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Plenary Speech

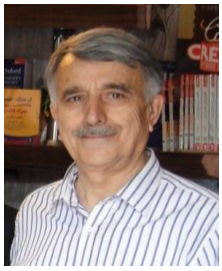
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Textuality: The 'form' to Be Focused on in SLA

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Abstract

Due to the special (procedural) nature of the language (verbal communication) 'knowledge', the dominant trends in applied linguistics research in the last few decades have been advocating 'acquisition' rather than 'learning' activities where the main focus in SL & FL education should be on 'meaning' while some 'focus-on-form' being justified. But the 'form' to be 'focused-on' is mostly misconceived to be 'grammaticality' of sentences. This misconception is driven by the traditional outlook on language which considers it as a set of sentences carrying THE meaning deposited upon them, disregarding the true nature of verbal transactions where meanings are discursively constructed by the participants in interaction , and the text (enabled by its textuality) rather than sentences (supported by their grammatical accuracy) mediates this discursive process. The present paper argues that textuality representing an underlying discourse should be the 'form' to be focused on in SLA facilitation tasks. It is the textuality and its 'impulse-creating and impulse-reiterating agencies which, upon their perception, help the receiver to grasp the hierarchical integrity of the linearly organized text. Each text can be seen as containing a set of units which are psycho-socio-linguistically determined packages facilitating the linear presentation of the textual hierarchy. These units, labeled as T-units in written text, can be defined as stretches of text occurring between two full-stops. These T-units are the epicenters for 'impulse-creation' while carrying some 'impulse-reiterating' elements as well. Variations in the overall configuration of the T-units including what is chosen as their main verb (epicenter), the number of impulse-reiterating elements revolving around it and their mode of realization will be discussed. It will be argued that the SLA 'focus-on-form' activities designed to raise the language learners' consciousness should be along these textuality dimensions; and examples of such activities (mainly oriented towards reading/writing skills) will be discussed.

Keywords: Textuality, SLA, Focus on form, T-units, Facilitation tasks

It is always my pleasure to come to Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University. I remember the very beginning of the inception of this university. Under the efficient management of our college, Dr. Salahshour, with our leading professor Dr. Azabdaftari and other colleges, Dr. Behin and others, we started the English department here. I have always been very happy to come to this university whenever and wherever.

Just to save time, what I am going to talk about is not anything new. You know all about it. But it is a new amalgamation of all we know in applied linguistics. I haven't prepared any notes; so power point slides are in fact supposed to lead me to talk rather than presenting anything. So I am violating the basic philosophy of presenting lectures through power point. A PowerPoint is used for the purpose of attracting the audience but here it only helps me to talk. I hope you will bear with me.

This is the gist of what I am going to talk about. It is about textuality, the form to be focused on, in second language acquisition approaches. Scholars talk about form and focusing on form. I'm going to talk about:

- Which form?
- How do we define this form in the "focus on form in second language acquisition"?

I argue that the form to be focused on should be what I term "textuality", and I will be defining the concept. I have customized this approach for the specific audience who are post-secondary students 'doing' and reading academic discourse, and I'll be looking at the concept of textuality as opposed to grammaticality. I'll try to present examples of *textuality-based reading performance tasks*. The terms have been selected specifically with a special definition in mind; not reading learning tasks; not reading tasks per se; they are *reading performance tasks*. This is the gist of what I am going to talk about.

You know all about what second language acquisition means. They talk of acquisition as opposed to learning. Learning is used to refer to learning a second language in artificial situations where teaching and classroom are involved. But acquisition refers to the situations where no teaching is involved. The child having been born is exposed to the interaction of the parents in natural communication situations without any focusing on grammar. The child only focuses on meaning. That's what we call acquisition.

In late 1970s, they started talking about why not trying to find ways of creating acquisition-like situations in foreign language classrooms? So it was bringing opposing views together: They talk about second language acquisition which sounds to be impossible, and they talk about why not trying to create such a situation where

some 'focus-on-form' may be allowed. So what I am going to talk about next is: If focusing on form is allowed, then "what is form?"

A common misconception on the concept of 'form' is involved here: As soon as we talk about form, we go back to grammar; to grammaticality. Because of that misconception, even if the approach sounds up to date, we are carrying the same misconception to the foreign language classes. So what I am arguing is that that form should rather be 'textuality'; but how is grammaticality different from textuality? To be able to define textuality, we ask:

- What is text?
- How does a piece of language become a text?
- Is it merely a matter of the AMOUNT of language involved and the *connectedness* across units/sentences?
- What helps such a piece of language to assume textuality? Starting from a single word --or even a single expression like "um" can sometimes constitute a text -- moving up a few volumes can be referred to as a *text*.



