

CHAPTER 8: A brief review

Real language

The lexical approach as we have described it so far is firmly based on real language. It draws on the COBUILD research which provides an analysis of a corpus of natural language of twenty million words. The COBUILD corpus provided the content of the lexical syllabus- the commonest words and phrases in English and their meanings. It also provided some insights into that content which modified and shaped the way we treated the language in the coursebooks. As a result, the picture we presented of the language was quite different from what we might have offered intuitively. Intuition alone would not have identified the most frequent words and phrases of the language, or recognised their importance. In the past the coursewriter's reliance on intuition has led to distortions in the treatment of the language. Pedagogic grammars have placed great emphasis on the verb phrase to the detriment of other aspects of language. The basic meanings of prepositions, usually to do with space and time, have been thoroughly treated, but other prepositional meanings have been undervalued. Less than half the uses of the preposition **in**, for example, are temporal or spatial. The central function of lexis in structuring discourse has also been largely overlooked. These and other failings of established approaches to syllabus specification amply justified the decision to go back to a description of real language. There were, in addition, many specific insights into the language - the use of **some** and **any**; the use of **would** for past habit; the collocation between **can** and **be**, and so on. The description of language implicit in the *Collins COBUILD English Course* is very different from other courses. We would argue that it is a more accurate description, and that this derives from the fact that it is based on real language.

The *CCEC* materials offer a corpus of language to illustrate the insights derived from the original research. This corpus is in part natural language drawn from a number of sources (mainly written), and in part spontaneously produced spoken language drawn mainly from recordings of native speakers carrying out the tasks which form the basis of the course. This again is a departure from usual practice. Up to now no other coursebook at the elementary level offers predominantly authentic language. But I do not feel that there is any need to justify the decision to use almost exclusively authentic language. The onus rests with those who provide simplified and contrived language. They are the ones who should justify their procedures. The only real criticism of the use of authentic language would be if it proved too demanding for its target audience. That has not turned out to be the case.

Indeed, it is not difficult to provide justification for the decision to use authentic language. The spontaneous recordings provide listening material which is very different from scripted material. The structure of overtly interactive spoken discourse is extremely complex and extremely difficult to simulate. There are a number of features in the *CCEC* recordings which are typical of spoken discourse, but which are often omitted in scripted dialogues:

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DF: So. What do you do, again? You're a secretary, or

BG: Yes.

DF: more than-

BG I'm a secretary for Alistair.

DF: Okay. Erm...

BG: And I also do all his admin. And I work for John, who's our African Manager.

DF: Okay, so like a PA.

BG: To Alistair, yes.

DF: Yeah. Okay.

BG: And then, I sort of help John out with all his administration.

DF: Right. Erm... Are you planning to stay where you are?

BG: Yes.

DF: In your job?

BG: For the - for the time being.

DF: Erm... So you're quite happy with it?

BG: Yes.

DF: Erm... Have you got any long-term plans for the future, in terms of work?

BG: Erm... I'm not sure. I - it depends sort of what happens between now and then really.

Erm But, for the time being I'm happy. I'll just see what happens.

DF: Right. How long have you been there?

BG: Since May, last year.

DF: Oh. So you've only - you have - have you

BG: I haven't even been there a year yet. DF: Yeah. Yeah.... Okay. Right.

The turntaking is not as neatly organised as in most scripted dialogues. David and Bridget build up a description of Bridget's job over ten turns. The basic structure of their discourse is not simply a series of question and answer pairs. David constantly uses items like **yeah**, and **okay**, to signal that he has received and understood the answer to his question. The basic structure, therefore, is a three part exchange with question and answer followed by an acknowledgement of the answer before the next question. This structure has been familiar to discourse analysts (see Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) for many years, but these insights have rarely been incorporated in teaching materials. The word **right** is used twice. Each time it indicates the end of one part of the agenda and the beginning of another. The use of **again** in David's opening utterance links back to an earlier stage in the discourse.

There are two important points here. The first is that there is a great deal happening in spontaneous discourse which is idealised out of scripted dialogues. The second is that these features are a result of the fact that discourse is negotiated interactively. It is not a question of interlocutors taking turns to encode meanings. It is a matter of interlocutors combining to create a discourse. Scripted dialogues usually have more in common with written than with spoken language. There is an implied attempt to teach learners to speak written English. Not surprisingly this is something they find difficult to do.

