Functional Perspective on Teaching of English as a Second Language

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Abstract. The paper discusses the goal of language education in English as communication in real life situations. It is often realized that many learners of a second/ foreign language acquire knowledge about the target language and/or its creative literature but cannot independently use it in doing things in actual situations. This paper argues that the different aspects of language such as syntax, vocabulary, and discourse are interactive. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a frame work to teach a second/foreign language which can help the learners to use the language for effective communication. The paper further argues that the Hallidayian systemic functional linguistic theory can provide interesting insights to develop such a framework to teach English as a second language.

It has been often realized that many students in the developing countries remain deficient in their ability to communicate in spoken and written mode although they have received several years of formal teaching of English (Widdowson, 1972). The deficiency cannot be pinned down in singular terms. It may be the choice of a lexical item and/or a sentence pattern at the level of discourse. Widdowson (1972:117) points out that the cause of the problem is often traced into the non-performance by the teachers rather than in the approach to teaching: "It is seldom that the validity of the recommended approach is called into question". If teachers do not teach and learners do not learn, there is no academic discussion and no academic solution. Thus, the discussion must focus on the approach to the teaching of English as a second/ foreign language. The present paper deals with the problem, assuming that the teachers do work and the students intend and try to learn: it means that the learning does take place but what the students learn is about language and not the actual use of the language.

The teaching practice has been to introduce rules about isolated words and structures unrelated to real life. If there has been anything in the name of situations it is literary texts of the past. It has been believed that grammar operates exclusively at the level of sentence and sentence is purely formal pattern while on the other end literary texts have been taught as aesthetic material where the language is artistically modified and the content of these texts is 'possible world', not the world derived from the actual world. Now, when the grammar which operates at the level of sentence only cannot help to analyse the texts as wholes and literary analysis divorced from the actual day-to–day experience realized through language is a limited knowledge that does not prepare the learners to use it in real situations. "Learners are left to integrate on their own the isolated fragments of knowledge into whole units of meaningful language use"(Butt et. al.2000:246). Consider, for example, the case of a learner who has acquired the formal patterns of language but does not know the linguistic (grammatical) modes of politeness:

> 1a. Can you type this letter for me?
> 1b. Could you type this letter for me?
> 1c. I am afraid I shall not be able to help you.

Such a learner will not understand the illocutionary force of the utterances (1a) and (1b): he may take them as questions, thus responding verbally in affirmation but not actually typing the letter which may create a humorous situation. Similarly, while addressing others, he will

use imperative construction with or without the lexical item 'please'. In Punjabi language, the politeness is marked by the plural form of the verb. Thus, it is a genuine problem of the Punjabi learners of English to express politeness in sentence 'mood' and/or tense unless they are told that the interrogative and past tense can also be used to express politeness.

In the case of sentence (1c), the clause 'I am afraid' considered as idiomatic expression carries interpersonal meanings of apologizing or regretting or politely refusing (Collins' COBUILD Dictionary) may cause difficulty for the non-native learner of English. He may not understand the intended polite refusal and may take rather an expression of fear on the part of the speaker if he is not exposed to this special usage and made to learn that formal rules of language may not be mathematically used. Further, consider the use of 'had better' as an informal idiomatic expression which may be polite indirect directive, advice or warning etc.

> If you say that someone **had better** do something, you mean that they ought to do it. It is often used as a polite way of telling, advising, warning, or threatening people. EG I'd better go… I had better introduce myself… Better put it over there… You better be careful you don't overdo it, Edward. You'd better make some notes… 'Will she be happy there?' – 'She'd better…' 'The case will be dropped' – 'It better be.' (Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary, 1988:125).

Further, the communicative 'deficiency' may reflect in the inability to choose between 2a (formal) and 2b (informal):

> 2a. The food in the mess was very bad yesterday.
> 2b. The grub in the mess was awful yesterday.

Although the sentence (2b) is grammatically correct, the words 'grub' and 'awful' can not be used in a formal complaint to the authority: these words have to be replaced by 'food' and 'bad' respectively. However if one is talking to one's friend while discussing one's experience in the mess, it may be appropriate.

