

# Second Language Pedagogy

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Oxford University Press

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York Toronto Madrid  
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo  
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town  
Melbourne Auckland

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ISBN 0 19 437084 4

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First published 1987  
X impression 0000

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The author and publishers would like to thank the following for permission to reproduce the material below:

Alan Beretta and Alan Davies for the article 'Evaluation of the Bangalore Project' (copyright Oxford University Press) (Appendix VI).

The British Council for the unpublished report 'Procedures in teaching the structures "the green line is very long, the white one is very short"' by S. Durairaj (Appendix Ib).

A. Gilpin and B. Kumaravelu, and Esther Ramani, for the lesson transcripts (Appendix VI).

*The Indian Express* for the article 'Learning English Without Tears' (Appendix Ia).

The Regional Institute of English (Bangalore) for the extracts from RIE Bulletin, Special Series No. 2, and RIE Newsletters 1/1 and 1/2 (Appendix II).

The Regional Language Centre (Singapore) of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization for the extract from N.S. Pradhu: 'The teaching of English and notions about communication' (Appendix II).

Typeset by J&L Composition Ltd, Filey, North Yorkshire  
Printed in X

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# Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my deep sense of indebtedness to the following:

The Regional Institute of English, Bangalore (in particular, V. C. Devasundaram, its director at the time) for providing initial sponsorship and support to the Communicational Teaching Project.

The British Council, for enabling me to work on the project and for providing support in a number of ways.

The teachers and specialists who joined the project team at various times and contributed generously of their time and thought. They are: A. Arulpragasam, K. Subrahmanya Bhat, M. N. K. Bose, David Carroll, S. Damodaran, Sister M. Eleanora, T. Elia, Francis Jayachandran, Geoffrey Kaye, I. S. Nagaraja, Lalitha Obed, C. Radha, Esther Ramani, S. Renganayaki, T. R. Keshava Rao, V. Saraswathi, R. Vadivelu and Vanamala Vishwanatha.

The many applied linguists who took an interest in the project, helped to further my thinking through discussion, and gave me valuable advice and support. Among them are: Dick Allwright, Robert Bellarmine, Alan Beretta, Christopher Brumfit, Alan Davies, Arlene Gilpin, A. P. R. Howatt, Keith Johnson, B. Kumaravadivelu, Yasmeeen Lukmani, Maria Pavesi, R. Shanthakumari, H. G. Widdowson, and Regina Winert.

The Charles Wallace India Trust, the Hornby Trust, and Oxford University Press for financial assistance in writing this book.

The University of Edinburgh for providing me with facilities for doing the writing.

N.S.P.

# 1 The Context

This book aims to present a particular view of second language pedagogy, together with an account of a five-year project of exploratory teaching which helped to articulate that view and to develop procedures of teaching consistent with it.<sup>1</sup>

The project consisted of teaching English to a small number of classes in primary and secondary schools in southern India, over periods of time varying between one and three years. The teaching was planned, carried out, and reviewed regularly by a group of interested teacher trainers and teachers of English as a part-time activity, but with institutional support from the Regional Institute of English in Bangalore and the British Council in Madras. Some comments which have appeared in the literature refer to the project as the 'Bangalore Project', the 'Bangalore-Madras Project', or the 'Procedural Syllabus Project', but the project team itself used the name 'Communicational Teaching Project'.<sup>2</sup>

The stimulus for the project was a strongly-felt pedagogic intuition, arising from experience generally but made concrete in the course of professional debate in India. This was that the development of competence in a second language requires not systematization of language inputs or maximization of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication.<sup>3</sup> This view will be discussed at some length in later chapters of the book, but one or two points can be made at this stage to prevent possible misunderstanding. In the context of the project, competence in a language was seen as consisting primarily of an ability to conform automatically to grammatical norms, and communication as a matter of understanding, arriving at, or conveying meaning. The focus of the project was not, that is to say, on 'communicative competence' (in the restricted sense of achieving social or situational appropriacy, as distinct from grammatical conformity) but rather on grammatical competence itself, which was hypothesized to develop in the course of meaning-focused activity.<sup>4</sup> Attempts to systematize inputs to the learner through a linguistically organized syllabus, or to maximize the

practice of particular parts of language structure through activities deliberately planned for that purpose were regarded as being unhelpful to the development of grammatical competence and detrimental to the desired preoccupation with meaning in the classroom. Both the development and the exercise of grammatical competence were viewed as internal self-regulating processes and, furthermore, effort to exercise competence in response to a need to arrive at or convey meaning was viewed as a favourable condition for its development. It was decided that teaching should consequently be concerned with creating conditions for coping with meaning in the classroom, to the exclusion of any deliberate regulation of the development of grammatical competence or a mere simulation of language behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

