREHENDING AND READING	
4.1 Preview	77
4.2 The reading passage as dependent exemplification	77
4.3 The reading passage as independent 'comprehension piece'	79
4.3.1 Extracts: the problem of authenticity	79
4.3.2 Extracts: the comprehending problem	81
4.3.2.1 Priming glossaries	82
4.3.2.2 Prompting glossaries	86
4.3.3 Simplified versions	88
4.3.4 Simple accounts	89
4.4 Gradual approximation	91
4.5 Comprehension questions: forms and functions	94
4.5.1 Types of question by reference to form	95
4.5.2 Types of question by reference to function	100
4.5.2.1 Usage reference	100
4.5.2.2 Use inference	102
4.6 Other reading exercises	105
Notes and references	109
CHAPTER 5 COMPOSING AND WRITING	
5.1 Preview	111
5.2 Types of grammar exercise	112
5.3 Exercises in usage and use	115
5.3.1 Composing sentences in passages	115
5.3.2 Using the contexts of the reading passage	117
5.4 Preparation exercises	119
5.5 Exploitation exercises	123
5.5.1 Gradual approximation: sentence to discourse units	124
5.5.2 Gradual approximation: act to discourse units	126
5.5.2.1 Focus on single illocutionary acts	126
5.5.2.2 Relationships between pairs of acts	130
5.5.2.3 Extension to larger discourse units	134
5.5.3 Rhetorical transformation of discourse units	140
5.5.4 Information transfer	141
5.6 Summary and conclusion	142
Notes and references	143
CHAPTER 6 TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH	
6.1 Preview: the need for integration	144
6.2 The discourse to discourse scheme	145
6.3 Types of procedure	146
6.3.1 Demonstration: rhetorical transformation by gradual approximation	146
6.3.2 Demonstration: rhetorical transformation by illocutionary change	152

viii Contents

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

1 Usage and use

1.1 Correctness and appropriacy

The aims of a language teaching course are very often defined with reference to the four 'language skills': understanding speech, speaking, reading and writing. These aims, therefore, relate to the kind of activity which the learners are to perform. But how can we characterize this activity? What is it that learners are expected to understand, speak, read and write? The obvious answer is: the language they are learning. But what exactly do we mean by this? We might mean a selection of lexical items recorded in a dictionary combined with syntactic structures recorded in a grammar. In this view, the teaching of a language involves developing the ability to produce correct sentences. Many teachers would subscribe to this view and it has been productive of a good deal of impressive language teaching material. In some respects, however, it is unsatisfactory. We may readily acknowledge that the ability to produce sentences is a crucial one in the learning of a language. It is important to recognize, however, that it is not the only ability that learners need to acquire. Someone knowing a language knows more than how to understand, speak, read and write sentences. He also knows how sentences are used to communicative effect.

We may conveniently begin by considering an example of a correct English sentence:

The rain destroyed the crops.

Here we have a correct English sentence and we might wish to say that anybody speaking or writing such a sentence gives evidence of a good knowledge of the language. We would judge anybody producing the following sentences, on the other hand, to have an inadequate knowledge:

The rain is destroy the crops.

The rain destruct the crops.

But what would we say if someone produced our correct sentence in the following context?

2 Teaching Language as Communication

(A approaches B, a stranger, in the street)

A: Could you tell me the way to the railway station, please?

B: The rain destroyed the crops.

The sentence remains correct, of course, but we might well hesitate to say that B had a good knowledge of English on this evidence. We would be inclined to say that he did not really know the language. It might be objected that nobody in his senses would ever seriously utter this sentence in response to the kind of question that A puts. But why not? The answer is that when we acquire a language we do not only learn how to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units of random occurrence; we also learn how to use sentences appropriately to achieve a communicative purpose. We are not just walking grammars.

It might appear that the example I have given is somewhat extreme. Let us consider another:

A: What did the rain do?

B: The crops were destroyed by the rain.