When we began to pilot spontaneous recordings, we were worried that they might cause insurmountable problems for remedial beginners. This did not turn out to be the case. If anything, the spontaneous recordings were easier to process. We were surprised at this, but we should not have been. Interactive spoken discourse is structured the way it is in order to make comprehension easier, not in order to make it more difficult. The redundancy and overt discourse signals built into it do not obscure the message. Just the reverse - they make the discourse more accessible both to the participants and to other listeners. The reason why spontaneous discourse is often inordinately difficult to understand is that there is shared knowledge and shared assumptions between the participants which are not shared by other listeners. In the case of taskbased listening the tasks can be designed to ensure that shared knowledge between the participants which is not shared by the listener can be kept to a minimum.

Written texts in EFL coursebooks are often used simply to illustrate the pedagogic grammar which the coursebook writers want to impart to learners. But as we have seen, this grammar is often of doubtful validity. It is also based on the belief that the selection of, say, the past simple rather than the present perfect is a function of meaning in some objective sense. In fact the selection of one form rather than another is a result of the speaker's or writer's choice. It is difficult to see how one might justify contrived texts which are designed to present a precise contrast between past simple and present perfect, when we know that very often the contrast is not precise but a matter of choice. A procedure which focuses on a clear cut contrast and ignores cases in which choice operates, obscures the fact that very often no such contrast exists objectively. Language use is not a matter of conforming to a set of restrictive rules. It is a matter of exploiting the language system to achieve communicative intentions. The language used is shaped by the purpose for which it is being used. Language which is being used simply to illustrate an abstract grammatical system has no purpose and therefore offers no basis for choice.

Some coursebook writers defend the use of simplified language on the grounds that simplification is a natural phenomenon. We simplify our language when we are speaking to children and also when we are speaking to language learners. There is therefore no reason why writers should not simplify their language in this way when they are writing material for an EFL coursebook. This might be acceptable if they then took the trouble to ascertain that the language produced in this way is in fact typical of the target language, and that the words and phrases which their students are likely to meet outside the classroom are indeed covered by the simplified language they are offering. It may be that what they are offering is not simplified, but simply restricted. They would also need to show some principled development from the simplified code in the direction of the target language as used by adult native speakers.

On the question of how far simplified language is typical of language as a whole - how far it exploits the typical words and patterns of English - I would suggest that there are at least two reasons why simplified language is not typical of language as a whole. When simplifying our language we use specific techniques- repetition, paraphrase, exemplification and so on. Simplified language is, therefore, likely to be different in discourse structure from other manifes-

tations of natural language.

There are also doubts about the simplification techniques used in selecting or creating examples to demonstrate features of language form for the learner. A language description which focuses on sentence structure is likely to simplify out any features which detract from that focus. Thus the sentence:

Yes I do, I like being a father.

is a very likely sentence at the presentation or practice stage of a lesson. A sentence like:

Yes, my wife and I both like having kids around the house.

is very unlikely as a pattern sentence in a teaching context, but it is by no means an unlikely sentence of English.

Language materials based on a functional description of language tend to produce highly explicit realisations of language functions. In such materials suggestions are realised by:

If I were you I would . . .

or:

Why don't you . . .

They are rarely realised by:

Well what I do is . . .

or:

One answer would be to . . .

Simplification, therefore, is not neutral. It is conditioned by the description of the language which materials wish to present. If they wish to describe the language structurally, that will dictate certain priorities and omissions. Contrived simplification of language in the preparation of materials will always be faulty, since it is generated without the guide and support of a communicative context. Only by accepting the discipline of using authentic language are we likely to come anywhere near presenting the learner with a sample of language which is typical of real English.

Task-based methodology

By a task I mean an activity which involves the use of language but in which the focus is on the outcome of the activity rather than on the language used to achieve that outcome. It is what I described earlier as a replication activity, because it replicates important features of communication outside the classroom. Most teachers are well aware of the value of tasks in language learning. Most teaching centres have shelves full of books which help teachers bring activities of this kind into their classrooms. But tasks have rarely been used as the basis of published coursebook materials. This is because there is a basic contradiction between the structural syllabus and the use of tasks. The structural

syllabus depends on grading language patterns according to certain notions of difficulty, and then presenting these patterns to the learner one at a time. Control of language is essential to the structural approach.

A task-based methodology on the other hand, does not control in the same way the language demands placed on the learner. It encourages learners to make the best use they can of whatever language they have. It assumes that learners will find ways of encoding the meanings they need in order to achieve the desired outcome, but it does not try to predict or control the language that will be used to achieve the outcome. One way of looking at the opposition between form-focused and task-based approaches is that form-focused approaches see language as a system of patterns or structures. Learners are gradually introduced to more and more complex patterns until they have built up a picture of the whole language. Task-based approaches see language as a system of meanings. This view is succinctly characterised by Halliday (1975) in the title of a study of child language acquisition, *Learning How to Mean*. For Halliday, 'the learning of a language is essentially the learning of a semantic system'. Language develops in response to the demands made on the learner's meaning system. The crucial thing is what meanings can the learner encode? How well can learners exploit the language they have in order to meet the demands imposed upon them? From a learning point of view, how readily can they expand their language system in response to the demand placed upon them?

