H.G. WIDDOWSON. **Learning Purpose and Language Use**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 122pp.

Over the last decade or so, language teaching has been evolving in two major ways: by trying to improve the language content of its courses, and by trying to improve the exercises. Although these strands of development are not mutually incompatible, the emphasis on language content has perhaps been   greater. More recently, however, the methodological side has started to attract more attention, and the present book is a contribution to this line of development. Although he calls it "only a framework, a construct for convenience" Widdowson sets out to integrate theory of language ability, types of course and methodology, and relate the whole to educational theory, thus engaging in an important task for the language teaching profession.

The book is in four chapters, the last being a short summary. The first chapter,'Learning Purpose' establishes an educational dimension for the study, examining the broad purposes that can be satisfied by language courses. A continuum is set up running from training to education along which courses may be situated. The objectives of training courses can be derived entirely from needs analysis, and consist only of developing knowledge in the learner of how to apply a given number of formulae (linguistic items) to a fixed set of situations so that after the course the learner has no further learning to do (the extreme kind of ESP). On the other hand, a course at the educational end of the continuum concentrates more on developing the ability in the learner to improvise with an indefinite set of linguistic resources to solve an indefinite set of communication problems after his course (typically General Purpose English (GPE courses)). The distinction between these two types of aim provides the author with two educational concepts (which are also linguistic): **competence**, which is a set repertoire of resources and the

knowledge of when to use them: and **capacity**, which is the ability to apply resources to solve new problems. ESP courses may be "wide" or "narrow" depending how much they concentrate merely on developing competence. This account sets clear limitations on the role of needs analysis in course design.

In the second chapter "Language Use", Widdowson proceeds to an applied linguistic account of competence and capacity. He divides competence into two parts: **linguistic competence**, consisting of the systemic levels of grammatical and phonological knowledge; and **communicative competence**, which is made up of schematic knowledge. This includes knowledge of the world, and knowledge of speech acts and of acceptable sequences of social interaction. Schematic knowledge also presumably includes knowledge of collocational probability, range and register, although this is not always clear. Widdowson's point is that language use has to operate over both levels. For instance, understanding of the reference of the definite article depends on certain non-linguistic schematic knowledge:

> "You know St. Mary's. Well, I live in the street
> on the other side of **the** graveyard" (p.42).

That is, the article is definite because the speaker assumes the listener will realize that it is the graveyard of St.Mary's church, given the knowledge that in England churches often stand next to their graveyards. Thus utterances are produced or understood by reference to stored knowledge.

This ability to refer from a piece of language to stored knowledge in order to make sense is different from merely having the knowledge in memory. This is **capacity**, and in Widdowson's view of things, it consists of various procedures which include 'inferencing, computing cross-reference, negotiation of meaning, problem-solving' (p.41) and predicting. Production procedures could be added like clarifying, paraphrasing and so on, though perhaps this ressembles a list of functions. Widdowson gives the examples of summaries

intended to clarify or make a point explicit:'formulations' (a
term taken from conversation analysis) which can be used to
briefly clarify content meaning ('gist') or rhetorical
intention ('upshot'). Finally, the aim of procedural
activity is to defend one's identity (the territorial
imperative) while working with others sharing common views(the
cooperative imperative). Widdowson is not claiming originality
for all these concepts, although he has occasionally altered
them slightly in the interests of overall coherence. What he
is claiming, however, is that procedural activity is relevant,
indeed central, to methodology.

In the third chapter, 'Course Design and Methodology',
the author criticises needs analysis and register analysis for
not distinguishing clearly between means ('methodology') and
ends in education. While relevant samples of language are
worth selecting, what is far more important than the language
is the activation of procedures, through meaningful activities.
The emphasis then should be on exercise types, and Widdowson
rightly stresses that course design should serve methodology
and not the other way about: learning exercises should not be
taken for granted in course design. The discussion thus shifts
attention off the analysis of language, and onto the kinds of
activities that the learners will be involved in.

Chapter 4 provides in conclusion two important connections,
first between language teaching and other types of learning,
which in all cases

> is a matter of relating knowledge abstracted from
> past experience as systems, schemata, formulae,
> to actual instances by procedural problem-solving
> activity (p.108)

and secondly between ESP and GPE:

> in both cases, these (communicative) purposes must
> be such as to engage the learner's use of
> procedures for realizing schematic meaning,
> drawing on his or her knowledge of the language
> system as a resource (p.109).