The teaching which was undertaken was exploratory in three ways. First, it was an attempt to develop in the course of sustained teaching in actual classrooms, and by trial and error, a teaching methodology which was consistent with the initial intuition and maximally replicable in relation to such classrooms. The methodology which developed has since been referred to as 'task-based teaching' and will be discussed in this book in some detail. Secondly, the teaching was a means of developing a clearer perception of the intuition and of articulating it more fully in a number of ways. As the perception was influenced by the teaching, the teaching too was influenced by the emerging perception, so that theory and practice helped to develop each other in the course of the five years. Thirdly, the process of this development was reported as fully and frequently as possible to a wide audience of teachers and specialists in India, through periodical newsletters and at annual review seminars, in an effort to expose it as fully as possible to fellow-teachers' criticism or corroboration at every stage.<sup>6</sup> The regular debate thus generated, not only with teachers and specialists in India but, to a significant extent, with visiting specialists from outside India, was an important input to the project.<sup>7</sup> It is possible to think of progress in pedagogy as resulting from a continual interaction not only between perception and practice but also between differing perceptions, so that focused debate becomes a valuable means of sharing and influencing perceptions in ways that act as a process of error elimination. It is in this spirit that the project was submitted for discussion in India at various stages and it is in the same spirit that it is now being submitted for wider discussion.



It will be clear from the above that the project was not designed as an experiment to 'prove' a given methodology empirically, but was rather a classroom operation for developing a methodology and gaining some understanding of it.<sup>8</sup> An attempt was, however, made to see to what extent empirical evidence of outcomes can be obtained within the constraints of such an exercise and the result is included as Appendix VI. Equally, it has not been possible, with the staffing support available to the project, to gather and analyse observational data from the classroom as extensively or systematically as might have been desirable, though readers will, I hope, be able to form an impression of what teaching on the project was like from the description in the next chapter and the lesson transcripts in Appendix IV.<sup>9</sup> In general, what is offered in this book is an interpretation of classroom experience, with as clear an indication as possible of both the nature of the experience and the point of view from which the interpretation is made. Perhaps this will, among other things, serve to illustrate the value or otherwise of a project of this kind.

The project's concern for developing teaching procedures which are realistic and replicable in the Indian classroom does not necessarily imply that these procedures are being recommended for large-scale implementation in India. Nor does it imply that the relevance of such procedures is limited to Indian conditions. There can be different views on the relationship between pedagogic innovation and large-scale implementation, and my own is outlined in the last chapter of this book. On the question of local and global relevance, while it is true that teaching and learning situations can vary to a large extent on one or more of several dimensions, it would be unfortunate if innovations related to real and specific situations were, for that reason, assumed to be of limited relevance; one consequence of such an assumption might be to place too high a value, in terms of range of relevance, on innovation based on abstraction or idealization.<sup>10</sup> A more desirable course would be to assume that an innovation has relevance beyond the specific situation it is associated with and to examine, for any given situation, at what level of generality such relevance can be established. This would involve asking questions of the form 'Why not?' rather than 'Why?' and seeking to eliminate application at too low a level of generality. Relating specific dimensions of a situation to particular aspects of a pedagogic proposal in this way can in itself be

a fruitful activity. Typologies of teaching situations commonly made in terms such as 'second' and 'foreign' languages, 'elementary', 'intermediate' and 'advanced' levels, 'young' and 'adult' learners – should thus be seen as an aid to investigating the extent of relevance of a pedagogic proposal, not as a means of treating pedagogic proposals as merely pragmatic responses to specific situations.

