

## A brief but invaluable interview with Henry G. Widdowson

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*Professor Widdowson has been teaching for many years at the University of London in Institute of Education. He has written many articles and several books on second language teaching and education, including **Teaching Language as Communication** (OUP, 1978), translated recently in Brazil by José Carlos P. de Almeida Filho as **O Ensino de Línguas para a Comunicação** (Pontes, 1993), and, more recently, **Aspects of Language Teaching** (OUP, 1990) and **Linguistics** (OUP, 1996). In 1995, a book called **In Honor of H. G. Widdowson** was written in his honour by some of his colleagues. He has been to Brazil several times for lectures and courses and is one of the most influential thinkers in the area of second/foreign language teaching for many Brazilians.*

Professor Widdowson's seminal work and most influential book *Teaching Language as Communication* (1978) fell into my hands in 1979 and caused a profound effect on my way of thinking (and certainly on many others). It not only introduced me to the basic and remaining issues of teaching communicatively, but also expanded my view on the nature of language. As I started to learn about the distinction between "usage" and "use", I was initiated in the study of what people actually do when they interact with each other. What impresses me most about his work is that he has always been faithful to his ideas that teachers themselves have to define "who they are, what they do, and why they do it".

I remember the first time his figure caught my eyes. It was in San Antonio, Texas, when I attended the TESOL 89 Congress. At that time, I was writing my Ph. D. proposal and I remember I wrote the conclusion inspired by his remarks in the plenary closing address with Judy Winn-Bell. He observed: "*Belief in theory liberates thinking, belief in a theory confines it*".

The second time was at the 11th World Congress of Applied Linguistics (AILA) in Jyväskylä, Finland, last year. At AILA, my colleague and friend Maria Inês P. Cox and I attended his talk on "*The Status of Theory in Applied Linguistics*". A few minutes before it started, I got the guts (with the support of Maria Inês) to ask him whether he could send by e-mail his comments on the three questions presented below. He kindly and promptly e-mailed his comments in a few weeks.

The current interview was first published in *NewsLetras* (nº 6, Dec. 1996) edited by Odila Watzel, Elaine Pereira and Heloisa Figueiredo from the Language Department of the Federal University of Mato Grosso to whom I am thankful for the permission to publish it here.

*In this interview, professor Widdowson discusses the contribution of SLA theory to language teaching and the role of grammar in the English language class.*

*Ana Assis-Peterson:* In your opinion, what is the most meaningful contribution of SLA theory to language teaching practice?

*Dr. Widdowson:* Probably to make us think about the different factors which come into play in the acquisition process, and the extent to which these can be manipulated in classroom teaching. What SLA cannot do, it seems to me, is to provide a definite set of recommendations. It can only point things out. This is so because its research inevitably operates within a controlled set of circumstances, and isolates particular factors and effects. So its findings cannot be directly applied to pedagogy. What is actually relevant to pedagogy can only be established by teachers themselves. So in general my feeling is that SLA has contributed by making language teaching

productively problematic in raising interesting questions, but not by providing effective answers.

*Ana Assis-Peterson:* What do you think is the role of grammar in language teaching and learning today?

*Dr. Widdowson:* Its role today is as it has always been I think: to provide the basic resource which has to be drawn on to function effectively in a language. Grammar at one time fell out of fashion, and principally perhaps because it was supposed that language teaching should focus on meaning rather than on form and form was associated in people's minds with grammar. But grammar is the encoding of meaning in form, and so if your purpose in teaching is to develop the ability to communicate, then the learning of grammar has to be learned somehow. The problem in the past, I think, was that there was not sufficient focus on the nature of grammar as encoded meaning, as a communicative resource, and the connection was often not made between the knowledge of this resource and the ability to act upon its acts of communication. It was somehow isolated from meaningful behaviour and so often has become a boring classroom ritual of pattern practice and pointless repetition.

*Ana Assis-Peterson:* Have you changed your conceptions about language teaching in the last few years?

*Dr. Widdowson:* My beliefs today are not, I think, essentially different from those I had before. My view has always been that pedagogic practice should always be subjected to critical examination, and that we should always avoid the temptation of easy answers, especially those which claim the authority of theoretical research. I think that over recently we have been misled by too exclusive a focus on the eventual goal of learning and the consequent emphasis placed on authenticity. It is very often stressed these days that the language (English in our case) which is presented in the classroom should be real English — that which is attested as what is used in genuine communication among its users. But this language is not real to the learners themselves, and as learners they simply do not have the knowledge available to make it real. It seems to me

that in the teaching of English, as in the teaching of anything else for that matter, the first point of reference is the learner's own reality. I do not think it matters whether or not the language presented in the classroom is that which would be contextually appropriate in the real world of users. What matters is whether the learners can relate to it, make it real, appropriate it for their own classroom purposes and make it effective for learning.