Meaning-Focused Materials for Language Learning

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Edited by

Marina Bouckaert,
Monique Konings
and Marjon van Winkelhof

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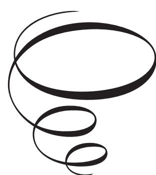

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PREFACE

This book is a development from the MATSDA/Fontys University of Applied Sciences Conference on Meaning-Focused Materials for Language Learning held on June 10th-11th, 2017 at Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts in Tilburg, the Netherlands.

MATSDA (www.matsda.org) is an international materials development association which I founded in 1993 to bring together researchers, teachers, materials developers and publishers in a joint effort to improve the effectiveness of language learning materials. We publish a journal, *Folio*, we run materials development workshops and we organise international conferences on specific topics related to significant themes and issues in the field of materials development.

The 2017 Conference focused on issues related to meaning-focused materials development for language learning and attracted presenters from twenty-five countries stretching from Greenland to Brazil. Some of the papers focused on defining what meaning-focused means and involves, some on the theoretical justifications for developing such materials, some on ways and examples of effective development of meaning-focused materials and many on reports of meaning-focused materials in action. These topics are reflected in the papers in this volume, with each one focusing on a different aspect of meaning-focused materials and many of them introducing the reader to previously unexplored facets of the theory of meaning-focused instruction and its application to materials development. The papers raise many questions, present a lot of convincing data and make many principled suggestions for the development of language learning materials.

The chapters in this book have been written so that they are of potential value to post-graduate students, to teachers, to materials developers and to researchers. They are written to be academically rigorous but at the same time to be accessible to newcomers to the field and to experienced experts alike.

Brian Tomlinson, President of MATSDA

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The editors wish to thank the authors whose chapters have been included in this volume – it has been an honour and a pleasure working with you all.

Many thanks to everyone who attended and presented at the MATSDA/Fontys University Conference in June 2017. Welcoming participants from twenty-five countries across the world to Tilburg was a humbling and memorable experience.

The conference itself could not have been made possible without the invaluable help from Kim Smits-Senders and her colleagues Ellen van den Biggelaar and Sandra van Doorn (general organisation), Mike van der Schans (IT services), Peter van der Klundert at Sodexo (catering), our students and alumni Noëmi Claes, Chiara Hautz, Iris Maas and Myrna de Win, and our colleagues at Fontys School of Fine and Performing Arts.

A final word of gratitude goes to Ronald van den Burg, who designed the cover of this volume, and to the team at Cambridge Scholars, who helped make this publication a reality.

Tilburg, April 2018

Marina Bouckaert
Monique Konings
Marjon van Winkelhof

PART I

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

(CO-)CREATING MEANING-FOCUSED MATERIALS

The chapters in this first part of the volume focus on the creation of materials which support and enhance meaningful language learning as well as teaching.

In Chapter One, **Brian Tomlinson** (University of Liverpool, United Kingdom / Shanghai International Studies University, China / Anaheim University, United States of America) raises and discusses the question what 'meaning-focused' really means. He elaborates on definitions grounded in ongoing debates about form-focused and meaning-focused approaches. The chapter compares and contrasts various different types of meaning, and offers a solution in the shape of a meaning-focused pedagogic approach which has been designed to enhance learners' pragmatic awareness. Several concrete examples are offered to illustrate this approach and help the reader implement it in practice.

In Chapter Two, **Danny Norrington-Davies** (International House London / King's College London, United Kingdom) explores what teachers could do with existing coursebook materials to make them more engaging. He discusses a few basic requirements coursebooks should meet, and goes on to offer solutions to three common deficiencies in relation to comprehension questions, rule discovery activities, and controlled practice exercises. He argues that, by asking different types of questions, moving from rules to reasons, and setting replication tasks, teachers can make materials more meaning-focused for their learners and themselves.

In Chapter Three, **Roberta Amendola** (Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil) explores how the teacher's book could be better exploited as a significant educational and social resource for teachers. She writes about an intensive, collaborative project which resulted in a series of three magazines accompanying the three volumes of a new series of coursebooks for Brazilian high school learners of Spanish as a foreign language. The chapter reports that the teachers who were interviewed

experienced these materials as meaningful, relevant and highly appropriate to the reality of their teaching practice.