When one looks at language as a semantic system, this offers a whole new perspective on the dichotomy between fluency and accuracy. The concept of accuracy relates very much to a form-focused view of language. In thinking of accuracy, most teachers are addressing the question of how far the language tokens produced by learners do accurately reflect the grammar of English. But one might ask another question. How precisely are learners able to encode the meanings they wish to encode? This is an ability which requires them, particularly in the early stages of learning, to exploit their language learning resources in a way that distorts formal code:

(Errors) take place because the learner attempts to adjust the language he is learning to make it an effective instrument of communication and he does this by calling upon those strategies which he employs in his own language. Errors are the result of the learner's attempt to convert his linguistic usage into communicative use. (Widdowson 1979)

It is these demands on the learner's system which oblige learners to refine and expand their language resources. The exercise of choice will lead the learner into error because only in exercising choice in this way are learners obliged to create new meanings, and, in creating them, to extend their language resources. This creation of meaning is the first stage of learning. Refining the language used is a later stage. A presentation methodology is based on the belief that out of accuracy comes fluency. A task-based methodology is based on the belief that out of fluency comes accuracy, and that learning is prompted and refined by the need to communicate.

Once we view language as a semantic system, the arguments for a task-based methodology of some kind are overwhelming. The problem then is to devise a

methodology which will place appropriate demands on the learner's system. The *Collins COBUILD English Course* attempts to do this first by ordering tasks as far as possible according to the communicative demands they place on learners, and secondly by varying the communicative circumstances through a basic *Task - Planning- Report* cycle, so as to place varying demands on the need for formal accuracy.

A form-focused approach does not place such demands on the learner. It requires the learner to produce target forms to a large extent irrespective of meaning. In the final event it is still rooted in a behaviourist theory which believes in controlling and shaping the learner's code towards a desired outcome. Advocates of such approaches argue that we cannot reasonably expect learners to carry out certain tasks because 'they don't have the language to do it' because 'they haven't done conditionals yet', and so on. But trying to carry out tasks which stretch their language resources is useful to learners in two ways. It obliges them to make the best possible use of the language they do have. And it makes them aware of failings in the meaning system they have developed - it highlights the need for learning.

A shortcoming of task-based approaches is that they make it difficult to specify syllabus content, and as teachers we cannot be sure what is being learnt in the course of a given language activity or in a given unit. What we can do, however, is define a learner's corpus which covers the most important meanings and patterns in English. We can then exploit that corpus by using it as a source for language awareness activities, and we can enable the learner to exploit it by referencing and recycling the material it contains. An approach of this kind takes account of the fact that we cannot describe the logic by which a learner's system develops. We must equip learners to take advantage of whatever learning opportunities occur, not by presenting language to them a piece at a time, but by enabling them to look more and more critically at their own language experience.

The lexical syllabus

Taking lexis as a starting point enabled us to identify the commonest meanings and patterns in English, and to offer students a picture which is typical of the way English is used. We were able to follow through the work of Wilkins and his colleagues in their attempt to specify a notional syllabus. We were also able to offer learners a way of referencing the language they had experienced. Thus learners were able to use their corpus in the same way as grammarians and lexicographers use a corpus - in order to make valid and relevant generalisations about the language under study.

We did not work from other pedagogic grammars, but from a body of research into natural language. This meant that we were able to offer a more complete pedagogic description of the language and also a better balanced description. Coursebooks which take other coursebooks as their starting point draw on the strengths of accumulated experience. But unless they go back to look at language they are also likely to perpetuate the failings of other courses. They spend an inordinate amount of time on the verb phrase and ignore other

important features of language. We not only took a lexical description as our starting point, we also checked the course content against other courses by checking against the TEFL Side Corpus.

We found that we had covered to our satisfaction all that is traditionally in elementary and intermediate courses in terms of structures and functions, and had covered a good deal more besides. Where we made omissions, we did so on the basis of a deliberate decision. We decided, for example, that reported speech was not a valid category in a pedagogic, or indeed in a formal grammar. We did not, therefore, find it necessary to spend a large amount of time on tenses in reported speech. Similarly, by highlighting the meaning of would and encouraging learners to identify these meanings for themselves we avoided the need to spend time focusing specifically on the second conditional.