So it is not a matter of the amount of language; it is a matter of what supports that amount of language. Widdowson (2004) refers to the underlying set of factors which changes or converts a piece of language into a text as a pre-text. So it is such collection of pre-textual factors that converts a piece of language into textuality. In

this quotation, Henry Widdowson says: "I identify a text not by its linguistic extent but by its social intent". He continues: "We achieve meaning by indexical realization. That is to say by using language to engage our extra-linguistic reality". In modern discoursal approaches to language, it is believed that the text, whatever its size is, does not carry meaning. Meaning is constructed by the participants and such a construction is mediated through indexical elements. Dr. Azabdaftari was talking about indexicality and ethnomethodology yesterday. The function of a text is to offer such indexical references referring to extra-linguistic situations through which we may be able to arrive at *a meaning*. We are not talking about *the meaning* in any text. Texts carry no meaning. Texts can help us to construct *a meaning*.

Let me continue with this quotation from Widdowson. He says: "we achieve meaning by indexical realization; that is to say, by using language to engage our extra linguistic reality. Unless it is activated, the text is inert." So unless this indexicality, this textuality is activated by the contextual connection, the text is dead. He continues: "It is this activation, this acting of the context on code (code means grammaticality), this indexical conversion of the symbol (the code) that I refer to as discourse." This is Widdowson's definition of Discourse. And for this reason, Widdowson argues that Discourse in this view is the pragmatic process of meaning-making and text is its product. But what do we mean by text? What is a text? How do we define it? Do we define it in terms of collection of sentences? You can easily collate a handful of sentences into a paragraph. You pick up five volumes of books; pick the first sentence of each volume and type them neatly in the form of a paragraph. Can we call it a text? It is underlain by no textuality.

Text or any piece of language assumes its function only when it is underlain by textuality. In a paper a few years ago, I tried to compare and contrast grammaticality and textuality in terms of a set of factors. Textuality is meaning-based but grammaticality is rule-based. We can always assign a meaning on a text; but can you assign meaning on tense or passive voice, which are parts of grammaticality? These are elements of grammaticality. They carry no meaning; they are rule-based. But text with its potential to construct meaning is meaning-based. That is one difference.

Secondly, textuality is interaction-or-event-specific. Let's look at events; marriage ceremony is an event. Hymes refers to the concept as a speech event. It is on the basis of the type of the event involved that we decide on the type of the speech act we are going to use. Let's take an example from the Christian world. A priest who is marrying a man and woman uses a piece of text. The choice of such a text is situation-based. Can I stand on a transit bus and address a man and woman, saying I pronounce you man and wife? It will have no meaning. Why? The reason is it carries no 'Textuality' in that situation'. Textuality of that piece of language would depend on the situation. So textuality is interaction-or-event-specific. But

grammaticality is system-specific. We have, for example, the system of case in grammar. You talk of *accusative* as a case. It has its value within the boundary of the language system. Thirdly, textuality is situation-or- process-bound but grammaticality is only sentence-bound. This is an example:



Look at the above example and consider the single word 'Stop' here. Can it be called a text? The answer is: It would depend on the situation. When you look at the situation, yes it is a text. But grammaticality is only system-based. I have chosen the following example to demonstrate how textuality is process-bound as opposed to grammaticality being frame-bound. The example is:

The decision to set a date *came* in a meeting yesterday between the two leaders.

Now, what is the value of *came*? You may say it is a past tense. This is grammaticality. It is frame-bound: What type of verb frame -- or verb pattern in traditional grammar -- the verb 'come' has here? You may say it is the frame of intransitive verb. But with consideration to the word 'decision' as its participant, it becomes the process type in Systemic Grammar. It assumes its value within the boundary of process. By process I mean the process of the verbal event together with its satellite participant roles. So within that frame or within that process boundary, the same word 'come' changes its value. It is not 'come' as a physical movement anymore. It changes its value.

Look at another example:

When he stepped out of the terminal in Los Angeles, she *was*, of course nowhere to be seen.

Here you may say "was" is the past tense. It is because of grammatical choice and arising from the first phrase. But how has the discourse producer arrived at that decision of starting his text with that phrase saying "when he stepped …"? It's

because of this phrase that "is" became "was". That is sentence boundary. But how has he chosen the first phrase itself? This is situation-based not sentence-based.

