

# TOWARD A NEW VIDEO PEDAGOGY: The Role of Schema Theory and Discourse Analysis

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The eighties were an exciting decade for proponents of authentic foreign video in the language classroom. Ten years ago, the only foreign materials regularly available on videocassette were feature films. With the advent of multistandard videotape recorders, satellite networks, and inexpensive standards conversion, the audiovisual landscape changed rapidly throughout the eighties. Now, as we enter a new decade, we have easy access to catalogues full of reasonably priced foreign video programs already converted to the American standard; we can order carefully crafted workbooks based entirely on video materials; we can refer to manuals explicitly developed as an aid to teachers introducing video into the curriculum.

In short, we have reached the end of the beginning. While the excitement of video has not yet rubbed off, its status as the newest technology on the block has faded. American distributors have acquired rights to the most easily available video programs; teachers have done the most obvious things with the available programs; writers have produced the needed but necessarily limited introductory manuals. The time has come to push beyond this pioneering stage. Alongside the obvious news anthologies, advertisement compilations, and feature films, we need a new breed of video material more suited to the requirements of beginning learners. Alongside the existing workbooks and manuals, we need a series of new initiatives, revealing the aspects

of video's potential that remained invisible to pioneering practitioners. This article proposes a first foray in that direction.

In considering the future of video pedagogy, I will be drawing directly on both of the fields to which I am professionally committed. Throughout the eighties, a joint appointment at the University of Iowa has split my time between the Department of French and Italian and the Department of Communication Studies, where I teach in the film studies program. It was this combination of commitments to language and audiovisual concerns that first kindled my interest in authentic foreign video. Along with Sue Otto and Jim Pusack, my co-directors at PICS (The Project for International Communication Studies), I found myself constantly calling on multiple fields in order to solve the practical problems of video pedagogy. Only recently, however, have I recognized the complementary nature of the contributions that my chosen domains might make to a new video pedagogy.

## Extending Schema Theory

One of the most promising contributions

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of recent language theorizing is the set of postulates usually combined under the general title of "schema theory."<sup>1</sup> Contrary to received notions, schema theory proposes that texts do not carry meaning by themselves. Instead, texts participate in a dialectic process involving two interdependent activities: a) decoding, or "bottom-up" processing, and b) schematizing, or "top-down" processing. According to this theory, we owe our understanding of any particular text as much to the schema we invoke for understanding the text as we do to our linguistic knowledge. The schemata in question include many types of expectation that the reader/listener/viewer brings to the text: narrative patterns, speech and image conventions, knowledge of particular disciplines, and so forth, right on down to national stereotypes or racial prejudice. Simplifying a bit, we might say that schema theory posits a five-part process of understanding:

1) Decoding. Using our knowledge of the language in question, we construe the linguistic meaning of the text. (For example, when we read the sentence, "On the way to the restaurant, George reached over and turned on the radio," the decoding process gives us information about where George is and what he is doing.)

2) Schema postulation. As we decode the text, we recall and engage one or more schemata to which this particular text appears to bear a privileged relation. (In this case, we undoubtedly assimilate this text to other stories of a trip to a restaurant, or to other texts about a person driving a car or turning on the radio.)

3) Schema expansion. Once we have postulated a schema, that schema provides a broad framework defining our expectations about the linguistic message. (Here, we fit George into a familiar narrative about going to a restaurant, involving activities ranging from dressing to asking for a menu.)

4) Modified decoding. As we continue to read, our schematic apprehension of the situ-

ation leads us to interpret the text within the context provided by the invoked schema. Understanding of unclear or unfamiliar expressions is affected especially strongly by this process. (If George says: "How about Season's Best?" we are likely to fit this into a familiar narrative of restaurant choice, quickly identifying "Season's Best" as the name of a restaurant.)

5) Schema modification. Just as the input from schema postulation and expansion has a continuing impact on the decoding process, so the decoding process continues to call for modification of schema identification. (Now that we know that George is not alone in the car, and that he is proposing what sounds like an upscale restaurant, we refine our expectations regarding the clothes worn, the likely menu, the overall script of the evening's entertainment, and so forth.)