At the level of lexis, there may be deficiency in recognizing the semantic range of a word. Take for example, in Punjabi language there is single expression for the concepts of 'category' and 'class' while English speakers clearly understand the difference. A Punjabi learner of English who has learnt the meaning of 'class' in isolation as a concept of 'a group of pupils' may produce sentence (3) while he actually means to say (4) below:

> 3. Poets and lovers are class fellows.
> 4. Poets and lovers fall in the same category.

These examples illustrate the problem of non–fit between teaching practice and the outcome in terms of the learner's ability to actually use the language in real situations. These and many other problems of mismatch between formal structures and the meanings in context have lead to the 'no grammar' approach to language teaching (Wilkins 1976; Krashen 1977; Allwright 1979; Canale and Swain 1980; Morrow 1981; Brumfit 1980, 1982, 1984; Brumfit and Johnson 1979). What they argue is that the output of teaching formal rules may not ensure the communicative competence in the learner. However, we need not overemphasize the rules of communication as a second set of rules. Rather a theory of language description with a functional perspective is required for teaching language for communication. Learning only vocabulary and a set of rules of a language is not sufficient for communication. It is so because the communication is realized in texts, and texts are "instances of linguistic interaction in which people actually engage" (Halliday 1975:24). Language occurs in the form of texts as harmonious wholes of meanings with a unity of purpose. Of course, there are situations where unity may be deliberately violated to make meanings. But then such texts

have their own unity of purpose and that is violating the unity to create some stylistic effects. Considering that language is "a process of making meanings…" so as to create purposeful texts, the objective of "language education thus becomes one of supporting language learners so they can participate in this process effectively" (Butt et. al.2000:15).The learner of a second/foreign language " will not only have to give information in abstract… he will wish to express certainty or uncertainty with respect to something; he will want to apologize for something. In other words, he will need the ability to refer to things, to people, to events etc. and to talk about them" (van Ek 1972 rept. 1979:104). The learner's wish to communicate is frustrated when the formal knowledge of language is challenged by the principles of conversation in social contexts.

People learn languages so that they may use them to communicate. If that is so, it is imperative that second/ foreign languages are taught strategically to do that. This challenge has prompted linguists and applied linguists to search into the developments in other allied areas of knowledge, and rightly so because the language in practice is not just language but language in context (Hymes 1971, 1972; Labov 1970; Sinclair & Coulthard 1975; Halliday et. al.1964). The Chomsky's formal model (1965) is strongly questioned and the focus is shifted from 'competence' to 'performance' : "To cope with the realities of children as communicating beings requires a theory within which socio-cultural factors have an explicit and constitutive role…"(Hymes 1972:271) and a linguistic model "must design it with a face toward communicative conduct and social life… rules of speech acts enter as a controlling factor for linguistic form as a whole"(Hymes 1972:278).

In spite of the sophisticated efforts to describe socio-linguistic factors such as geographical origin, social class, the degree of formality in the communicative situation, pragmatic and discourse variables and to incorporate these other kinds of knowledge into the model of competence, the effective model of language teaching is invisible. Of course, some attempts to write grammars that claim to face the challenge are good attempts (Leech and Svartvik1975; Quirk et. al.1985; Collins COBUILD Grammar of English 1990; Locke1996). The attempts to develop systematic theoretical paradigm of functions, meanings, wordings and expression (Halliday 1985) generate some scope of an approach that may fulfill the language learning goal of achieving both accuracy and communication.