In Chapter Four, **Isabella Seeger** (University of Münster, Germany) argues that classroom materials can be made more meaningful when learners are involved in materials development. She draws on Learner Autonomy and Motivation theory to attest that, even in contexts with a prescribed curriculum and when working with teenagers, learners can be involved in syllabus design and curricular decision-making. Three practical examples and various suggestions related to literature, music and film inform the reader about ways in which learner involvement and engagement can be enhanced to good effect.

In Chapter Five, **Marina Bouckaert** (Fontys University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands) faces a dilemma in pre-service English as a Foreign Language teacher education: how to use meaning-focused materials, and ask student teachers to teach meaning-focused lessons, in a form-focused course? She explores this question from several perspectives and describes how modelling, or teaching as you preach, could be a solution. This approach, aimed at the development of students' pragmatic awareness and communicative competence, is illustrated through three sample lesson plans and examples she and her students have observed over the years.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT SHOULD MEANING-FOCUSED MEAN?

BRIAN TOMLINSON

Definitions

One definition of a meaning-focused approach is: "An approach which provides exposure to rich input and meaningful use of the L2 in context, which is intended to lead to incidental acquisition of the L2" (Norris & Ortega, 2001, p. 160). This approach is often labelled as a 'focus-on-meaning approach'. It is often advocated by methodologists and materials development researchers (including me) because of its match with second language acquisition research findings, but it is rarely put into practice in classrooms or coursebooks because of its lack of face validity with administrators, teachers and students who believe in the explicit teaching and learning of languages. One compromise which has been put into practice involves focus on form in focus-on-meaning approaches For example, strong versions of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) make use of this approach and advocate shifting "students' attention to linguistic code features during an otherwise meaning oriented lesson" (Long & Norris, 2009, p. 137).

The Problem

The problem is that neither the literature on focus-on-meaning approaches nor the literature on focus on form in focus-on-meaning approaches typically answers the question: what does meaning mean?

In most of the examples of meaning-focused approaches in the literature as well as most of the published materials which claim to follow a meaning-focused approach, the meaning which is focused on is denotative meaning (i.e. the literal, explicit meaning of a lexical item; the referent it refers to). Though to be fair, Ellis (2005) does distinguish (but does not exemplify) two senses of focus-on-meaning: 1. semantic meaning

and 2. pragmatic meaning. Obviously, understanding the denotative meaning of lexical items and expressions is important for learners of a second language (L2), but in order for them to understand the target language in use and to achieve communication in it themselves, they also need to be aware of how many other types of meaning need to be achieved.

In this chapter I am going to:

- distinguish between numerous different types of meaning (many of which are neglected in most teaching materials);
- describe and exemplify a meaning-focused pedagogic approach designed (amongst other things) to help learners to develop pragmatic awareness.

Different Types of Meaning

Denotative meaning

As I have just said, this is the literal, explicit meaning of a lexical item or expression; the referent. Concrete items like *nose, watch, anger, quick* and *slowly* can be defined ostensively (i.e. their meaning can be shown or demonstrated). More abstract items like *morality, philosophy* and *humour* can be described and exemplified. If you look at almost any coursebook from A1 to B2 level, you will see that any meaning orientated section is almost exclusively focused on denotative meaning. This is despite the fact that the learners in their own first language (L1) have been used all their lives to responding to and communicating other types of meaning, and that most acts of authentic communication feature types of meaning other than denotative.

Connotative meaning

This is the denotative meaning of an item or expression plus an attitude towards it. For example, *slim* and *skinny* could be used to refer to the same referent (e.g. a particular person) but *slim* usually indicates a positive attitude towards the person and *skinny* a negative attitude. This is the same for *well-built* versus *fat* and for *economical* versus *mean*. Obviously, it is very important that learners are aware of the connotative meanings of items so as to realise the attitudes being conveyed and to avoid giving offence to their interlocutors by inappropriate use of such items.

