SUMMARY REFLECTION

Annual Review of Applied Linguistics (1998) **18**, 323–333. Printed in the USA.
Copyright © 1998 Cambridge University Press 0267-1905/98 $9.50

SKILLS, ABILITIES, AND CONTEXTS OF REALITY

H. G. Widdowson

The contributions in this volume provide a comprehensive survey of recent research and pedagogic practice in what is described as 'the four basic language skills.' My brief, and my original intention, seemed straightforward enough: to provide a short overview which would comment on general trends in a relatively impartial manner. Impartiality is never easy to achieve, however, and since trends are typically a matter of implicit assumptions, discerning them is bound to be subjective in some degree. What I have done is to consider certain of these assumptions and relate them to general issues about the so-called language skills which have been subject to debate for some time. This commentary, then, is less a measured survey than a critical reflection, from an historical and personal perspective, on matters arising from these contributions.

It is of the nature of collections of papers of this kind that topics tend to get enclosed as separate formulations by the individual authors. The underlying connections are often implicit in common bibliographical references, but the overall conceptual context is generally speaking left to the reader to infer. It is also worth noting that this context is assumed to be current, and dissociated from the past: These 'state of the art' papers are essentially synchronic in character, and pay relatively little attention to the diachronic development of ideas. As we would expect from such a volume, the account we get is of current thinking, and the references are to recent work, almost always that published within the last fifteen years. This is entirely appropriate. Nevertheless, it does seem to carry the implication that what is dated is outdated. So it is (to take just one example) that there is no reference at all in any of the contributions here to what many people (of an older generation at least) would regard as a seminal work in this area, namely Wilga Rivers' book ***Teaching foreign language skills***, originally published in

1968, though reprinted since. It is no doubt inevitable, given the prestige of innovation, the pressure to publish, and the need for authors to make their mark, that emphasis should be on recent reformulations of ideas about the language skills and indeed it could not be demonstrated otherwise how they are currently relevant. All the same, the work in the present has grown from that of the past, and is to some degree dependent on it. The past does connect up with the current context of enquiry, and crucially contributes to it. So, while recognizing the relevance of recent scholarship, so authoritatively expressed in these pages, what I should like to do is to explore certain problematic issues that have been around for some time, and which seem to me to continue to lurk behind current discussion of the language skills.

We might take as the first issue, the problematic nature of the skills themselves. Their separate treatment in this volume is a matter of convenience based on historical precedence. However, the fourfold distinction is based on a concept of language behavior which is actually inconsistent with that which is represented in these pages. The structure of the volume is, therefore, paradoxically, at variance with its content. The identification of four skills rests on the distinction between different ways in which abstract linguistic knowledge is actualized. Speech and writing draw on the physical features of what Hymes (following Jakobson) refers to as channel (Hymes 1968): One is aural and the other visual. These physical signals are produced, and apprehended, by totally different motor-perceptive mechanisms. The physical signals whereby linguistic knowledge is actualized call for different kinds of physiological processing. There is clearly then a sense in which there are indeed four distinct phenomena here.

But the obvious point is that the distinction is based on the channel, or **medium,** through which language is manifested. When we look at the **mode** of communication that is realized thereby, the fourfold distinction no longer holds (Widdowson 1978). Thus Halliday (Halliday, *et al.* 1964 and elsewhere) identifies mode of discourse as one of the dimensions of register, and points out that we can have spoken language designed to be read, written language designed to be spoken, and so on. The factors that now come into consideration have to do not with the participants as producers and receivers, but with their interactant roles as addressers and addressees. This is not to say that the medium difference is irrelevant, but it becomes an epiphenomenon, and interest shifts to **how** it is relevant in creating conditions for different modes of communicative interaction.

So it is that Halliday points out that written language is not more complex than spoken but that each typically has its own kind of complexity, writing being synoptic and speech dynamic in character, and they differ in degrees of lexical density as a consequence (Halliday 1989). The differences of medium are thus exploited to different modal effect. Some scholars (e.g., Carter and McCarthy 1995) have talked about the grammar of speech as distinct from that of writing. But the point to note is that these lexical and grammatical features are not intrinsic

manifestations of the medium but consequent realizations of the fundamental features of orate as distinct from literate modes of communication, as discussed in Ong (1982) and elsewhere. A central point here is that, as these modes become conventionalized, they become independent of the media through which they are actualized: You can, for example, talk like a book, or write in the manner of unscripted speech and simulate its spontaneity. Ong cites the interesting case of ***Paradise lost***: Though the poem was dictated by Milton (the poet then being blind), and so directly transcribed from speech, it is essentially a literate poem, and quite different from the orate rhapsodic mode of the Homeric epics. Although modes develop to counter the constraints, and exploit the possibilities of media, once established they take on an independent life of their own.