This is not to deny that features of specific teaching situations influence the feasibility of particular pedagogic procedures and, indeed, the development of particular pedagogic perceptions. An important feature of the English-teaching situation in India is that English is a part of statutory 'mainstream' education, with such factors as the allocation of time, the size of classes, and examination requirements decided on in the context of the teaching of all other subjects. Second language teaching in this institutional context has to come to terms with the norms and expectations of formal education in general. There are, for instance, perceptions of the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom and there is an expectation of serious, substantive content to handle. When pedagogic perceptions of language as skill or of language learning as a matter of social interaction lead to classroom activities such as playing games or acting out non-classroom roles, 'having fun' or managing without the teacher, there is a conflict with the norms of formal education and with what may be called the 'classroom ethos'.<sup>11</sup> The traditional perception of language as formal grammar, and of language learning as a matter of studying (or translating or memorizing) serious texts, suited the educational framework much better. This is not to suggest that the constraints of formal education should have precedence over innovative perceptions of language pedagogy; but neither should it be assumed that these perceptions can, or should necessarily seek to, alter the formal context of teaching. Developing feasible classroom procedures based on a given perception of pedagogy involves a reconciliation with the constraints of the teaching context, and it should be regarded as a strength for classroom procedures to be able to develop within and draw support from such constraints while remaining consistent with the perception involved. It is one of the advantages of a teaching project which is not a 'designed experiment' that it is able to explore the possibilities of such reconciliation and ensure some general viability to the teaching procedures it develops. Thus, while the pedagogic perception

behind the project in southern India is that language ability develops in direct relation to communicational effort (and that language structure as content is unhelpful in language teaching), the teaching procedures which evolved on the project crucially involve a preoccupation with meaning-content and activities in which teachers act as teachers and learners act as learners in the way they do in the rest of the school's work. It will be claimed that both the focus on meaning-content and teacher-directed activity are advantages from the point of view of the perception of learning in question.<sup>12</sup>

It may be useful to conclude this discussion by mentioning some general features of the English-teaching situation in India. English has the constitutional status of an 'associate official language' in a highly multilingual national context and is the dominant medium of higher-level administration, higher education, the learned professions, large-scale industry and commerce, and a considerable part of literary and artistic activity. Indians who use English are estimated to constitute only about 5 per cent of the nation's population, but this group forms a very large proportion of those who are in leadership roles and are concentrated in the largest cities in the country, where English functions as a *lingua franca*. The age at which the teaching of English starts at school varies between different states, but is generally between 7 and 12 years. Examinations in English at school-leaving and first-degree stages are compulsory in the majority of states and optional in others. Only a small proportion of the students being taught English at school, those in the large cities and from highly-educated or high-income backgrounds, come into contact with the language outside the language classroom. This may be in subject classes in the small number of private English-medium schools, or at home. English is, however, widely regarded by students and parents alike as the language of opportunity, opening the door to higher education, a better job, upward social mobility, and so on. Consequently, there is a widespread general desire to learn the language. An estimate of the number of students being taught English throughout the country at this time is twenty million, and virtually all the teachers of English are Indians who have learnt English in the same educational system. Class size in primary schools varies from 30 to 45 and in secondary schools from 40 to 60. Few classes use teaching aids beyond the blackboard, chalk, paper, and pencil.

## Notes

- 1 No distinction is made here between 'second' and 'foreign' languages. Some indication of the teaching situation which gave rise to the project can be found later in this chapter and in the next.
- 2 See Johnson (1982: 135–44); Brumfit (1984a: 101–9); Brumfit (1984b: 233–41); Howatt (1984: 288); Beretta and Davies (1985: 121–7).
- 3 There is a parallel to this in Brumfit's account of how he was led to formulate the principle of fluency activity in language teaching (1984a: 50–51).
- 4 The view developed during the course of the project thus differs from what is generally called 'communicative language teaching' both with regard to objectives (grammatical competence in the former case, a distinct communicative competence in the latter) and with regard to means (meaning focused activity in the former case, practice activity organized in terms of features' of situational appropriacy in the latter). This point will be taken up again in the next chapter.
- 5 The project group became aware with the publication of Krashen (1981), when the project had completed two years, of the striking similarity between these concepts and Krashen's concepts of 'acquisition' and 'comprehensible input'. There are, however, significant differences which will become clear at various points later on.

The general concept of second language acquisition as an internal, self-regulating process is, of course, an old one. Howatt points out how, as long ago as 1622 (in the context of teaching Latin), Joseph Webbe had argued that 'no man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled and ingiv'd with grammar precepts' and 'By exercise of reading, writing, and speaking after ancient Custom . . . all things belonging to Grammar will without labour, and whether we will or no, thrust themselves upon us' (1984: 34–5; and also 192–208 for a survey of other such proposals through the ages). Similarly, Palmer argued that (1) 'in learning a second language, we learn without knowing what we are learning', (2) 'the utilization of [the adult learner's] conscious and focused attention [on language] militates against

the proper functioning of the natural capacities of assimilation', and (3) in teaching a second language 'we must design forms of work in which the student's attention shall be directed towards the subject matter and away from the form in which it is expressed' (1921: 44, 8, 51). Bloomfield thought too, that 'our fundamental mistake has been to regard language teaching as the imparting of a set of facts. . . . Language is not a process of logical reference to a conscious set of rules; the process of understanding, speaking, and writing is everywhere an associative one. Real language teaching consists, therefore, of building up in the pupil those associative habits which constitute the language to be learned' (1914: 294). These are arguments against the overt teaching of grammar: the project has been concerned with developing an alternative to covert grammatical systematization as well, as will be seen in later chapters.