Grammatical meaning

"This morning, more than half a million primary children will take a test that may ask them to identify the grammatical label for the two-word phrase at the start of this paragraph." (Mansell, 2017, p. 32).

Grammatical items often indicate an attitude or opinion, or make a point, as well as having a grammatical function. For example, in the sentence above "This" informs the reader about when the children will take the test but its prominence at the beginning of the sentence also indicates its immediacy and significance. In the same sentence "will" indicates that it is about to happen soon and signals its inevitability, too. The grammar of the sentence is used to indicate the negative attitude of the writer in a way which turns an apparent statement into a criticism. In addition to this sentence communicating grammatical meaning, you could also say that it exhibits sentential meaning as you cannot fully appreciate the writer's intentions without connecting all the expressions in the sentence to each other.

In the following sentence from the same newspaper article, "did" indicates that the writer is making a concession but it also suggests that the writer is going to add a critical 'but' clause:
"The Department of Education did publish a secondary English curriculum…" (Mansell, 2017, p. 32)

Lexical meaning
"He admits it was not based on good research evidence…" (Mansell, 2017, p. 32).

In the context of the newspaper article referred to above, the lexical item "admits" not only reports the speech act of the person referred to but suggests criticism of it, too.

Apparent meaning versus Actual meaning
1. "Give him the keys. Let him drive it."
– Charles Webb, *The Graduate* (Webb, 1964)

In sentence 1 above, the apparent meaning is a directive used to get the car keys to someone so he can drive a particular car. In the context, it is a son telling his father that he has no intention of taking Mr Robinson for a drive in the Alfa Romeo Spider which his father has bought him as a graduation present. He is also indicating that he knows Mr Robinson has been invited to the graduation party in order to offer him a job in his law firm and he does not want to work for him. This meaning can only be appreciated by connecting the utterance to its surrounding co-text and to the context in which it is used.

2. “You’ll be alright.”
– Barry Hines, *Looks and Smiles* (Hines, 1981)

In sentence 2, it seems as though someone is comforting someone else, is reassuring them. In the context, a boy has taken his girlfriend to a football match and is telling her not to keep bothering him by complaining about feeling ill when he is concentrating on the game. It is dismissal rather than reassurance.

3. “I think I’m going to be sick. It must be that hot dog I had outside.”
– Barry Hines, *Looks and Smiles* (Hines, 1981)

In sentence 3, the girl seems to be informing her boyfriend about what she thinks is going to happen and suggesting a likely cause. In fact, she is telling him that she is not going to be fobbed off, she is warning him of what will happen if he does not take her out of the stadium and she is blaming him for buying her a greasy hot dog outside the stadium because he was too late to take her for the lunch he had promised her.

Another way of referring to this common interactional phenomenon is to distinguish between surface function (i.e. the apparent function) and deep function (i.e. the actual function). See Tomlinson (1994) for a discussion of how these pragmatic functions are commonly used in interaction but are rarely mentioned in language learning materials.

Isolated meaning versus Contextual meaning

The apparent meaning of words in isolated sentences (as often presented to learners in coursebooks to exemplify meaning) is often very different from the meaning of the same words in a context.

When I saw “Go wash up”, my assumption was that it was a directive with somebody in authority (e.g. a parent or boss) telling a reluctant subordinate to wash the dishes. In context, it turned out that it is a quotation from an American novel in which an agent is encouraging a young client to clean himself up in order to take advantage of an opportunity she has found for him to appear in a commercial:

“Darling,” she now called me, “I have something for you. An audition. It’s for a commercial or something, but it’s a good one. It could put you on the map quick. Go wash up. Here, take this.” She came out from behind her desk and handed me the address.”
– Ottessa Moshfeg, *Homesick for Another World* (Moshfeg, 2017)

Semantic meaning versus Pragmatic meaning

The semantic meaning of an utterance is the literal message, information, idea, etc. that the utterance communicates. So in isolation, "The grass is getting long." seems to communicates an opinion about the state of a garden, "It's going to rain." seems to be a confident prediction about the weather, "Liverpool are playing Man U tomorrow." seems to provide information about when a game will take place, "Sunday's going to be sunny." seems to be another prediction about the weather and "The Robinsons are coming on Sunday." seems to provide information about when a family is coming to visit.