Halliday (1976) provides five different perspectives on language teaching by analyzing the sentence- 'the teacher taught the student English'- in terms of his 'transitivity' model of language. Firstly teaching is understood as a 'material' process experienced upon the language with the suggestion that the student is 'beneficiary'. In other words, the language is treated as a commodity and teaching as a process of handing over (giving) the commodity (language) to the receiver (student) who is viewed as merely 'circumstantial' to it. Secondly, teaching again is a 'material' process but now experienced upon the student as if the teacher is doing something to the student not to the language while the language is the 'range' – an unaffected target. The difference between the first and the second view is that in the former the student has a passive role of 'beneficiary' while the teacher acts and the language is acted upon; in the latter the student is still passive but is acted upon. Thirdly the act of teaching is causative, helping the student to acquire/possess the language. Fourthly teaching may be viewed as the enabling exercise to make the student know about a language. Finally teaching is enabling the student to learn to be able to speak and write. According to Halliday, "This version expresses the complex notion that teaching a language means helping the student to master the ability to verbalize". He describes the fifth version as a 'meaning potential'. To Halliday (1973) language is basically 'meaning potential' what he describes as "sets of options or alternatives in meaning…" He describes learning including language learning as "learning to mean and to expand one's meaning potential" (Halliday 1992:19). Language teaching is a complex phenomenon requiring more than one resource and more than one perspective. However, from the point of view of an applied linguist, there is requirement of a theoretical perspective and a method of language analysis that can help the student to learn the language to be able to do things with it in actual situations.

People are motivated by various factors to tell others about their experience(s) resulted from the action(s) in which they themselves and/or others participate under some circumstance. The actions may be material doings, mental perceptions/reactions/ cognition, verbal sayings, identifying/attributive relations, behavioural and existential indications. The world is represented the way speakers/ writers experience it. Therefore, the representations are made available along with the speakers/ writers' intervention because they observe the way objects participate in the actions and also see what they represent is usual or unusual, certain or probable, obligatory or optional etc.; if the participants are inclined or obliged to act. Further a verbal text is given some shape suitable for the representation, assessment, and attitudes towards representation. Textual shape is also determined by the contextual and inter-textual factors, for example what is to be assumed, and what is to be said; how much can be left for the listener to understand from what is being said etc. Since all the things described above take place at once and not in parts, the linguistic descriptions must include all these aspects of communication. Halliday (1985) has drawn on Firth (1957, 1964) and Malinowsky (1923, 1935) to develop such a theory called Systemic Functional Grammar. A grammar, according to Halliday (1973:42), is "the linguistic device for hooking up the selections in meaning which are derived from the various functions of language and realizing them in a unified structural form". He identifies three meta-functions of language:

(a) Ideational i.e. representation of reality
(b) Interpersonal i.e. assessments and attitudes
(c) Textual i.e. texture

The three functions are actually three kinds of meanings and lexico-grammar of a language is a system of realizing these meanings. Further language is contextual: each context comprises three factors:

(d) Field of discourse
(e) Tenor of discourse
(f) Mode of discourse

The three meta-functions are three kinds meanings realized in the lexico-grammar of clause structure. For example, ideational meanings are realized in the clause as made up of process, participant(s), and circumstance as it is natural that the world comprises (a) processes of action, existence and association happening in spatial-temporal settings with numerous contingencies; (b) participants as actors and goals in the processes. Human beings add to the processes in the physical world the processes of consciousness, behaviour and locutions. Halliday (1985) calls these processes material, existential, relational, mental, behavioural and verbal (the words in the bold letters are technical concepts of Systemic Functional Grammar). At the same time the clause structure expresses the interpersonal meanings as attitude and/or evaluation of the processes (a) by way of layering out the 'mood', (b) by mood adjuncts, and (c) by appraisal (Martin 2000, 2003; Butt et. al. 2000; Hunston 1993; Thompson 1996; Morley 2000). The textual meanings are realized in the theme- rheme structure of the clause (Halliday 1985, 1967a, 1967b, 1968; Halliday and Hasan 1976). The clauses organized into texts and texts into the contexts (Halliday and Hasan 1985; Martin 1992) provide a model of language teaching enabling the learner to gain literacy for communicating in real situations. For example, the strategy of politeness as a point of communication in (1a- 1c) above can be better understood as a grammatical metaphor when using the mood structure of an English clause which is actually in a straightforward manner for asking questions and for indicating tense. The description of clause as interpersonal meaning will enable the student to understand that languages do not carry meanings as absolute statements; the truth as represented is only one of the choice i.e. either a statement or a query and either a yes or a no or a position between yes and no. Further, it is possible for the speakers of English and, in