It is indeed connections of this type which can only enrich

practice in our respective fields.

The layout of the book is unusual, each chapter consisting
of two parts, first the Argument, and then the Discussion,
rather in the style of lectures. The advantage of this format
is that the educational argument remains prominent, while the
concepts derived from other disciplines are in full view in the
Discussions, laid out in the form of extensive footnotes
indexed to the Arguments. Perhaps a disadvantage is that the
Arguments ressemble lectures a little too closely, so that
there is rather more repetition from one chapter to the next
than one might expect (notably of the argument against register
analysis and needs analysis, which appears on pp.9-10; 33-4;52-
4; 83-8; 95-7). In addition, the notes overlap a little on
some topics (eg. the discussion of capacity). The idea of a
two level text is, however, stimulating, permits two 'tones of
voice', and is a good illustration of how methodology draws on
a wide variety of sources. Incidentally, background discussion
is well-referenced, and accounts for roughly two thirds of the
book.

There are, inevitably in a work which is so dense, various
questions which one would like to raise if the speaker were
present. The first is perhaps just a matter of balance.
However, at one point Widdowson stresses the importance of
lower level skills ('the backstage facilitators (...) which
have to be learnt in order to be disregarded' (p.30) even
regretting the **as** in the 1978 title, preferring "Teaching
Language **for** Communication". Yet the acquisition of lower
level resources seems to have no place in Widdowson's overall
scheme of language learning. For many, however, acquiring low
level resources efficiently is more difficult than activating
them. But there are in fact points when the reader feels that
for the author communicative activity causes an efficient
increase of low level resources. Efficiency is however the
major problem for most foreign language courses, so it might be
interesting to see how this argument might be developed, so as
to show how systemic knowledge (and not just schematic

knowledge) grows through procedural activity. (It might also be worth finding a place for error-correction in the theory since it is at least questionable whether error-correction is always the same thing as the suppression of error' or the 'imposition of correctness' p.27).

A further doubt arises over whether Widdowson is really any closer to setting up methodological criteria than are proponents of needs analysis (which is not to question the relevance of studying the characteristics of procedural ability). After all, he himself says that "objectives (...) have to be based on some description of learning, not what has to be learnt" (p.97). How are we to help a learner towards negotiating meanings, formulating gist and upshot, and achieving fluency?

There are other questions. Given the definition of capacity as being an integral part of the procedure of computing meaning, is it in fact possible to conceive of a course which does not develop capacity if it teaches a skill? Another question is whether it is satisfactory to define the educational value of language courses as the ability to relate knowledge from past experience to actual instances. This seems to leave out the acquisition of low level resources as well as wider humanistic aims that are common to general education and to language teaching. Or again, one wonders whether there are any substantial grounds for developing different methodologies for different groups of learners according to the type of specific purpose of the course, or indeed whther this would be logistically feasible. Further, the exclusion of EAP from ESP (p.106) might make an illustration helpful here.

Finally one may have doubts over the division of language into systemic and schematic levels. It is useful to think in terms of schemata, but the separation seems at times awkward. Are schemata 'realized', and if so by elements from what level? Is language in use entirely made up of schemata? If so what role is left to the systemic level? If not, systemic items

could be viewed as surface structure which is always indexical of schematic structure. In which case one wonders whether Winter deserves to be criticised for using systemic terminology when refering to conjuncts even if these are 'indices of schematic structure' (p.73). Certainly schemata can be seen to penetrate to the level of phonology (eg. the families like: **slope, slide, slip, slither, sliver, slice**; or **snub, snout, sniff, snuff, sneeze, snooty**), and grammatical markers too. One wonders whether there is much to gain from a new separation of form and meaning.

Some of these remarks may seem nitpicking and a long way from the language classroom, yet over the years language learning has begun to be seen as an integrated activity, and these questions underlie or follow from many of the assumptions we take with us into the language classroom. It is for this reason, indeed, that Widdowson's project of forming a coherent view of this complex field is so worthwhile. The range of topics discussed, quite as much as the basic philosophy, make this a valuable little book for the profession.

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