The pragmatic meaning of an utterance is the intended and the actual effect of that utterance when used to communicate in a context. If we put the utterances in the paragraph above into a context in which a wife and her husband are having a conversation, then their pragmatic meanings could be as follows:

Hitomi: "The grass is getting long." (A criticism of the husband for not cutting the grass and a suggestion that he does it now)

Brian: "It's going to rain." (An indication that he recognises his wife's intention and also an excuse for not doing what his wife wants him to do.)

Hitomi: "Liverpool are playing Man U tomorrow." (A refusal to accept her husband's excuse and a reiteration of her suggestion that he cuts the grass now as he will not be able to do it tomorrow because he will be going to the game.)

Brian: "Sunday's going to be sunny." (A continuing and apparently reasonable rejection of his wife's suggestion without a definite commitment.)

Hitomi: "The Robinsons are coming on Sunday." (A rejection of her husband's rejection plus a strengthening of resolve with a reason why the garden needs to look good on Sunday.)

Most real-life conversations are like the one between Hitomi and Brian above, in which the interlocutors need to interpret utterances to work out their intended effect. To do this, they need to make use of their contextual awareness to penetrate surface functions (e.g. prediction) in order to discover deep functions (e.g. rejection).

Most coursebook conversations are not like the one above and instead consist of conversations in which the strategy of indicating deep functions is not used. Here is an example which I have taken at random from a page of transcripts in *The Big Picture Intermediate* (Brewster & Lane, 2012, p. 163):

A: You know Dorata, I've never had Polish food before…

B: Oh, it's delicious. You'll love it! Typical dishes use lots of cabbage, meat and cream.

A: Mmm. Er, I don't understand anything on the menu though.

B: Don't worry, I'll explain it. Well, we usually have soup as a starter. There are two here. I'd recommend the barszcz, beetroot soup. It's really popular in eastern Europe.

A: Hmm… What does it taste like?

The conversation continues in this same way with all meanings being semantic and all functions overt. This is true of all the other transcripts on this page and in the other five coursebooks I opened at Intermediate and Upper Intermediate level. It also seems to be true of the reading passages in *The Big Picture Upper Intermediate* and in the other coursebooks that I looked at. If learners' only experience is of listening to and practising such conversations, then they will struggle to understand what they hear and to communicate what they want to say out in the real world of authentic communication. If learners' only experience is of reading and writing semantically overt texts, they will struggle to understand what they read out in the real world too.

The Problem for Learners

As is implied above, the problem for most learners below the level of Advanced is that they are protected by their teachers and materials from the reality of authentic use of the target language. Either they are subjected to forms-focused approaches in which structural teaching points are selected from a syllabus and then taught one at a time using a PPP (presentation, practice, production) approach. Or they participate in a focus on form in focus-on-meaning approach (such as TBLT or CLIL, Content and Language Integrated Learning) in which the focus is almost

exclusively on semantic meanings and pragmatic meanings are rarely encountered.

The Answers to the Problem

I have found that pragmatic awareness and ultimately pragmatic competence can be fostered by:

1. exposing learners from early levels to extracts from television sitcoms and soap operas (see Jones, 2017; forthcoming);
2. the teacher talking naturally with the learners;
3. other proficient users of the target language being invited to the classroom to talk naturally with the learners;
4. the learners being encouraged to look out for English outside the classroom (see Pinnard, 2016, and Tomlinson, 2013a);
5. setting up a class ‘self-access centre’ consisting of magazines, comics, books and videos which reflect the reality of language use;
6. using an immersion approach in which all educational and social interaction is conducted in the target language.