This is a distinct improvement on the previous exchange, but as competent speakers of English we can recognize, nevertheless, that B's reply is still in some way the wrong kind of reply. It does not take on an appropriate form in this context. By the same token we recognize that the following are odd combinations of sentences:

A: What was destroyed by the rain?

B: The rain destroyed the crops.

A: What happened to the crops?

B: The rain destroyed the crops.

We also recognize that the following exchanges are quite normal:

A: What did the rain do?

B: It destroyed the crops.

A: What was destroyed by the rain?

B: The crops.

A: What happened to the crops?

B: They were destroyed by the rain.

Making an appropriate reply is a matter of selecting a sentence which will combine with the sentence used for asking the question. Or it may involve using only part of a sentence, as in the second of the normal exchanges given above.

1.2 Usage and use as aspects of performance

The learning of a language, then, involves acquiring the ability to compose correct sentences. That is one aspect of the matter. But it also

involves acquiring an understanding of which sentences, or parts of sentences are appropriate in a particular context. The first kind of ability depends upon a knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language being learned. We can demonstrate this knowledge by producing strings of sentences without regard to context:

The rain destroyed the crops.

The cat sat on the mat.

The unicorn is a mythical beast.

Poor John ran away.

The farmer killed the duckling.

John loves Mary.

My tailor is rich.

To produce sentences like this is to manifest our knowledge of the language system of English. We will say that they are instances of correct English *usage*. But of course we are not commonly called upon simply to manifest our knowledge in this way in the normal circumstances of daily life. We are generally required to use our knowledge of the language system in order to achieve some kind of communicative purpose. That is to say, we are generally called upon to produce instances of language *use*: we do not simply manifest the abstract system of the language, we at the same time realize it as meaningful communicative behaviour.

This distinction between usage and use is related to de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* and Chomsky's similar distinction between competence and performance.¹ It is important to make clear what this distinction is. The notion of competence has to do with a language user's knowledge of abstract linguistic rules. This knowledge has to be put into effect as behaviour, it has to be revealed through performance. When it is put into effect through the citation of sentences to illustrate these rules, as is done in grammar books, then performance yields instances of usage: abstract knowledge is manifested. When language teachers select structures and vocabulary for their courses they select those items of usage which they judge to be most effective for teaching the underlying rules of the language system. Usage, then, is one aspect of performance, that aspect which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules. Use is another aspect of performance: that which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication.

In normal circumstances, linguistic performance involves the simultaneous manifestation of the language system as usage and its realization as use. But we can separate one from the other if we wish by focusing our attention on one rather than the other. When we are engaged in conversation we do not as a rule take note of such usage phenomena as

4 Teaching Language as Communication

grammatical irregularities (which may be quite frequent) in the speech of the person we are talking to, unless they force themselves on our attention by impeding communication. Our concern is with use and this concern filters out such irregularities of usage. If we assume the role of linguists in search of data, on the other hand, we might well adjust our focus of attention and concentrate on our interlocutor's usage, take note of his hesitations and repetitions, the peculiarities of his pronunciation and so on. The terms we have in English for referring to performance reflect these two aspects of behaviour. An expression like 'She speaks indistinctly', for example, refers to usage and an expression like 'He speaks persuasively' refers to use. I shall return to the relevance of the usage/use distinction to a definition of the so-called 'language skills' in Chapter 3.

Although there is a natural coincidence of usage and use in normal language behaviour, these two aspects of performance tend to be treated separately by people concerned with the description and the teaching of languages. Thus the grammarian illustrates the abstract rules of the system of the language he is describing by devising sentences in isolation which manifest these rules. The language teacher designing materials has also generally been inclined to concentrate on usage: the common practice is to select and organize language items with a view to demonstrating how the rules of the system can be manifested through sentences. There has been less concern with demonstrating how such rules can be realized for communicative purposes as use. So when the teacher introduces a sentence like:

A book is on the table.

he does so to manifest the operation of a set of rules for sentence formation. He is not offering it as an example of a meaningful act of communication. In fact, utterances of sentences of this kind are of relatively rare occurrence as instances of use.

