

***Covert Interaction with the Text-Writer:
An Approach to L₂ Composition***

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در این مقاله به دنبال مقدمه‌ای کوتاه درباره یادگیری زبان دوم، مسائل
چندی از جمله
الف) روش شناسی خواندن در پرتو فراگیری زبان اول،
ب) تعامل زبانی از طریق خواندن و نوشتن و
ج) رابطه متقابل رشد خواندن و نوشتن مورد بحث قرار گرفته است.
انتظار می‌رود بحث هریک از این مسائل مرتبط این واقعیت را روشن کند
که کسب مهارت در زبان نوشتاری انگلیسی بر اثر خواندن آثار مورد
علاقه انگلیسی و مناسب با توانش یادگیری زبان آموز حاصل می‌گردد و
توفیق معلم درس نگارش پیشرفته در گرو به کارگیری آن روش آموزشی
است که در آن هر دو فعالیت خواندن و نوشتن به گونه معقول با هم ترکیب
شده باشد.

1. Introduction

Second language development has not been short of theorizing. Schouton (1974:4), for instance, suggests that in second language learning too many models have been built and taken for granted too soon, and this has stifled relevant research. R.Ellis (1988:159) argues that research has suffered from the lack of sound theoretical base, with researchers often happy to

investigate researchable but unrewarding hypotheses.

It is interesting to note that there is no theory of classroom second language development* and speculations about how SLD takes place in a classroom have either derived from general learning theory or from theories of naturalistic SLD - the creative construction theory. Researchers on SLD , in their attempts to account for L₂ acquisition, have studied three sets of factors (Schumann, 1976): The first set consists of "initiating factors" - how does SLD take place and why does it stop short of native-like competence? The second set involves "cognitive processes" - what internal learner mechanisms are responsible for the internalization of data from the input and also for the use of internalized rules in actual performance? The third set deals with the learner's linguistic product - the actual utterances produced by the learner, which are used to learn about cognitive processes of comprehension and production of verbal messages.

The three sets of factors have been explored by various theories of second language acquisition. For example, the acculturation theory explains SLD as part of the process of becoming adapted to a new culture (Brown, 1980); the interlanguage theory was primarily concerned with the learner's internal processing mechanism (Corder, 1967, Selinker, 1972);

the creative construction theory (Dulay and Burt, 1978) and the Monitor model (Krashen, 1981_b) attempted to account for all three sets of factors.

A rapid survey of the studies on psycholinguistics will reveal that the discipline has, since its inception in mid-nineteen sixties, dealt with two main questions:

1. What does it mean to know a language? , and
2. How does a child acquire a language?

Although in most studies the answers to these questions refer to native speakers, in the seventies the answers were recognized to be relevant to second language learning. Stern (1984: 301) has posited the fact that "native language growth provides a standard against which to conceptualize second language learning." We will take up this issue to initiate the first sub-topic of the present paper.

1.1. L₂ Reading in the Light of L₁ Acquisition

Researchers, following in the footsteps of first language development (FLD), have realized the need for investigating the relationship between interaction and SLD. In order for SLA (second language acquisition) to take place, they have expressed the belief that there must be (1) some L₂ data made available to the learner as input, and (2) a set of internal learner mechanisms

is needed to account for how the L₂ data are processed. Regarding the role of input in language development three different views have been expressed:

1. The behaviorist accounts of SLA view language learning in terms of the regulation of the stimuli and the provision of feedback which lead to the formation of linguistic habits,
2. the nativist regards input as a trigger which activates the internal mechanisms.

Thus, whereas a behaviorist view of language acquisition seeks to explain progress purely in terms of what happens outside the learner, the nativist view emphasizes learner-internal factors. A third view, however, treats language acquisition as the result of an interaction between the learner's mental abilities and the linguistic environment.