My preferred answer to the problem is to use a text-driven approach in which many of the texts are extracted from contemporary literature and feature interactions in which the interlocutors make use of pragmatic strategies to influence each other and/or the reader (see Tomlinson, forthcoming). In a text-driven approach, the teacher or materials writer builds up a library of potentially engaging written, spoken and audio-visual texts. The texts are stored in categories to effect easy retrieval, with one category being engaging texts featuring pragmatic interactions. When developing a unit of materials, the writer selects one of the texts which is likely to achieve a fit with the levels and lives of the target learners. The writer then makes use of the following flexible framework to develop activities which are driven by the core text:

1. A **readiness activity** which activates the learners’ minds in relation to the topic, theme or location of the text (e.g. visualising a party they have attended and talking to themselves about why they did or did not enjoy it).
2. An **initial response activity** which the learners do whilst first experiencing the text (e.g. working out why Benjamin did not want to go to the party as they listen to the teacher performing a dramatic reading of the first two pages of the novel *The Graduate*).

3. An **intake response activity** in which the learners articulate their personal response to the text they have just experienced (e.g. Do you think Benjamin's parents were right to organise a graduation party for him? Do you think Benjamin was right to refuse to go to the party?).
4. A **development activity** in which the learners produce a written, spoken or audio-visual text as a development from the core text (e.g. Continue the story so that the father finds Benjamin in the local park and triers to persuade him to come back home and join the party.).
5. An **input response activity** in which the learners focus on the language of the core text in order to make discoveries about how the target language is used to try to achieve pragmatic effects (e.g. In groups of four, two of you work out the intended functions of the imperative in the text and two of you work out the intended functions of the use of the interrogative. Then share your findings.).
6. A **research activity** in which the learners look outside the classroom for further examples of the use of the language features investigated in the input response activity (e.g. For homework, find examples of the authentic use of the imperative and the interrogative.).
7. A **further development activity** in which the learners make use of their discoveries and findings in 5 and 6 above to revise the text they developed in 4 (e.g. Use your discoveries about the use of the imperative and the interrogative to revise your continuation of the story about Benjamin and his father.).

For more information about the principles and procedures of text-driven approaches, see Tomlinson (2013b) and Tomlinson and Masuhara (2017), and for advocacy and examples of using literature to foster pragmatic awareness, see Jones (forthcoming) and Tomlinson (1994; forthcoming).

Until recently, the development of pragmatic awareness was rarely focused on in the literature on materials development. However, Cohen and Ishihara (2013) stress the importance of speech acts in communication and suggest that this is "a fruitful area for materials development" (p. 114). They review recent literature on pragmatics which regret the continuing neglect of L2 pragmatics in coursebooks and attribute this to the fact that materials tend to be "written for a grammar-based syllabus or driven by content" (p. 120). They also consider coursebook writers' dependency on intuition to be a factor and recommend the use of "research-informed insights or naturally occurring conversation as a basis for materials development" (p. 120). Their main recommendation (which they exemplify on pages 121-123) is to provide learners with naturally occurring data for

them to experience and analyse in order to notice how pragmatic meanings are achieved.

Ishihara & Leigh Paller (2016) review recent studies which have investigated the pragmatic language use in ELT coursebooks and found that "textbook dialogues and … natural conversations were not in alignment with one another" (p. 90). They focus in particular on the speech act of disagreement and report mismatches which they have found between the research on disagreement in English and the way disagreement is exemplified in ELT materials. However, they also report some matches they have found and are impressed in particular by the way that *Workplace Talk in Action* (Riddiford & Newton, 2010) makes use of naturally occurring conversation to help learners develop greater awareness of the speech act of disagreement.

Another recent publication focusing on the need for more pragmatic awareness materials is which stresses the importance of using "spoken corpora for the development of materials for the teaching of pragmatic routines" (p. 250) and provides detailed recommendations for the use of corpus data in developing noticing and production activities.

Examples of Materials Designed to Promote Pragmatic Awareness

Here are some examples of units of material that I have developed to help learners at different levels and ages develop greater pragmatic awareness:

Example 1 – Nothing Can Frighten a Bear
Target learners:
Level – B1
Age – Young learners; young adults; adults

A) Think back to when you were a small child.