Normally treated as an unconscious process, engaged in by all readers/listeners/viewers at all times, this five-part progression actually extends indefinitely, with parts four and five being repeated again and again until the text has been completed. Within foreign-language education circles, schema theory has been most heavily cited in support of two extremely desirable approaches to language teaching. First, if understanding depends on proper schema postulation, linguists reason, then understanding will be enhanced by the use of "advance organizers" that shortcut the schematizing process and assure proper schema postulation.<sup>2</sup> This insight has been applied to listening comprehension<sup>3</sup> as well as reading.<sup>4</sup> Second, ambiguity is reduced and learning is enhanced when student tasks (such as the exercises at the end of each language textbook chapter) are presented in context.<sup>5</sup>

These arguments are both sound and important, but they have not been carried far enough. Advance organization proponents and champions of contextualization share a concern for student comprehension—whence their decision to provide the information

necessary to understanding—but they fail to carry their insight to its logical conclusion. If students understand better when they are aware at a very early point of the general content of a written or oral passage, then we need not only provide that awareness, but teach students how to gain it. In short, if schema theory provides acceptable hypotheses about the process of understanding, then it needs to have a more direct impact on our teaching strategies. Providing students with advance organizers or appropriate context is not enough; we need actively to teach them how to make use of that context and how to provide their own organizers when none are offered by the instructor.

To put this in another way, we might say that understanding is dependent on two activities: decoding and schematizing. For years we have been teaching students how to decode, through grammar drills, vocabulary lists, and reading practice.<sup>6</sup> We look in vain, however, for regular attention to the skills involved in successful schematizing. Indeed, it is not immediately obvious where we might find materials appropriate to the teaching of skills related to schematizing. Presented in books or on audio tape, the reading and listening passages that we assign to our students typically appear out of context. In many cases, there never was a context; the sentences were written out of the blue to illustrate or test a particular grammar point. Even when the passages are carefully chosen from authentic materials, however, contextualization is commonly limited to a single introductory statement, locating and explaining the passage. While this type of presentation may satisfy the theoretician's call for advance organizers, it does little to help students learn how to provide their own advance organization.

The problem with written and oral texts is not just that they are so commonly presented out of context: contextualization is easily provided. Far more serious is the fact that written and oral texts alike are single-channel media

that require readers and listeners to derive all their schematization cues from the very medium to which that schematization will eventually be applied. For sophisticated interpreters of a language, this situation is perfectly acceptable. When I read a passage in English or French, I alternate constantly between decoding and schematizing, with each activity contributing directly to the success of the other. I can do this in part because of the high percentage of words and phrases that I am able to decode, and in part because of the speed with which I perform that decoding activity. Reading at high speed, successfully processing most of the detailed information contained in the passage, I am easily able simultaneously to construe the passage in terms of broad schemata. When I tackle a passage in German, however, I am never able to reach this cruising speed. Difficulty in decoding keeps me working at the level of individual words rather than at the sentence level; my schematizing activity is thus severely impoverished. In French or English, success in decoding guarantees an appropriate context for schematizing, which in turn increases my success in decoding; in German, on the other hand, the slowness and imprecision of my decoding makes it hard for me to schematize with any degree of success, which in turn leads to the increased likelihood of mistakes in decoding.

In other words, while single-channel media may be perfectly appropriate for those experienced with a language, single-channel media provide little help to those who have still not reached "cruising speed" in the language.<sup>7</sup> Students in the early stages of language learning are notoriously weak at using decoding-derived information for any of the broader functions that contribute to language comprehension. This is certainly one of the reasons why so many studies on the efficacy of advance organizers make use of image-based organizers rather than organizers expressed in the target language. Eventually, we want our students to be able to use the target

language as their main source of schematizing; until they are able to decode at cruising speed, however, the *lingua franca* of images plays an important role.

This is the point where video has a special contribution to make. Unlike single-channel media, video materials offer the constant assistance of images for the process of schematizing. Instead of basing all schematization on the target language, students reach preliminary schema hypotheses on the basis of a combination of image and target language. Further decoding, based on these preliminary hypotheses, either confirms or modifies them, initiating a never-ending alternation between both decoding and schematizing on the one hand, and between image input and language input on the other. The five-step schema theory model outlined earlier thus grows in complexity. Far from depending entirely on linguistic decoding, the process of schematizing derives much of its power and precision from image material, thus assuring more accurate decoding, and thereby a greater ability to schematize on the basis of decoded material. The video image thus serves as a sort of catalyst, accelerating the schematizing process at the very point in their development when students are most in need of that acceleration.

With advance organizers, the teacher helps the student to create appropriate schemata; with video, students repeatedly go through the process of organizing in advance, regularly creating their own schemata. In other words, the use of video as a perpetual advance organizer not only helps students to decode an otherwise difficult oral text, it also provides opportunity for instruction in the all-important skill of schematizing—a skill that is all too often ignored or taken for granted.