What this means, of course, is that literacy is incorporated into cultural history, and members of a literate community will inevitably adopt certain literate modes of communication even if they find it hard to cope with the medium of writing. Being illiterate in an orate society is a totally different matter. By the same token, of course, you can learn how to cope with the medium of writing or speech, but this does not of itself provide for the ability to deal with the different modes of communication conventionalized within a particular community that the medium is commonly associated with. As Abercrombie pointed out years ago (Abercrombie 1964), conversation is not spoken prose. This is well documented in the papers in this volume with regard to literacy: Writing is not just a matter of composing sentences, nor reading just a matter of decomposing them; both are modes of social actions. And the same applies to oracy. We have, then, two kinds of performance here. One of them is what might be called **usage**, calling on skills for encoding and deciphering linguistic signals physically **manifested** in a particular **medium**. The other is a matter of **realizing** these signals as in **use** in some particular **mode** of communication (Widdowson 1978). We can talk of skills in respect to usage, but if we talk about language use, we need a different concept, and perhaps a different term.

These distinctions are obvious enough, and to the extent that they have been drawn some time ago, are dated. But I do not think that they are outdated, for they carry implications which are perhaps not quite so obvious, both for research into language behavior and the way in which it is taught. Mention of performance brings us to one such implication. In Chomsky's terms, competence is abstract knowledge of a language code, and this is (imperfectly) manifested as performance in the aural or visual medium: as spoken or written sentences. This is performance as what I have called usage. In this conception, it makes no sense to talk about being competent in speech or writing, or indeed about the grammar of speech as distinct from the grammar of writing. For this would imply that competence is a matter of the realization of knowledge as **use** in different modes of behavior. You can extend the concept to incorporate **use**, and this, of course, is what Hymes famously attempted to do in his definition of communicative

competence in reference to the four dimensions of the possible, the feasible, the appropriate, and the actually attested (Hymes 1972).

Although Hymes does not make this explicit, it is clear that the essential shift here is from a consideration of language behavior as a medium manifestation to language behavior as mode realization. So it is that although (in English at any rate) it may be possible to produce any lexico-grammatical combination allowable by the code in any use of language, relative feasibility, appropriacy, and attestedness are determined by conventions associated with different modes of communication. For example, with respect to feasibility, the reason why spoken language is, as Halliday puts it, 'dynamic and intricate,' whereas written language is 'static and dense,' is that they are produced to be processed in different ways. Thus written language does not have to be immediately apprehended in flight and does not need to be designed to counter the limitations of processing capacity. So it can tolerate a degree of informational compactness which would just not be feasible in spoken language. As a consequence, in respect to attestedness, as corpus descriptions have made abundantly clear, there are features of language which occur commonly in spoken conversation, but are relatively rare in written modes. Similarly, what is appropriate to use in one mode would be quite inappropriate in another.

Whether these differences of language use are grounds for proposing different **grammars** is a moot point. One might compare English with French in this regard. In French, the physical manifestation of grammatical agreement, for example, marks a clear distinction between a sentence in the written or spoken medium, whatever the mode. Thus, ***Les fille sont épicé*** is, in Chomsky's terms, not a possible sentence in written French, whereas ***Les filles sont épicées*** is: They are different encodings. But in English there is no such distinction. **The girls are spiced** is the same encoded sentence in whatever medium and whatever mode. It may not be appropriate to say such a thing, or it may not be attested as common occurrence, but this does not affect the status of the expression as a possible sentence of English (as distinct from **The girl are spiced**). So to talk about the grammar of spoken English is not to talk about what is or is not a possible encoding, but about the differential deployment of the available code resources. It seems clear that the skill involved in **manifesting the code** in one **medium** or another is quite different from the skill involved in **realizing the code** in one **mode** or another.

The difference brings us back to Hymes' formulation of competence. For he not only extends the concept to embrace a knowledge of other aspects of language beyond the possible, but also extends it to include an ability to actualize this knowledge (for further discussion see Widdowson 1989). Now, as we have seen, to actualize the possible alone is to manifest usage, to display linguistic knowledge of the code by means of a physical medium and so produce, and receive, sentences in speech or writing. But to actualize the possible in relation to

the feasible, the appropriate and the attested, is to exploit this knowledge, to act upon it to communicative effect, and so to realize it as language use. This provides us with clear criteria for a distinction: We can refer to **skills** as the capability of manifesting the possible in different media, and **abilities** as the capability of realizing the possible in relation with the feasible, the appropriate, and the attested in different modes of use.