Krashen (1981_b) emphasizes that SLD is the result of comprehension, not of production. Assuming that this is psychologically true, appropriate reading activity* provides the learner with data to comprehend. But in order for the data to convert into intake, it should be comprehensible to the L₂ learner though comprehensibility is not the only factor to ensure language acquisition on the part of the learner. There should also be interaction between the reader and text writer. In order for the learner to interact with the reading text writer. In order for he to

take the task. Motivation requires that the test is interesting for the learner. Thus the input is not determined solely by the text writer. It is also determined by the learner himself: The information on how the learner selects from the input data is scanty. It might have to do with the way pieces of input data are presented or the socio-affective factors such as motivation. There is, however, consensus among language researchers and teachers that motivation, of all the factors contributing to the successful acquisition of L_2 , rates first (Carroll, 1963; McDonald, 1965).

In recent studies on natural approach to SLA, researchers have opted for the term "filter" - the socio-affective factors which control how much input is let in and how much is excluded. With self-motivating reading, roughly tuned to the student writer's language proficiency to ensure the maxim "i+1 level" is observed, the filter is low to let in a large portion of input. At the same time the input hypothesis, advanced by Krashen (1982), calls for understanding the discourse when the learner is focused on meaning and not on the form. This makes it possible for the reader to subconsciously interact with the text writer. If it is true that subconscious interactional adjustments are important for language acquisition, which is supported by evidence on L_1

acquisition, then it is reasonable to deduce that appropriate reading texts will provide L₂ learner with input data to draw on while expressing himself through the written mode of language.

It is worth noting that one of the salient features of FLD is that the process of acquisition is subconscious, a feature which is realized when the reading text is characterized by two requirements:

1. The text is in accordance with the learner's language proficiency,
2. It fits the interest area of the learner.

This subconscious intake of language through reading, still unyielded to the probings of cognitivists and neorolinguists, helps L₂ learner develop his writing competence which makes it possible for him to put the newly gained L₂ knowledge to various uses similar to those he has come across in his pleasurable reading activities.

Extensive research (reviewed by Krashen, 1981, 1982) has confirmed that acquisition is a far more powerful process than learning. Speaking from experience, many a time, while engaged in expressing myself through the written mode, I have found myself in the contexts of situations similar to the ones I had come across in a novel or a short story. The similarity between the two situations (be it fictional or real) was strong enough to invoke in

my mind the linguistic forms which I had faced in my reading and which were fully available when I was performing on paper. It is almost certain that focussing on the form at the expense of neglecting meaning is of no or very limited use; this is an example of rote learning which is looked down in language learning. However, in extensive reading the content, encapsulated in various linguistic forms, enters the cognitive field as a whole and relates to already existing concepts or propositions. In so doing the ideas carry along with them the forms through which they are expressed. To put in other words, in the perceptive process of reading language forms are hung on semantic pegs so that whatever necessary a particular meaning invokes the corresponding language form which has been acquired subconsciously. Self-motivated reading makes it possible for the L₂ learner to acquire both types of language knowledge - the systemic and pragmatic simply because:

- a) the Learner has a meaningful learning set - that is a disposition to relate the new task to what he already knows, and,
- b) the learning task itself is potentially meaningful to the learner - i.e., relatable to the learner's structure of Knowledge.

To William James (1890:662), the secret of good memory is the secret of forming diverse and multiple associations with every

fact that we want to retain. The implication of this statement for our proposed methodology of L₂ composition is that when semantic items, familiar in the L₂ learener's experience, are found in congruity with unfamiliar language forms, the familiar notions will activate the relevant linguistic forms in identical situations of language use. To put in different words, relevant linguistic forms will emerge naturally in the process of verbal communication when pieces of meaning with which they are associated are incorporated within the L₂ learner's cognitive system. And this paper claims that extensive pleasurable reading, through which language intake accrues subconsciously by means of interaction with the text, holds the promise of a great pedagogical accomplishment in L₂ composition course.

