

From paragraphs to patterns: Ablocutionary value in autobiography

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Re-reading my 1983 article 23 years after its publication has turned out to be quite an experience, in at least three dimensions: affective, conceptual and autobiographical.

Affectively, it brought back immediate memories of place and time and the students that I was working with. With that came some strange sense of loss: perhaps just a loss of youth and innocence, but then also a suspicion of current tiredness and age, rather than growth and wisdom. I see that the article is naïve in its approach to reading, but I was then on an upward trajectory, the sun was for me still in the ascendant and we were far from noon.

Conceptually, the use of paragraphs as a formal level of analysis was in no way derived from a theory of text or reading, and the closing comments about the need “eventually to move away altogether from the paragraph-by-paragraph approach” were prompted by an inquiry from the editor, Ray Williams, as to whether I was committed to this approach due to text-theoretical reasons. (I am not sure whether the regrettable “his” in the second paragraph was Ray’s decision or mine, but I accept the responsibility.)

The ideas, then, are explicitly procedural and classroom oriented, arising from a sense of “what works” to help students deal with the need to shift from a school-world of reading comprehension in which success was scored according to an ability to respond to questions on specific and unconnected texts, to a university-world of reading in which success would be measured according to an ability to gather information as required, with a view to using it to some purpose.

This last point signals the task-based approaches that had already developed under the umbrella of communicative language teaching. There is also evidence in the article of the move into learner-training, as it was to be called for a while, with the need for emphasis on the learner’s behavioural skills, knowledge, awareness, and attitude. I note with a smile the influence of Munby’s (1978) communicative needs processor, even without the full-blown specification of micro-skills.

The article could have been written from one of the theoretical perspectives evoked above, but the foregrounding of classroom method under a title that so explicitly announces a semantic relationship of Goal (grammatically signalled by two infinitives of purpose) and Means (lexically signalled by the item, *procedure*) rather than a “theory + application” approach was typical of my pragmatic mindset at the time. The mindset, in fact, has not changed. In the early 1980s,

however, I simply did not have available either the concepts or the terminology of action research, nor was I as familiar as I might have been with the work in schema theory that I was soon to learn about from, for example, Carrell (1983) and Alderson and Urquhart (1984).

More significant for my professional autobiography than even these publications, however, was the appearance of Hoey (1983), which drew my attention away from the formal structure of texts and towards the semantic organization of discourse, along with its signalling (see comments in the previous paragraph on my 1983 title). My concern at this time (along very much the same lines as with the *RFL* article) was to find a way of making the professional literature of English language teaching more accessible to teacher trainees who struggled often bravely, but frequently in vain, with the texts set for them. My 1985 article “Do TEFL articles solve problems?” was my first published report on attempts to use Hoey’s relational analysis to this purpose. This led on to doctoral work, supervised by Hoey, and to further articles (e.g., Edge, 1989, 1993) attempting to synthesize discourse analysis and reading in the context of teacher education. Edge (1989), for example, theorized the change in approach required from my teacher-trainee readers as a shift from what I called *interpretive* reading to *exploitative* reading. The same paper introduces a reader-oriented dimension to speech-act theory, arguing that it can be useful to work with the concept of *ablocutionary value*, defined as the semantic or pragmatic meaning that a reader takes from a text, whether or not this was intended by the writer. I cannot claim that any of these concepts or terms have taken the world of applied linguistics or TESOL by storm, but they have remained useful to me and to some others.

The main reason for my not having maintained a more disciplined academic focus on reading and relational analysis has been my increasing interest in teacher development via the use of Rogerian non-judgemental understanding. This work in what I have called Cooperative Development (Edge, 2002), has provided a specific focus for my more general commitment to action research (Edge, 2001).

However, Hoey’s work has remained central to my support of professional reading and writing at master’s level (Edge & Wharton, 2001, 2002). Beyond the significance of an awareness of semantic organization at the level of language “skills,” however, what has excited me for some years is the realization that the archetypal discourse pattern of Situation-Problem-Response-Evaluation is symbiotically related to the archetypal action research cycle of Reflection-Planning-Action-Observation: not simply and directly in any mechanical sense, but as alternate expressions of the same worldview (Edge, 2003a, 2003b; Edge & Wharton, 2002, 2003).

More recent reflection has led me to ponder deeper connections between action research, non-judgemental discourse, and relational analysis—these being the three major lines of thought and action that have been most meaningful to me since I first stumbled into the world of TEFL as a United Nations Association volunteer in Jordan in 1969. I acknowledge immediately that this may be of interest only to me. We shall see. If I am lucky, something may come out of it that others will find worth the sharing. On good days, I feel re-energised by the prospect.

So, it was a surprise to have my attention drawn back to this article from 1983. It has certainly been intriguing to reflect on it and its place in the autobiography of my own professional development. The roots of discourse study and action research are clearly there, even before I

could name them. Would I use the procedure again if I was in similar circumstances? Even without any text-theoretical underpinning? Well, I would not rule it out, in a broader approach that played off elements of form and elements of meaning in that same attempt to help readers move away from their earlier experience of interpretive reading toward a more exploitative style of reading, according to which the ablocutionary value of any text would be constructed according to reader purpose.

Of course, I would want to work on the idea with a colleague in a Cooperative Development framework, and if possible construct a small action research experiment around it

Something stirs

References

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