1.3 Usage and use in classroom presentation

I want now to consider some examples of how language is presented in the classroom and how this presentation, in concentrating on usage, may sometimes involve an inappropriate use of language. The following is an example of a familiar oral drill in which the learner is required to repeat a sentence pattern by using different 'call-words'

Teacher: Book

Pupils: There is a book on the table.

Teacher: Bag.

Pupils: There is a bag on the table.

Teacher: Pen.

Pupils: There is a pen on the table.

Teacher: Under the table.

Pupils: There is a pen under the table.

Teacher: On the floor.

Pupils: There is a pen on the floor.

What is going on here? We have a series of responses to a verbal cue but these responses are not replies in any normal sense. The pupils are demonstrating their knowledge of usage by manipulating the sentence pattern but they are not doing so for any other purpose.

Let us now adjust the drill so that we get what appears to be a more normal question and answer sequence:

Teacher: What is on the table?

Pupils: There is a book on the table.

Teacher: What is on the floor?

Pupils: There is a bag on the floor.

Teacher: Where is the bag?

Pupils: The bag is on the floor.

Teacher: Where is the book?

Pupils: The book is on the table.

Here we can recognize that some account is taken of use. To begin with, for the pupils to give an answer there must be a book on the table and a bag on the floor: there must be some simple situation to refer to. The pupils are not simply spinning sentences out without any reference to what the words mean, as they are in the first drill. But although there is some concern for use in this respect, it is still usage which has the dominant emphasis. Although the pupils' response is a reply to a question and not just a reaction to a prompt, the *form* of the reply is inappropriate. We can compare the drill with the following exchanges where the replies take on a more normal appearance:

A: What is on the table?

B: A book.

A: Where is the bag?

B: On the floor.

Even in this form, however, the language cannot necessarily be regarded as demonstrating appropriate use. To see why this is so, we have to ask ourselves: 'Why does A ask this question?' If a book is seen to be on the table, and a bag seen to be on the floor, and if everybody is aware of the location of these objects, then why does A need to ask where they are? If there is a book on the table in front of the whole class, then, as has been pointed out, the question is contextualised to the extent that it refers to something outside language and is not just a manipulation of

6 Teaching Language as Communication

the language itself. But by the same token, the fact that there *is* a book on the table, visible to everybody, makes it extremely unnatural to ask if it is there. Thus the provision of a situation may lead away from usage in one respect but lead back to usage in another. Only if the pupils know that the teacher cannot see the bag and is genuinely looking for it does his question as to its whereabouts take on the character of natural use. The following classroom exchange, for example, would commonly take on this genuine quality of real communication:

Teacher: Where's the duster?

Pupils: Under your chair.

We may say that the realization of language as use involves two kinds of ability. One kind is the ability to select which form of sentence is appropriate for a particular *linguistic context*. The second is the ability to recognize which function is fulfilled by a sentence in a particular *communicative situation*. Let us look again at our examples.

Teacher: What is on the table?

Pupils: There is a book on the table.

If this is part of a drill and there is a book on the table which everybody can see, then the teacher's question is not fulfilling a normal function since in ordinary circumstances we do not ask questions about something we already know. So the teacher's question and the pupils' answer do not fulfil a communicative function in this particular situation. Furthermore, a question of this form does not normally require a response which takes the form of sentence which the pupils give, so their reply is not appropriate in this particular linguistic context. This exchange, then, illustrates both inappropriate function in relation to the situation and inappropriate form in relation to the context. Let us now consider a second example:

Teacher: What is on the table?

Pupils: A book.

In this case, we have a reply which is appropriate with regard to form. But the function of the question and answer sequence remains as unnatural as before: the situation is still the same and still makes the question and answer inappropriate. This becomes clear if we compare this last example with what can be taken as an instance of genuine language use like the following:

Teacher: Where's the duster?

Pupils: Under your chair.

or:

Teacher: Where's Mary today?

Pupils: She's not well.