Following in the footsteps of child language acquisition, today many language teachers have come to believe that in the early stages of foreign language learning the L₂ learner should be allowed a silent period during which the learner receives large amount of comprehensible input via listening and reading. This strategy, it is argued, equips the learner with adequate material for production in speech and writing. If Krashen's claim (1984:22) is true, namely, "Acquistion may happen most efficiently when the acquirer "forgets" that he is listening to another language", then we may deduce that the more deeply the L₂ learner is absorbed-

in the reading act the larger intake he will have, hence ready to commit his views to paper - i.e. write a composition. Just as speech is hypothesized to be a result of Comprehensible input, the ability to write is assumed to be a result of reading. We have a piece of advice for our presumptive EFL learner to observe if he is to speed up the process of learning to write appropriately. In this approach to writing we allow the conscious a role to play - that is to say the L₂ learner is advised to note down idiomatic expressions and formulaic utterances* while he keeps on reading. Later when he is expressing himself through the written mode, he will have the chance of using such consciously learnt formulaic utterances to fill the gaps left by incomplete acquisition. In this approach to L₂ writing the learner resorts to expressing himself on paper about the themes similar to the ones he had witnessed in reading. Talking from experience, writing practice should form almost one third of the learning activity, and two thirds of it may be devoted to reading.

1.2. Verbal Interaction through Reading and Writing

It is common today to refer to both reading and writing as part of a continuum - i.e., what is written is intended to be read and what is read provides the substance for writing. Because communication by its nature requires at least two persons

involved in face-to-face interaction, some people may hesitate to accept the opening thesis of this section simply because in either process there is seemingly one person engaged in the activity. But the fact is that reading and writing, though non-reciprocal and dissimilar from face-to-face interaction in which the interlocutors take turn to respond to one another's utterances, are a two-way process - the writer intends to transmit some information for a particular purpose and the reader, while engaged in reading, assumes the role of the addressee, weighing the address itself with regard to the particular objective he has in mind. To receive the message, the reader needs to know both the explicit (locutionary) and the implicit (illocutionary) meanings of what is written. It is a radical mistake, in Widdowson's words (1986:119) "to suppose that a knowledge of how sentences are put to use in communication follows automatically from a knowledge of how sentences are composed and what signification they have as linguistic units". Linguists and philosophers of language have belaboured the point to bring out the following contrasts: linguist's meaning vs speaker's meaning; reference rules vs expression rules; systemic / symbolic knowledge vs referential / indexical knowledge; proposition vs illocution; denotative meaning vs connotative meaning; significance vs value; linguistic rules vs language behaviour;

usage vs use; the analyst's model vs the user's model ... to mention only a few of them. It is interesting to note that the second parts of the foregoing contrasts, pragmatic in nature, defy linguistic formulations similar to those made by structuralists and generativists. While the sentence shows the formal properties of language as a system, its meaning internally defined and always signalled by formal devices, the meaning of the utterance is conditioned by circumstances in which it is uttered. "The linguistic signals in an utterance", says Widdowson, "always point outwards in the direction where meaning is to be found". There is a plethora of situational factors bearing upon a particular utterance, hence inducing various implications which will be understood by negotiation. This negotiation is carried out by the use of interactive procedures which are, in turn, determined by situational contexts. For the L₂ learner to develop adequate communicative competence, he needs to learn what value a sentence may have as description, narration, prediction, reporting, etc. Interrogative questions do not always require the respondent to supply affirmative statement. To the question "Where's my box of chocolate?" one may respond using an interrogative question which indeed, functions as a reply: "Where's the snow of yester year?", implying that the box of chocolate is gone, probably eaten. Let me cite an example given

by Widdowson (1986:223) to illustrate how an utterance could be used to perform different illocutionary acts, the precise formulation of which have defied strict treatment in terms of taxonomic linguistics:

Utterance : The door is open.

Illocutionary acts:

Invitation : The door is open. Come on in.

Dismissal : The door is open. Clear off and never darken it again.