Classroom activity for the schema-oriented teacher would concentrate not on the exact words of any given video segment, but on the process by which students might predict and understand those words. Nor would the schema-oriented teacher play a twenty-

minute video program and then ask questions about it. Instead, the program would be divided into multiple short segments. By presenting the video in short segments, the teacher is able to detail the process whereby image information and decoding information combine to foster appropriate schematizing and thus increased success in decoding. Showing the entire program without stopping might be appropriate for advanced students, but it deprives beginners of the instruction in advance organizer creation that video can so easily provide. Video has much to offer to most language-teaching approaches, but it stands to reason that it will be used in different ways by proponents of different theories. For the proponent of schema theory, no aspect of video is more important than its ability to serve as a perpetual advance organizer.

### The Lessons of Discourse Analysis

Just as schema theory (along with the proficiency movement) marked the eighties in the domain of foreign language acquisition theory, so the field of media theory was marked by a renewed understanding of the discursive status of film and television. Under the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Vladimir Propp, and Roland Barthes, literary and film analysis in the late sixties and early seventies had been extremely narrative-oriented. Texts were treated as self-contained wholes addressed by no one in particular to no one in particular. Analysis of literary texts and films alike concentrated on internal structures and relationships. During the seventies, a major reevaluation of literary and film scholarship took place. Whereas earlier theory and criticism had concentrated on *narrative* (the story of a novel or film), the new approach stressed *narration* (the process of creating that story).

In developing this new line of thinking, critics regularly referred back to the pioneering work of linguist Emile Benveniste, who had much earlier provided an important distinction between two basic registers of language: *discours* or discourse (character-

ized by the first- and second-person pronouns) and *histoire* or story (characterized by the third-person pronoun).<sup>8</sup> Following Benveniste, the critics and theoreticians of the late seventies and eighties increasingly stressed the discursive aspects of literary and film texts, i.e. the fact that the text is addressed *by* someone *to* someone.

For many writers, Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, a careful discourse-sensitive reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, served as an important model.<sup>9</sup> For others, the work of speech act theorists J. L. Austin and John R. Searle proved instrumental.<sup>10</sup> Whereas other linguists commonly stress the structure or referential nature of language, Austin and Searle treat language as a tool to do things with. Close attention is thus constantly paid to the implied function and the real interlocutors of specific speech acts.

In the hands of media analysts, speech act theory took on a still newer look. To whom is a given film or program addressed? What is its function? Why is it programmed or advertised in this particular way? What effect is it expected to have? Asking these and many other questions throughout the eighties, discourse-oriented critics have awakened media theoreticians around the world to the importance of discursive concerns.

Just as schema theory suggests that understanding involves a dialectic between decoding and schematizing, the discursive approach (whether applied to language, literature, or cinema) depicts understanding as a dialectic between the universally understandable story aspect of a text and the particularizing effect of a story's addressed nature. Discourse-oriented approaches thus take into account not only *what* is said, but to whom and under what conditions.

A discourse-sensitive approach to language learning would have much to gain from judicious use of video's strongly discursive nature. Whereas most novels and feature films are only nominally addressed by a particular author to a specific audience, nearly every form of television or video program is

heavily marked by discursive signs. News programs quickly identify the national or local identity and projected interest level of their audience; weather forecasts openly reveal whether they target farmers or commuters, jetsetting skiers or local picnickers; short fiction typically addresses audiences of specific gender, age, and interest.

The more we understand about a program's discursive nature, the better we are able to predict what the program contains (and thus the more readily and effectively we can carry out our schematizing activity). In fact, combining discourse analysis with the language of schema theory we can readily say that *awareness of a text's discursive dimension serves as the best possible advance organizer*. Consider the process of post-prandial perusal of the *TV Guide*. As our eyes flit from one title to another, we quickly form an image of the shows in question. Each title—even when it belongs to a show we have never seen—evokes a particular category of programming addressed to a specific audience. When we tune through the channels of a cable TV system, a similar phenomenon takes place. In many cases, all we have to do is hear a single word or view a single image to know what type of program we have encountered, and by extension what the contents are likely to be. We know what's coming because we easily assimilate each program to a particular purpose, a particular format, a particular audience.