In reference to this distinction, it is clear that the contributions in this volume are essentially concerned with language abilities, not skills. And so they should be, one might argue, for this is consistent with a shift that has taken place in language teaching generally away from the language code to its contextual realization as communication. The rationale for the shift is easy to understand. In normal real life circumstances, we are rarely if ever called upon to manipulate the code and manifest it as usage: What we do is realize it as social action in conformity to conventions associated with different modes of communication. The assumption is that classroom learning should emulate these natural processes and set up activities which develop the required abilities for use. Such activities are typically **tasks** which present contexts which are incomplete in various ways and prompt the use of language for their completion. It is the context that is manipulated, not the code, which is the reverse of the traditional language **exercise** which bore little resemblance to real life language behavior, nor indeed claimed to do so.

Such a shift from skill to ability would seem on the face of it to be self-evidently desirable. But it actually raises a number of rather troublesome questions. One of them takes us back to Wilga Rivers. She makes a distinction between skill-getting and skill-using activities (Rivers and Temperley 1978). This corresponds with the distinction I have drawn between, on the one hand, exercises in code manifestation to induce skills of accessing the possible and, on the other, tasks for contextual realization of the possible to develop communicative abilities. But, obviously enough, to use a skill you have to get it first. The point about natural language use is, of course, that it works pragmatically on a least effort principle whereby we only pay as much heed to language as is necessary to key us in with contextual factors. The strategies we use for coping with the everyday tasks we encounter in normal social life involve paying attention to the possibilities of the context rather than the possible in the code. We exploit linguistic redundancy on a massive scale. But the possible is nevertheless a resource we can fall back on if our pragmatic strategies fail on a particular occasion of use. It seems clear, then, that replication of the pragmatics of normal language skill using cannot provide the conditions for skill getting. It seems equally clear that skill getting is crucial for second language learners, for otherwise they are equipped only with a repertoire of superficial communicative behavior, and have no resource to draw on when pragmatic strategies fail.

It would follow from this that research into the language abilities as normally practiced in contexts of use can have only an indirect bearing on second

language pedagogy. It will reveal what users of language naturally do, and to the extent that this is what learners will eventually wish to emulate, it will clearly have potential relevance. But its **actual** relevance to classroom instruction has to be demonstrated and cannot be taken on trust. For the classroom has to provide the contexts for learning the language, and this means the learning of the possible. The question then arises as to what the relationship is between such classroom contexts and those of naturally occurring language. The whole history of developments in language pedagogy is essentially a record of different proposals for dealing with this basic question.

Since we are concerned with contexts, we are necessarily involved again with Hymes' notions of the feasible, the appropriate, and the attested. But these are not now applied only to the **description** of naturally occurring language but also to the **prescription** of language designed for learning. In other words, the question is not how or whether we can directly replicate language which meets the contextual conditions of normal use, but how it can be treated so as to make it feasible and appropriate for learning in the contexual conditions as attested in particular classrooms. One answer, much favored in current proposals, lies in the concept of the task as an ability-developing activity.

Peter Skehan (this volume) proposes that a task is an activity which meets the following criteria:

- Meaning is primary.
- There is a goal which needs to be worked towards.
- The activity is outcome-evaluated.
- There is a real-world relationship.

It should be noted, however, that these criteria do not in themselves distinguish the linguistic exercise and the communicative task. What does distinguish these kinds of activity is what **kind** of meaning, goal, outcome, and relationship with the 'real' world they focus on. The linguistic skill-getting exercise of the traditional type did focus on meaning, but on that which is semantically encoded in form. It had a goal—the manifestation of code knowledge, and the outcome was evaluated in terms of code conformity. And there was a relationship with the 'real-world' in that it was supposed that an internalization of such knowledge would provide an investment for subsequent use. The essential idea was that learners should be so skilled in manipulation and manifestation that it became second nature to them, thus enabling them to engage in 'normal' communication when occasion arose. As Lado and Fries put it, the purpose of pattern practice was "to reduce to habit what rightfully belongs to habit in the new language, so that the mind and personality may be freed to dwell in their proper realm, that is on the meaning of the communication rather than the mechanics of grammar" (Lado and Fries 1957). In other words, the end in view was communicative fluency. Of course, the word *habit* has unfortunate connotations these days, but it is important to note that

pattern practice was preceded by presentation which was designed to demonstrate meaning, so what practice made habitual was a knowledge of forms as semantic encodings. It was not a matter of teaching form **rather than** meaning (as it is commonly misrepresented as being) but of teaching meaning as encoded **in form**, on the assumption that this would provide the basic resource for communication.