Request for : The door is open. Close it please. action

The way the addressee negotiates with situational factors leads him to appropriate interpretation of the addresser's intent. To acquire these illocutionary acts, the L₂ learner, should either live in the target speech community which is impossible for most of L₂ learners coming from the third world, or take up the less-expensive, yet more efficient approach, to the task, namely read through English novels, stories, biographies which abound in real-life statements with accompanying utterances whose meanings are a function of their extension by situational factors - who produced them for what purposes, against what background of shared knowledge, and so on. People, in their attempt to establish communication, need to make the meaning accessible (linguistically comprehensible) and acceptable

(conforming with principles of cooperation). Again, none of the English grammars, to the best of our knowledge, had ever embarked on teaching how one can make his utterance acceptable in terms of Grice's principles of quality, quantity, relevancy, and so on. Studies of FL as well as SLA provide ample evidence that L₂ acquisition, or to put in other words, attaining native-like competence, is basically a subconscious process. In formal learning situation, self-motivated reading is the most efficient means of rendering L₂ learning subconscious whereby the L₂ learner is expected to pick up various communicative features like observing principles of cooperation, mastering verbal correlates of situational contexts, coping with stylistic variations... The components of communicative competence if analysed out from their natural uses will render the learning task artificial and the pedagogical attempt a failure.

3. The Interface of Reading and Writing

The process of writing and reading are usually studied and analysed separately, perhaps because each ordinarily is thought of as occurring in an organism. It is true that in the case of face-to-face interaction negotiation of meaning takes place through reciprocal exchanges and that in the written discourse

the interaction is non-reciprocal; that is to say there is no shifting of the initiative from one interlocutor to the other, no monitoring of effect, no open cooperation in the negotiation of meaning. While it is also true that in spoken interaction the interlocutors, caught up in a social behaviour, need to observe the acceptability requirement, the reader is detached from the immediacy of a social encounter and is free to key his reactions to the writer's position on the issues concerned. Also the writer is the sole begetter of the text and he produces discourse, in Widdowson's words, "... by means of a covert interaction whereby he anticipated the likely reactions of an imagined reader and negotiates with him as it were by proxy (1986:220). Despite these outward differences between reading and writing, they are both psycholinguistic processes and it is possible, according to Smith (1971) to identify common elements in the two processes and increase the overall effectiveness of instruction by focusing on commonalities. Evanechko and Armstrong (1974) have expressed the view that if it could be possible to determine language competencies common to both reading and writing, then developments in these areas could be planned to occur in these subjects concurrently to permit reinforcement as the student uses skills learned in the receptive reading process to apply in the expressive writing process. Page (1974) offers

further insights by examining relationships between reading and writing with communication assumed as the intent of both the writer and the reader. Page identifies the elements surface structure, deep structure, meaning and knowledge as related to one another in the process of writing and reading as shown in the diagram below:

Writer

Knowledge

Meaning

Deep Structure

Conceived Surface Structure

Graphic Surface Structure

Reader

Graphic Surface Structure

Perceived Surface Structure

Deep Structure

Meaning

Knowledge

Conceived surface structure is the writer's internal concept of the sentence about to be written. Perceived surface structure is the reader's perception of the observable surface structure. Both conceived and perceived surface structures, according to Page, are circumstances of inner speech, unobservable elements of the writing and reading process.

The text, produced by the writer and received by the reader, is the focal point at which both the conceived meaning and perceived meaning meet. Today in discursal studies, text is considered from two perspectives both as a product and as a process. It is a product in the sense that it is an output; it is a process in the sense of a continuous process of semantic choices, each choice invoking a further set of choices. Halliday (1990:11) has put it very aptly:

The text is an instance of the process and product of social meaning in a particular context of situation. The context of situation is encapsulated in the text through a systematic relationship between the social environment on the one hand and the functional organization of language on the other hand.... If we treat both text and context as "modes of meaning" we can get from one to the other in a revealing way.

Hasan, following Halliday's view, also believes that there is a two-way relationship between language and situation. This

means that the situation in which linguistic interaction takes place gives the participants (including the reader as if by proxy a great deal of information about the meanings that are being exchanged; the meanings that are being made by the language will give the participant a great deal of information about the kind of situation they are in. This two-way relationship between language and situation has significant pedagogical implications because the bidirectionality will make it possible for the L₂ learner to predict, by drawing on some features of the context, some elements of the structure of possible and appropriate texts. Situations are culturally constructed and in foreign language teaching much of the work of learning consists in learning to make the right predictions. Halliday (1990) has introduced the three terms field, tenor, and mode* to refer to certain aspects of social situations that always act upon the language that is being used. The particular configurations of field, tenor, and mode that bring a text into being are culturally imbued-that is to say, these features are, in Hasan's words (1990:64). a totality of things that go together in the culture.