1. Was there anything which made you frightened or worried?
2. When you were frightened or worried, did people try to help you, to make you feel better?
3. If people tried to make you feel better, what did they say to you? Write the words down.
4. Show your words to other students.

B)

1. Are you frightened of bears?
2. What do you think bears might be frightened of?
3. Share your suggestions with other students.

C) You're going to listen to a story called *Nothing Can Frighten a Bear*.

1. As you listen try to see pictures of the story in your mind.
2. If your teacher pauses, shout out the next word or words.

D)

1. Was father bear right to say, "nothing can frighten a bear"?
2. Do you think the father bear was right to take his family out looking for monsters? Why?
3. Discuss your answers with other students.

E) Form a group with other students write a story about a family in which the parents keep reassuring their children (i.e. stopping them from worrying and helping them to feel better).

F)

1. Read the story *Nothing Can Frighten a Bear* by Elizabeth Dale and, as you read it, note down all the things the mother and father bear do and say to stop their children from worrying and to help them feel better.
2. Show your notes to other students.

G) For homework, try and find as many examples as you can of people reassuring other people. Write your examples down and bring them to class next week.

H) Show your examples of people reassuring others to the members of your group. Then make use of them in revising your story about the parents reassuring their children.

I) Turn your story into a short film for young children and then practise acting it out. If you can, video your acting of the film and then show it to other groups.

Example 1 above makes use of children's L1 literature because it can achieve affective engagement (even with adults) and because typically there is a lot of repetition of a salient language function (in this case reassurance). In this example, A and B consist of readiness activities, C consists of initial response activities, D consists of intake response activities, E is a development activity, F consists of input response activities, G is a research activity and H and I are further development activities. The intention is to achieve the affective and cognitive engagement required for language acquisition, to provide the learners with a meaningful experience of language in use and with an opportunity to use

language for communication, to promote learner autonomy and to achieve a learning experience which is coherent in that each activity follows from the previous one and leads into the subsequent one.

Example 2 – The News
Target learners:
Level – B2
Age – Young adults; adults.

A) You are going to listen to a conversation between someone who works for a television company and somebody who presents a programme for that company. The programme is called *Game On* and it is about computer gaming.

1. Would you watch such a programme? Why?
2. The presenter has been asked to come to a meeting to hear some important news. What do you think the news is?

B) Listen to the conversation and as you listen, try to work out what the two people are thinking.

C)

1. Have you ever broken bad news to somebody? If so, how did you do it? If not, how would you do it if you had to?
2. What was the news which was broken to the presenter?
3. Do you think it was broken to the presenter sensitively?
4. How could it have been broken more sensitively?

D)
Write a group story in which somebody is breaking bad news to somebody else.

E)

1. Read the transcript of the conversation from Nicholls (2009, pp. 236-237) and as you read it, focus on the many times that the presenter makes an apparent statement to ask a question (e.g. "But it's still called *Game On*?").
2. Why do you think he does this? What is he trying to convey?
3. Discuss your findings with other students.

F) For homework, try and find as many examples as you can of apparent statements being used as questions. Write your examples down and bring them to class next Monday.

G)

1. Show your examples to the other members of your group and discuss why you think this strategy is being used.

2. Make use of your findings to revise your group story in which one person is breaking bad news to another.
3. Act out your story to another group and then to the class if you are asked to do so.

Conclusion

My recommendation is to use text-driven meaning-focused approaches to provide your learners with engaged experience of proficient users of the target language exploiting their pragmatic competence in order to try to achieve their intended effect in interactional communication. I would select core texts primarily for their potential to achieve affective and cognitive engagement but also for their potential meaningfulness, for their contextual richness and for the typicality of their use of language features to achieve pragmatic effects. I would aim initially to elicit personal responses to these texts but I would also select pragmatic features of the texts for the learners to investigate and subsequently use which are communicatively salient and contextually dependent. In this way, there is a far greater chance of our learners not only achieving linguistic competence but of eventually becoming pragmatically competent too.

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