Current ideas about the nature of the task reject this interpretation of the defining criteria and propose a different one based on the supposition that the meaning should be pragmatic, the goal and outcome defined in communicative terms, and the real-world relationship made more direct and obvious. Classroom tasks are indeed seen as necessarily a *version* of those in the real world, and their validity a function of their verisimilitude. The essential difference in those two ways of conceiving of classroom activities lies not in the communicative objective but in views as to how this might be brought about: On the one hand is the view that the teaching of linguistic skills is a necessary prerequisite for the learning of communicative abilities, and on the other the view that if communicative abilities are to be learned, they have to be directly taught. And the criteria for the task are interpreted accordingly.

There are problems with both points of view. Whatever activities are devised in the language classroom, they need to meet two crucial conditions for learning. One is that they have to draw attention to the specifics of the language as a code (cf. Schmidt 1990), and the other is that they have to engage learners in such a way that they appropriate the language and make it their own. The main problem with the skill-oriented linguistic exercise is that, as generally practiced, in striving to meet the first condition too explicitly, it failed to meet the second. It tended to be humdrum and unappealing. In other words, the learners could not relate to it, could not realize it as a semantic resource by making it real for themselves. The language was pointed out to them, repeatedly, but they did not see the point. The main problem with the ability-oriented communicative task, on the other hand, is that in striving for pragmatic reality it fails to draw sufficient attention to the semantic meaning intrinsic in linguistic form, and furthermore makes the assumption that the 'real' language of the user will necessarily correspond with what is real for the learner, thereby disregarding the fact that what makes the language familiar for the user is precisely what makes it foreign for the learner.

So it seems to me that it is possible to take a position which is very different from that which seems to be generally adopted. One might propose that we need to design tasks in which semantic meaning is primary, where the goal to be worked towards is the internalization of this meaning to provide for what I have referred to elsewhere as a communicative capacity (Widdowson 1984), the outcome to be evaluated is the extent to which the activity promotes and exploits such capacity, and the reality to be related to that of the learner rather than the user. Such activities would be directed at activating language for learning which is

feasible and appropriate in the classroom context. As such they would combine features of the skill-oriented and ability-oriented approaches as earlier defined in that they would on the one hand focus on the actualization of meaning as formally encoded but would on the other induce students to realize this meaning, make it real, by doing things which they recognize as purposeful on their terms, however remote these might sometimes be from 'real' life. I have indicated elsewhere what such actitivies might look like (Widdowson 1990).

One advantage that might be claimed for such an approach is that it reconciles the teaching of usage and use, and does not reject everything that teachers in the past proposed, which current thinking tends to do, but acknowledges that in certain respects they got it right. In particular, what they got right was the pedagogic primacy of what might be called semantic investment as a necessary pre-condition on subsequent pragmatic use, and the corresponding priority given to the skills of processing linguistic signals, actualized in one medium or another, as a necessary stage in the development of abilities to communicate in real life contexts. Pedagogic opinion over the past twenty years has, of course, taken the view that to teach this is not sufficient, but it has, unfortunately, also often drawn the conclusion that it is therefore not necessary. Instead, what is proposed is that it should be replaced by a more direct teaching of the ability to communicate in real-life contexts of use.

Such an approach to language teaching is open to question on a number of counts. To begin with, it seems to equate language use with the ability to communicate. But language is used for other purposes as well. It is used for thinking, for example, for conceptualization which may leave little trace in terms of overt communicative behavior. On the evidence of the experience of language teachers of my acquaintance, this aspect of language poses a major problem for learners; indeed, they seem to find it more difficult to think in the foreign language than to do communicative things with it. It is in this respect that the foreignness of the language is most marked. It might also be noted that conceptualization necessarily makes more direct demands on semantic encoding than does communication, and it is therefore more readily accounted for by an approach which focuses on such encoding rather than on one which does not. One might suggest that this is indeed the notional side of notional/functional pedagogy which was generally speaking left unattended to in the enthusiastic pursuit of the functional. An approach which focuses on the use of language to achieve 'real life' communicative outcomes necessarily deflects attention away from semantic meaning instrinsic in the code, because, as I have indicated earlier, in real life uses of language the code is only expediently exploited to fill in the contextual gaps.