All these factors as well as the meaning relations between the parts of a text, which lend the text its particular texture are too subtle features (with intricate relationships between them) of the written mode to be analysed out from natural uses and

presented to the L₂ learner in an attempt to teach him how to tackle the task of writing in the target language. It is not, therefore, difficult to understand why almost all language teachers are committed to the notion that the integration of reading and writing activities is a good educational process and that, so far as possible, artificial barriers are removed, allowing the L₂ learner to advance and mature in the conviction that what is written is meant to be read and what is read becomes the substance or point of departure for writing. Language teachers who have taken up the discussion of teaching writing skill to L₂ learner have all supported the methodology of using reading models in teaching writing skills:

- native speakers' way of learning to write is analogous to the way they first learn grammar. The young child internalizes the grammar of the language by being exposed to the language spoken around him. The same process of discover and transform must also occur in order for the native speaker to become a native writer (Arapoff, 1969).
- There is a parallel process between writing and reading that is comparable to the match between speech produced by the speaker and interpreted by the listener (Dubin and Olshlain, 1980).
- Reading must play an important role in a writing course as

listening does in an oral production course.... Students have to know what writing is before they can be expected to produce it (Carr, 1967).

- To be able to express one's thought in writing directly in the foreign language without resorting to use of native language is the goal toward which one aspect of foreign language instruction should be directed. To achieve this goal writing skills should be developed along with reading skills because each of these graphic skills reinforce the other (Cornfield, 1966).

Research findings confirming students' gains in an analytical reading-based approach to L₂ composition are numerous; however, this paper, drawing on the notion that L₁ acquisition is basically a matter of verbal interaction between the interlocutors, claims that subconscious intake of L₂ through extensive reading, when the L₂ learner is deeply absorbed in meaning, hence mentally interacting with the participants introduced in the text (a novel, short story, biography) is the safest and most efficient way of achieving a native-like competence in writing. Unlike the child acquiring L₁, the mature adult L₂ learner is expected, while absorbed in the content of the text, to wise up to the beauty of expressions and note them down for further uses in situations analogous with the ones he has come across in his reading

activity. The rationale behind the communicative approach to language teaching which opts for exposing L₂ learners to unstructured language - written or spoken - can be said to support our suggested approach to L₂ composition because with such an approach learning is highly motivated and nonanalytical (subconscious), the learner is exposed to texts abounding in various uses of verbal exchanges between interlocutors in social situation, and finally the psychological principle "recognition, assimilation, and production" is observed. I would like to put the finishing touch to this paper with a quotation from Widdowson (1986:191): "Employers have employees, but teachers do not have teachees... No matter how precisely you specify what is to be taught, the learner will always tend to defy its limitation".

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1. Henceforth for the sake of brevity we will be using SLD standing for "Second language development"

2. By "appropriate reading activity" we mean the activity which is concerned with texts within the language proficiency and the area of interest of L2 learner.

3. A formulaic utterance consists of learnt discourse stretches that are dependent for their existence on specific easily identifiable context. It has been suggested that in both FL and SLD research formulas first learnt as unanalysed whole are later recognized as consisting of discrete constituents which which can be combined with other constituents, serving as the basis for creative speech (R.Ellis; 1988:67).

Spiro (1980) has classified formulaic utterances functionally into four groups:

- 1) Situation formulas (associated with a specific situation)
- 2) Stylistic formulas (associated with a particular style)
- 3) Ceremonial formulas (associated with ritualistic interactions)
- 4) Gambits (those used to organize interactions and activities)

4. The FIELD OF DISCOURSE refers to the nature of the social action that is taking place.

The TENOR OF DISCOURSE refers to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles.

THE MODE OF DISCOURSE refers to what part the language is playing. See the sample text in Halliday and Hasan (1990:30).

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