fact, all languages to be indirect in conversation depending on the context i.e. field, tenor, mode, and of course, the cultural contexts. The speaker of 1a-1c is fine-tuning the interpersonal meanings by making his demand for service by packaging it as a query. "This shift to less straightforward structures increases the interpersonal distance between the speaker and the person they are speaking to, which is often an expression of politeness"(Butt et. al. 2000).Now we can explain that English uses interrogative mood and past tense as linguistic strategies of both politeness and distancing at once whereby the two interpersonal meanings are woven together while in Punjabi, politeness as interpersonal meaning is not associated with 'distancing' but with power and superiority and is grammatically linked to plurality. Hence, the problem for a Punjabi learner of English can be answered in the systemic functional description of language as function and text in context.

How these aspects of language are a meaning making resource can be laid out as a series of levels, each level getting realized in the text:

Context: What is going on in the world outside a text, the context, has two levels:
            – a general level of culture
            – an immediate level of situation
Language: What is going on inside of the text also has two levels:
            – a level of content
                The layers of context shape the meanings in a text (semantics)
                A text's meanings are encoded in wordings (lexicogrammar)
            – a level of expression
        Wordings are expressed as sounds
                    (Butt et. al. 2000:254-255)

It is rather difficult to understand precisely what a piece of language means without knowing the context in which it is used (Halliday 1978). Language always occurs in some kind of contexts, including cognitive contexts of past experience and knowledge, cultural contexts of shared meanings and world views and social contexts through which definitions of the self and situations are constructed. As such, language changes its form to match the functions it performs (Halliday, 1970a; 1970b). The contextual factors systematically correspond to the three meta functions so that the lexico-grammatical descriptions turn out to be description of meanings. For example, the English lexical items 'boy' , 'girl' , 'kiss' in isolation have conceptual meanings but these meanings do not create a linguistic event called communication; communication begins when these lexical items are arranged in one of the possible order:

    5. The boy kissed the girl.
    6. The girl kissed the boy.
    7. The girl was kissed by the boy.
    8. The boy was kissed by the girl.

The grammar of the clause requires three descriptions: there is a material action of kissing and there are two participants 'boy' and 'girl', one may be the actor and the other is acted upon goal. The grammar of English provides options of placing either of the two participants in the initial and end positions. What shape the text will take depends on the way the world is experienced by the speaker i.e. whether girl or boy is the actor. The sentences (7) and (8) create another option: even if 'girl' is the actor, the speaker may choose either 'girl' or 'boy' to make the topic in the message. Further, the meaning of 'kiss' may be either material process involving purely physical movement or behavioural process involving physical movement combined with emotional state of the actor. Suppose the participants are

conceptualized in terms of their social as well as physical identity rather than purely physical, the contextual factors will give different meanings. Consider the following:

> 9. The sister kissed her brother.

The meaning of 'kiss' as purely physical action, in fact, does not communicate because in that case there will be no difference between 'girl' as actor and 'boy' as **actor.** However if 'kiss' is understood as **behavioural** process i.e. physical action evoking emotion may provide option of 'brother-sister' affection or 'boy-girl' passion of love which will depend on the cultural context. These sentences may further be modified by adding more lexical and/or grammatical items:

> 10. The girl didn't kiss the boy.
> 11. The girl may kiss the boy.
> 12. The girl must kiss the boy.
> 13. The girl might have kissed the boy.
> 14. Did the girl kiss the boy?

The grammar of the clause now engages with the interpersonal aspect by incorporating the speaker's assessment in terms of polarity (10), future probability (11), past probability (13), and obligation (12). The sentence (13) changes the direction of exchange from 'giving' to 'demanding' and it becomes possible by changing interpersonal system of grammar i.e. **Mood Block**.

The above discussion explains how lexis, semantics, syntax and discourse interact for the communication to take place. In addition there is a suggestion that Systemic Functional Grammar has potential to help the student to learn the language to communicate while also learning about the language.

Language in actual situations occurs as text, not as clause(s). Thus the meanings will further be pinned down when another clause is added:

> 15a. The boy kissed the girl.
> 15b. She blushed.
>
> 16a. The boy kissed the girl.
> 16b. So did she to him
>
> 17a. The boy kissed the girl.
> 17b. She slapped him.