And, the contextual gaps can be very wide—so wide indeed as to be unbridgeable. And here we come to another use of language: the use of language for the expression of social identity. As many of the contributions in this volume make clear, communication is inextricably bound up with community. As Firth

(following Malinowski) insisted, the immediate context of situation is embedded in a common context of culture (Firth 1957). Communication is a matter of appropriate use, and this presupposes a knowledge of the contextual conditions which define appropriacy, which in turn presupposes cultural knowledge. The whole process is one of extreme complexity. The question is, to invoke another of Hymes' conditions, how feasible is it to induce such complex knowledge, and the ability to act upon it, in the context of classrooms? Which foreign community and whose foreign culture are teachers supposed to get learners to identify with? And how are teachers to know what this culture is if they are not themselves members of these communities? One might argue (I have in fact argued myself) that learners of a foreign language should be made **aware** of these cultural conditions on real communication, most effectively perhaps by reference to their own language experience. But the explicit teaching of communicative **abilities** which measure up to those of the communities whose language they are learning is quite a different matter.

I believe that an attempt to do so is to set an impossible and pointless goal whose only outcome is likely to be frustration. For it is a proposal to teach the unteachable. We need to recognize, it seems to me, that some things can be taught, and some things must be left to be learned. What this means is that decisions always have to be taken as to what is the best investment, what it is that provides learners with an effective basis for further learning. Learners cannot be rehearsed in patterns of appropriate cultural behavior, and of course they will not be prepared in every particular to cope with all the niceties of communication, but the crucial requirement is that they should have a basic capacity which enables them to learn how to cope when occasion arises. The extent to which they subsequently fine-tune their behavior to conform to particular norms for appropriate use will depend on a number of circumstantial and attitudinal factors which simply cannot be anticipated and accounted for in the classroom context. What the classroom context can do is to create a community with its own cultural reality, with its own conventions of what is feasible and appropriate; conventions which are contrived, but which carry conviction. Such a context is bound to set limits on what language learners are explicitly taught, and these cannot of their nature contain "real world communication." But the crucial point is that this is not language to be learned as such, but language to be learned *from*. It is the business of pedagogy to decide on what can be feasibly and effectively taught within these limits so as to activate a learning investment for future use. Talk of real world communication is all too often a distraction.

As I said earlier, my purpose here is to raise certain general issues about language pedagogy, and I have proposed ways of resolving them which in some respects appear to be at variance with current ideas. This is not, however, to deny the value of current ideas, but only to suggest that their validity needs to be relativized, as all ideas must, in reference to alternative views and different perspectives. The contributions in this volume are impressive testimony to the

developments that have taken place in the understanding of how language is realized as social behavior in contexts of use. As they make plain, we now know much more than our predecessors about what makes language real for its users, and we know what learners have to do if they are to aspire to be foreign language users themselves. My main point is that this heightened understanding about language, communication, community, and social identity has also to be applied to the contexts of the classroom and the realities and identities of language learners. To do this is really only to recognize, as our predecessors have done, that what we are teaching is not language as experienced by its users but a *foreign* language which, as a subject, has to be designed for learners.

UNANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abercrombie, D. 1964. *Problems and principles in language study*. London: Longman.

Carter, R. and M. McCarthy. 1995. Grammar and spoken language. *Applied Linguistics*. 6.141–158.

Firth, J. R. 1957. *Papers in linguistics 1934–51*. London: Oxford University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. 1989. *Spoken and written language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____, A. McIntosh and P. Strevens. 1964. *The linguistic sciences and language teaching*. London: Longman.

Hymes, D. 1968. The ethnography of speaking. In J. Fishman (ed.) *Readings in the sociology of language*. The Hague: Mouton. 99–138.

_____ 1972. On communicative competence. In J. Pride and J. Holmes (eds.) *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 269–293.

Lado, R. and C. C. Fries. 1957. *An intensive course in English*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Ong, W. J. 1982. *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. London: Methuen.

Rivers, W. M. 1968. *Teaching foreign-language skills*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____ and M. S. Temperley. 1978. *A practical guide to the teaching of English as a second or foreign language*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schmidt, R. 1990. The role of consciousness in foreign language learning. *Applied Linguistics*. 11.17–46.

Widdowson, H. G. 1978. *Teaching language as communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Widdowson, H. G. 1984. *Explorations in applied linguistics, volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____ 1989. Knowledge of language and ability for use. *Applied Linguistics*. 10.128–137.

_____ 1990. *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.