So apart from these features we discuss, how can the concept of textuality be characterized? A text would naturally be a propositional, an ideational reflection of the experiential world outside the language. So any text is argued in Systemic Functional Grammar to be a reflection of what is happening around us. And that is demonstrated as the experiential phenomena. I am borrowing this one as a quotation from Halliday and Mattison (2014: P.178)

> The concepts of process and participant and circumstance are semantic categories which explain in the most general way, how phenomena of our experience of the world are construed as linguistic structures.

Here, the authors argue that the experiential phenomena are presented as language structures; it is how the mental process of thinking is converted into language through propositions or clauses. But would clauses per se constitute a text? Is text merely a bundle of propositions or a bundle of clauses? The answer is: Unless a bundle of clauses assumes a specific *Configuration* referred to as *Textuality*, it cannot be representing the underlying discourse.

In other words, the configuration of "a piece of language", despite whatever texture it may possess, cannot assume its textuality until it is coupled with what Widdowson (2004) calls *Intent* and unless it reflects a pretext and a given set of ethnographic factors. You can see how textuality is being defined here as the underlying power house with a potentiality of meaning creation -- changing a set of propositions from 'a Propositional Reservoir' to 'Indexical Discursive Agency'. A propositional reservoir or a collection of clauses would have no potentiality of helping us to create meaning unless it is empowered by textuality.

The *Text* should always be underlain by *Pretext* and the pretext is sociocultural context, and the interaction between how sociocultural features can be reflected in the text. The study of such a reflection, the way text can be reflective of sociocultural factors, is called discourse analysis. So just to recap, you want to say something; you have a discourse process in your mind, thinking, intent, situation, and sociocultural features. You produce a bundle of propositions. These bundles of propositions towards textualization process change into a hierarchical structure step by step.

I argue in this talk that, for the hierarchical structure of the text to be presented in a linear composition of the text on a piece of paper, T-unit plays a crucial role. What's T-unit? T-unit in systemic grammar is what they refer to as clause complex. But I define T-unit as a piece of language between two full stops. The T-unit may be five lines and may be half a line, only three word maybe. And the decision on, for

example, why five lines in a philosophical text but only three words in simple everyday language is again determined by pretext. The focus of our work will be T-unit. T-unit is a major element in the linearization of textual hierarchy. And where does the textual hierarchy come from? What I am saying is this: In order for the textual hierarchy to be linearized, some units are composed which we refer to as T-units. And every T-unit may consist of more than several clauses. Every clause would contain one verb. So from among all possible verbs occurring within a T-unit, one verb is assigned to be the leader. In grammatical terms, they call it the main verb. So we will be referring to that lead verb in a T-unit as a main verb. So every T-unit would have one main verb around which a collection of other verbs will revolve.

So discourse as a thinking process is presented in a text and both of them would require some elements referred to as Meta-discourse and Meta-text strategies. It is not an ad hoc linearization; it is a systematic process: Discourse is presented as the hierarchy of propositions, Propositions come together to create T-units, and all these decisions are made by Meta-strategies: Meta discoursal strategies which would organize what is being said and met-textual strategies which would organize the way what is being said is going to be said.

In the configuration of a T-unit i.e., a clause complex or a sentence, in fact we look at:

- What is chosen as its *Lead Verb*, the main verb of a T-unit? What are the type and number of participants it requires? That is, how many words are there in a T-unit?
- How many modifying or qualifying elements are each of these participants assigned?
- How many words are operating within the boundary of the Unit? We are talking about a length of a T-unit, how many words do exist in a T-unit physically? Some T-units may consist of three hundred words, and some T-units may consist of only three words?
- How much is the physical distance between the Lead/Main verb and its participants? That is, how many modifying elements are there? How many adverbials are there? How many participles, i.e., the verbs being converted or presented as participles (Present participle or past participle) are there?
- How many impulse-reiterating agencies are there?
- How many and what type of connectors are there?
- ……..

All these decisions are monitored by what we call Textuality. All the above decisions are monitored by Meta-agencies, both meta-discoursal and meta-textual.

All these operations are motivated by social-intent and ethnographic or situational factors. Co-text, of course, is one of these factors. In other words, a T-unit assumes the configuration it does only in relation to the position it occupies in the text. Now which text? The text in which it is *Situated.* The word *Situated* was highlighted here because I'm not talking about being located; but I'm talking about situated elements within the discourse. So by Situated, I mean utilizing the textuality factors on the basis of the way these operations are underlain by textuality, the text being an interface between the producer and the receiver.