The co-reference of 'girl' and 'she' in (16a) and (16b) gives the two separate sentences the status of one text because the meaning of the pronoun 'she' depends on the meaning of the noun 'girl'. Secondly the use of pro- form 'so did' in (16b) is the predicator which also refers back to the predicator in 16a- 'kissed'- whereby the roles of the **participants** are reversed so that it becomes reciprocal and cooperative material 'action' evoking 'emotion'. Thirdly **cohesion** obtains in the text from another point of view i.e. the two sentences are related as cause and effect. Thus the text in practice constitutes its context of passionate love while the same context has required the text to take this shape. This is the text which represents the two participants at once engaged in **material** (physical) and **mental** (emotional) process. It may be compared with (15a) and (15b) where the pronoun 'she' and the noun 'girl' co-refer. Therefore the two sentences constitute one cohesive text but the predicator 'kiss' in (15a) is different from the predicator 'blush' in the sentence 15b: it, of course shows the mental state of the 'girl' who is goal of the process 'kiss' in 15a and the **behaviour** of the process 'blush' in (15b). In this text the reality is represented as the goal of the first sentence as the **behaviour**

of the second sentence: the girl is not **actor** of the **material** process; she is behaving in a way that encourages and positively responds to the **material** process. The cause and effect relation between the two sentences is effective: the process of 'kissing' causes the process of 'blushing' which may further encourage 'kissing'. There is still another possibility: the pronoun 'she' and the noun 'girl' in (17a) and (17b) represent the similar textual cohesion. There is also cause and effect relation but the predicator 'slapped' in (17b) is a **material** process caused by the **material** process of 'kissed' in (17a). However, unlike in (15a) and (15b), the matter is settled and closed in (17a) and (17b): the process of 'slapping' does not encourage the process of 'kissing'.

The lexical items 'boy', 'girl', 'she', 'him' 'kiss', 'blush', 'slap', 'so did', 'to' comprise the lexicon of the speaker of the above sentences. He can create more than one texts: (a) love making where both participants have equal status; (b) love making where only 'boy' is active participant while 'girl' is passive object; (c) fight i.e. aggression and counter- aggression where kissing is an offence . The texts may multiply as the context will require the speaker to choose his listener and decide on his relation with his listener and decide his purpose and select the mode i.e. spoken or written etc. The contextual feature will thus make representation as casual or serious conversation, gossip; media report (news), police report, eye witness, short story, film script so on and so forth. It is this creativity in context that is relevant for learning a language to communicate in situations.

The teaching of a second or foreign language is a complex activity which cannot be reduced to description of language patterns, nor can it be description of cultural contexts and principles of communication without any reference to principles of language patterns. In fact the latter position is worse than the former position in second/ foreign language learning because without ability to create linguistic patterns, the principles of communication are of no consequence. "The aim of the learning is always to enable the learner to do something which he could not at the beginning of the learning process…learning objectives must be geared towards learners' needs" (van Ek103). It can be achieved if grammatical descriptions are function oriented. "If teachers think about grammar as a way of describing language in terms of pattern and function, they are inclined to develop teaching techniques that draw students' attention to the regular grammatical patterns which make language use functional in its context"(Butt et. al. 2000 rept.2003: 41). Systemic functional linguistic theory provides insights as to what can be done to the knowledge about language in communication by analyzing the texts as genres (their use) and as made up of clauses (their structure) as representing the world mediated by the speaker's assessments and attitudes to the way the world is represented.

It is often suggested in different terms that grammar can not be excluded from language teaching programmes although there is the need to change the approach to grammar (Butt. et. al. 2000; Halliday 1976; Christie 2002). Yet it is significant that the teaching of English or any other language should include knowledge about language and skills in its use: discourse patterns, text types or genres, knowledge of grammatical features in which these are realized, and an associated range of skills in handling the various text types. In this view, it is not the rules of the structure of the language but the students' communicative attempts that constitute the starting off point for language teaching.

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