There were several reasons why we were able to offer more complete coverage. The first reason of course was that we were working from a more complete description of the language than most materials writers are able to work from. The data sheets for Level 1 alone ran to hundreds of pages which we had to distil into fifteen units (around one hundred and twenty hours of study for remedial beginners). Secondly, having omitted items like reported speech and the second conditional, we made time to look at other features of language which we felt to be more important or more problematic. We looked, for example, at the use of prepositions and participles in the noun phrase, and at those lexical items which are important in the structuring of discourse. This gave us a more balanced picture of language than pedagogic grammars normally achieve.

Most important of all, we shifted responsibility for learning onto the learner - where it belongs. A presentation methodology purports to teach the language, resting on the belief that there is a close relationship between input and intake. A methodology of this kind spends a large amount of time on a very limited number of language patterns. It fails manifestly to work in the way it is supposed to work. Learners do not extend their control of the language piece by piece. It cannot work in the way it is supposed to, because we do not have a description of language which might enable us to input the grammar in any worthwhile sense. Instead of presenting discrete patterns to the learner, we enabled the learner to experience a corpus of language which is in many ways typical of the language as a whole, and to learn from examining and analysing this corpus. By offering learners exposure to carefully selected language, and by equipping them to analyse that language for themselves, we are enlisting the learners' help. There is no longer an appearance that learning is dependent on teacher control. The most dynamic element in the process is the learner's creativity. By exploiting rather than stifling that creativity, we make learning vastly more efficient.

The role of the teacher

We hear more and more frequently nowadays that the role of the teacher is not so much to teach as to manage learning - to create an environment in which learners can operate effectively. Sometimes this is taken further, and the job of the teacher is to help learners manage their own learning. This is the teacher

helping learners to discover for themselves the best and most effective way for them to learn. Certainly there is a move to a much greater focus on the learner, and a greater recognition of the fact that the most important variable in the language learning process is the individual learner.

We are much more likely to realise this ideal if we abandon the idea of the teacher as 'knower' and concentrate instead on the notion of the learner as 'discoverer'. There is nothing new in this notion. It was put forward by interlanguage theorists like Corder and Selinker almost twenty years ago. But there is an understandable reluctance on the part of teachers to abandon the role of 'knower'. It is a comfortable role in a number of ways, not least because, since the role of 'knower' is a high status role, it paradoxically allows us to cover up or redefine what we do not know. But even when teachers wish to break away from the role, it has not been easy for them to do so. Materials which are based on the assumption that the best way for learners to learn is to discover the grammar for themselves and that the teacher is a guide to this discovery process, have been few and far between.

It is to be hoped that techniques which specify a learner's corpus, and provide learners with a framework within which to examine that corpus, will enable teachers to place learners at the centre of the learning process.

The way ahead

Most of the things we have tried to do in the *Collins COBUILD English Course* have been done with varying degrees of success by other materials writers and teachers for years. Language tasks which focus on outcome rather than form are part of the repertoire of most teachers, and there is a wealth of material to support activities of this kind. The promotion of language awareness and the analysis of language by learners are also established techniques but, although other materials writers have used authentic materials, to my knowledge none have made spontaneous spoken interaction the basis for a course at the elementary level. But this is not a denial of the desirability of using language of this kind - simply an acknowledgement of the difficulty of doing so.

The notion of a learner's corpus and the deliberate attempt to reference and exploit that corpus are, I think, innovations. The learner's corpus is a direct consequence of taking the COBUILD corpus as a starting point. It was this starting point which gave us the idea of enabling the learner to work with a corpus just as a lexicographer or grammarian works with a corpus. It was the computational techniques used in the COBUILD project which enabled us to exploit the learner's corpus in this way.

As computers are used more and more in the study of large corpora of text and as aids to teachers and learners of languages, so these techniques will be further developed. In the *Collins COBUILD English Course* we, as materials writers, acted as intermediaries between learners and corpus, taking decisions as to what was worth highlighting and when. It is now technically possible to bring decisions of this kind much closer to the classroom. Teachers can scan a corpus and decide for themselves which features are likely to be most useful and valuable for their students. Students themselves can have access to a corpus. Using the FIND command on a word processing package they can examine

a range of uses of a given word in its original contexts. Using a concordancing programme they can bring those uses together and either compare them with a description provided by a teacher or a set of materials, or produce their own description. Given the rapidly improving state of technology it is more than likely that the notion of the learner's corpus will play a progressively larger part in the repertoire of the coursewriter, the teacher and the learner. In future we may come to think of the business of designing a syllabus as a process of constructing and exploiting a corpus of language with a particular group of learners in mind. A process of this kind acknowledges the proper respect due to both the learner and the language.