So we have been defining what the text is, and how the text is created; and we note that we have a paradoxical situation here: The discourse process is chaotic: discourse as a process having no definite form and the text presenting it being linearly organized. This is a paradox. The paradox is resolved by T-units making decisions, and such decisions are underlain and driven by the textuality.

That is the foundation of the first stage where I tried to look at the notion of textuality. What's textuality? How is the thinking process presented in the form of a text? What role would a T-unit perform? How does a text utilize the socio-cultural and textuality benefits represented by pretext? Now with this in mind, we take a look at our agenda again. We are trying to customize second language acquisition, an academic discourse reading program for post-secondary science students. Our agenda is customizing an SLA for post-secondary science students within the framework of their academic text reading performance tasks.

The route that I have chosen for language input is reading because reading is one of the essential language skills which can operate in foreign language acquisition situation. In such a situation, reading can be relied upon as a route for providing necessary and essential input for our students, especially in foreign language situations. So I'm trying to recap again by looking at language as a non-teachable subject. We cannot teach language because of the nature of its knowledge. For example, can you teach somebody how to swim? No, you can throw them into the water; they will try a lot to float and not to drown, and through such operation, they will, somehow, try to acquire how to swim. We are not sure about how they acquired it.

That is also the way it happens to a child. Having been born, a child is exposed to parental language input, and we are not sure about the way they acquire the language. Nobody tells them how to use grammatical rules; that the past tense of "go" is "went". That will never help them, and some mothers may say: "Yes we teach them some forms of language." But that will never happen between parents and the children who acquire first language.

So language is not teachable. What is the teacher's task then in foreign language situation? The teacher's task is designing communication, performance tasks rather than exercises. By communication performance, I mean not exercises such as "Change these sentences from passive form into active form". These are grammar learning activities or exercises. Since language is not teachable, language teacher's job is to design communication performance tasks to engage the learner in *doing/performing* focusing most of the time on meaning, but sometimes they may also focus on form. But which form? In this talk, I would like to emphasize that contrary to the prevalent misconception considering the 'form' to be only the traditional understanding of its underlying concept, i.e. 'grammaticality', it is the 'textuality' of the text which can/should sometimes be focused on.



What is textuality? I hope I have been able to present the basic meaning of textuality before, but I'll also present some examples of how to employ such an approach as a foreign language teacher in post-secondary academic reading classes. You may say that this approach is not new. If you look at second language teaching text books, you can always find some cohesion-related, texture-related and discourse marker-related exercises. Look at the most of the books published since 1970s up to now. You can see some reading text followed by exercises like picking up a sentence from the text, underlining a reference element "it" and asking the learners: "What does "it" refer to?" And such authors would believe that they are distancing themselves from sentence grammar into text grammar. But I would say that there are some differences:

- Such approaches are mainly cohesion/texture-centered not textuality-oriented.
- They are practice tasks, not focus-on-form performance tasks. I will be exemplifying what I mean by focus-on-form performance tasks.
- Such exercises are learning tasks, not acquisition-facilitating tasks.

In the approach advocated here the tasks are 1) Textuality-oriented 2) acquisition-facilitating and 3) performance tasks.

So in two previous parts of the presentation, we talked about textuality and how it may be used for designing performance, meaning-oriented, and textuality-oriented tasks. Now let's customize our situation, that is, customize second language acquisition for our own situation. Who are our students? Our students are the students who know grammar even better than a linguistics professor in the Oxford University. Coming from university entrance classes, they know lots of grammar but they mostly lack the ability to use language in real communication situations.

So these are the students; they are highly motivated, I hope. I am talking about students about 15 years ago. We are talking about our university ESP books. They pretend to be ESP books -- let's look at Specific English for medical students. They pick up a few texts on what is assumed to be related to medical topics, or sometimes they present 'a few paragraphs' on topics such as the structure of a heart. It's clear that they can never be authentic in most cases. They present every unit of the textbook in the form of a text followed by well-known grammar-oriented exercises, vocabulary exercises and some modernized cohesion practice. How does the teacher deal with these exercises? The teacher is supposed to go through the text in the classroom; she/he would translate the text and the students would jot down the translation. This, I'm afraid, is the reality of the situation in most, if not all of, our ESP classes. Now, what happens at the end of the term? How do teachers evaluate the students' performance? The same text discussed in the classroom or similar pieces are given; the students have already memorized the answers, and they get high grades without any assessment validity. But this is not the reality of language. In reality, there are some presuppositions concerning:

- The nature of language
- The nature of language education
- The nature of academic discourse
- Language proficiency and ways of gauging it

How is language education defined? Language is not teachable. So they talk of language education, not language teaching. What is the nature of academic discourse? Because of the nature of what they talk about in science, academic and scientific discourse has got specific configurations. In other words, these

presuppositions concerning the reality of scientific language and academic discourse are naturally motivated by the "pretext" and context, and I skip them just to save the time.