- 6 The Newsletters were published as a Special Series by the Regional Institute of English in Bangalore and consist of 1/1 (July 1979), 1/2 (September 1979), 1/3 (March 1980), 1/4 (April 1980), 2/1 (October 1980), and 2/2 (October 1980). Mimeographed lesson reports continued to be made available from the British Council office in Madras, from October 1980 to February 1982. Teaching in the last two years of the project (1982–4) was based largely on a re-use of classroom tasks devised earlier, with new classes, in different schools, and by different teachers.

The introduction to the first Newsletter said: 'We are publishing [these reports] in an attempt to share with interested fellow-professionals our thoughts on a possible new direction for English language teaching in India. . . . It is common for those who innovate to concentrate on defending or disseminating what they advocate. This series is an attempt to record, at every stage, our assumptions, methods, doubts and conclusions so that those who wish to may examine them; in this way the weaknesses, which we assume are many, may be discovered before they do much damage – or we ourselves are tempted to cover them up! Furthermore, we hope that, as the project develops, a body of theory about how one can employ a communicational approach in the teaching of English to school-age learners will be evolved; for this reason, the records of the lessons, which are the

breeding ground of new theory, are included in some detail with the conclusions that arose from the group's discussion of these lessons as it observed them.'

- 7 The visiting specialists who participated in different review seminars are: Keith Johnson, Dick Allwright, Christopher Brumfit, Douglas Barnes, S. Pit Corder and Alan Davies. In addition, Keith Johnson and Henry Widdowson participated in two earlier seminars which prepared the ground for the project.
- 8 Richards (1984: 19–20) criticizes the project for not being a 'true experiment' and concludes that, for that reason, little can be learnt from its results. While the account given in this book might enable the reader to judge what value there is to a project which is not a 'true' experiment, it is also possible to ask how realistic it is to expect progress in language pedagogy from 'true' experiments. Brumfit provides fundamental arguments for the view that 'it makes little sense to treat language teaching, or indeed any teaching, as if it can be prescribed as a result of experimentation or predictive hypothesizing at a specific level' (1984a: 21). See also Ericson and Ellett (1982: 506): 'Our coin of knowledge is not firm generalizations, but is more akin to the good measure of meanings: plausibility. In educational research, as in education as a whole, good judgement should be seen as the prized intellectual capacity. Good judgement will not yield certainty, but it can yield interpretations and analyses far more acute and powerful than even the most skilful application of the empiricist "scientific method".'

More specifically, experimentation in language teaching seems to me to face three major problems: (1) the measurement of language competence involves elicitation (in some form) of specific language behaviour, but the relationship between such elicited behaviour and language competence which manifests itself in natural use is unclear; (2) given the view that the development of linguistic competence is a holistic process, there is not enough knowledge available either to identify and assess different intermediate stages of that development or to relate those stages to some table of norms which can be said to represent expectations, and (3) there is, ultimately, no way of attributing, with any certainty, any specific piece of learning to any specific teaching: lan-

guage learning can take place independently of teaching intentions and it is impossible to tell what has been learnt because of some teaching, and what in spite of it.

- 9 Collingham (1981), Gilpin (1981), Kumaravadivelu (1981), and Mizon (1981), all provide further samples and analyses of classroom discourse on the project. See also Rajan (1983) and Saraswathi (1984).
- 10 Brumfit (1984a: 17–18) provides a concise statement of the various dimensions of situational variation.
- 11 See Howatt (1984: 297): ‘The exchange of ideational meanings is more amenable to the conditions of the typical classroom than interpersonal socialization (particularly if it is role-played or simulated).’
- 12 There is perhaps an informative comparison to make between innovations in second language teaching arising in contexts of formal education, and those with their origins in special functional texts (e.g. the Berlitz Schools, the Army Specialized Training Program in the USA, present-day pre-sessional language courses, and private language schools). The comparison may suggest relationships between types of teaching contexts and forms of innovation on the one hand, and the limits (and effects) of generalization across contexts on the other.