When I came back home from my graduate studies at Lancaster University, I was asked to teach specific English to medical students. With all that discourse background in my mind, I asked myself: "How am I supposed to teach? What can I do in the classroom? Just teach five or six pieces of text? What should I do next? How could I achieve my pedagogical objectives?" So I assigned my students to go to Guyton's *Physiology*, a major textbook in medicine. I told them that I was going to select my exam readings from that text. But what would I do in the classroom? What I did during the class time was to engage them in doing reading performance tasks. I just opened up a text from the book. It was authentic; as I already mentioned, it was underlain by sociocultural textuality-oriented facts. So the students are asked to engage in reading the text themselves.



Most of the medical students are highly-motivated, and they can handle the grammar of the text easily. As examples of my 'focus-on-form' strategies while the class is engaged in doing the reading performance tasks, the ESP teacher can draw the students' attention to the T-units organizations: pieces of texts between full-stops. The major requirement in order for them to be able to perceive the textuality and construct meaning was to locate the main verb of the T-unit. Unfortunately I am running out of time here, and I can't talk more about what I mean by the main verb. Most of the T-units would consist of only one main verb except for coordinated and compound sentences. After having located the main verb in the T-unit, they will have to decide what type of verb it is. In traditional grammar, they talk about verb patterns. But in my own approach, I have classified verb patterns into only six types in English:

1. X + V + C (Complement) e.g. Ahmad is a teacher.
2. X + V e.g. Ahmad arrived.
3. X + V + Y e.g. Ahmad wrote a letter.
4. X +V + Y + Z e.g. Ahmad gave me the letter.
5. X + V + Y + C e.g. We call him uncle.
6. X + V + Y + VC (Verbal Complement) e.g. We let him go.

For this approach, it is, of course, obvious that some meta-language should be established in class. If such 'meta-language-establishing activities' are observed, they might be 'judged' to be 'teaching grammar', which in reality is not the case.

The activities are rather intended to establish meta-language to communicate with students on the approach. For examples of meta-language activities on verb forms used as the main verb of the T-units, see my book on *Towards the Textuality of the Text*.

The approach advocated here would help the EFL student to practically perceive how any change in the configuration of the T-unit and therein the whole text is functionally-motivated, a consciousness which would certainly enhance their writing proficiency too. The students would come to realize that any change in the configuration of the T-unit, i.e., the main verb is functionally-motivated. How many words are located within the boundary of a T-unit? Some T-units might consist of twenty verbs, but only one is the main verb of a T-unit. What is the physical distance between a main verb and its satellite elements? In the T-unit "George ate an apple", "ate" is the main verb; "George" is one satellite participant and "apple" is another.

Sometimes in academic texts, you are able to locate the verb, but the satellite elements, i.e., the subject, object and complement are scattered around a lengthy paragraph. That is a T-unit of a paragraph size. This may be one source of problem in understanding academic discourse. I believe that, through this approach, students come to realize that any change in the text and in the configuration of the T-unit is the reflection of the change in context. If one T-unit is larger than the other one, let's say consisting of 300 words, it is because it belongs to philosophy discipline. If one sentence in the middle of a paragraph consists of only three words, it is because of the context and the nature of the underlying discourse. In this approach, students would first of all perceive the context-dependency of any variation in the text.

This approach, we believe, engages the learners not in "code learning" tasks – change the sentences from active into passive forms -- but in communicative skills performance activities; So in reading Guyton's physiology , I am actually throwing my medical students into the middle of a deep pool –and sometimes a lake – and asking them to try to float. That can be an SLA activity. This approach is engaging ESP students not in "practicing" sentence structures, but in dealing with "*situated*" utterances. *Situated* is defined discoursally here. The approach engages the learners not in picking up the meaning hanging from the language forms but in the discursive and dialogic cognitive operations of constructing possible and potential values suggested through textual indices by socio-semiotic factors involved. I stop here. Thank you.

Note: More dimensions of the concept of textuality are introduced and elaborated upon in Lotfipoursaedi (2015).

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Author's Biography



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