Teachers can successfully exploit these same insights by concentrating student attention on discursive concerns. Who is speaking? To whom? About what? To what end? What kinds of statement are people like this likely to make? What type of vocabulary do they use? What should you be listening for? Video is especially good at helping students answer these questions, because instead of depending on words alone, video provides a full audiovisual context as a basis for decisions regarding the discursive dimension. Of course, this aspect is maximized only by video

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that possesses a primary discursive context; authentic broadcast materials will provide far more discursive cues than video programs produced specifically for language teaching purposes.

Thus far, I have been stressing the student's ability to learn from the video's addressed nature, from its status as a complex speech act. A further discursive benefit can be achieved by manipulating the identity of the audience to which a given program or segment is addressed. As an example of this approach I offer a technique that I have recommended in many workshops around the country over the past year. Consider the typical national weather forecasts presented on U.S. television. When I have shown a nationwide weather forecast in various regions, each group tended to remember best the weather in its own area. In Portland, the crowd remembered the Pacific Northwest forecast, while in Denver, the conditions in the central Rockies were most easily recalled. Iowans tended to notice the predictions for the Midwest. In northeastern New Jersey, people listened especially carefully for the New York City weather, whereas Floridians noticed building Gulf or south Atlantic storms. As Maurice Chevalier would have it, "Chacun sur terre se fout, se fout / Des petites misères de son voisin de dessous" (Nobody gives a damn about his neighbor's worries).

Unlike most programs, national weather forecasts are consciously offered to a wide variety of different audiences, with each spectator choosing to highlight specific aspects of the forecast. Were such programs used in class without special preparation, students would actually have to process more information than the original spectators, since the original audience is never expected to recall in detail an entire national forecast. Instead of asking each student to recall climatic conditions throughout France, teachers might well start by giving each student (or group of students) a specific identity that will serve as an advance organizer for the viewing in ques-

tion. You're from Lyon; you're from Brittany; you live near the Spanish border; and so forth. As students listen, they are no longer overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of information. Instead, they are listening carefully for the information that pertains specifically to them. Once students have collected that information, the teacher can go around the class once again and add another detail to the original geographic identity. You plan to drive to Strasbourg; your wife will be flying back from Lille today; you own a house on the banks of the Dordogne, which is reputed to be flooding; and so forth. Now the class is ready for a paired "telephone" activity, in which students call up the other students who have the weather information they require. In this way, teachers can successfully combine the insights of a discourse-sensitive approach to language learning with the time-honored technique of *targeted listening*, certainly one of the most successful ways of taming the potential difficulties of authentic video.

To understand language as discourse is to recognize how heavily meaning depends on the situation in which speech is enunciated. Video provides a perfect vehicle for sensitizing students to discursive concerns, because it not only provides language, but also shows the circumstances of production of that language. With a literary or journalistic text, we have to understand the language in order to predict the language. Video ruptures this vicious circle by showing us a character's face before we hear her speak. Once we know that she is outraged by what she has heard, we easily predict the type of speech that she will utter. Because we know *to whom* she is speaking and *why* she is speaking, we more easily foresee *what* she is saying. This simple process may be repeated many times for even the shortest video. Students who are sensitive to discursive concerns assimilate oral language quickly and effectively, thus learning a skill with immediate real-world applications.

Taken together, schema theory and discourse analysis form an especially strong

theoretical framework for the use of video in the foreign language classroom. Schema theory makes it clear that decoding is only one side of the language learning process, thus freeing teachers to stress the broader schema-based road to comprehension that is so effective for video and . . . real life. Discourse analysis, so central to the understanding of real-world statements, provides students and teachers alike with a never-ending stream of advance organizers. As such, discourse analysis is a prime source of schemata and thus an appropriate partner for schema theory in a new video pedagogy.

Everyone senses the importance of authentic video materials for language teaching in the nineties. Perhaps with schema theory and discourse analysis, the practical excitement of video in the classroom will finally be joined by cogent theoretical underpinnings.

#### NOTES

1. For a useful summary of the literature on this topic, as it relates to language instruction, see Alice C. Omaggio, *Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction* (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1986), Chapter 3.
2. On the general importance of advance organizers, see David Ausubel, *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968, 1978).
3. For example, in John D. Bransford and Marcia K. Johnson, "Contextual Perquisites for Understanding: Some Investigations of Comprehension and Recall," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 11 (1972): 717-726; and in Gunther A. Mueller, "Visual Contextual Cues and Listening Comprehension: An Experiment," *Modern Language Journal* 64 (1980): 335-340.
4. For example, by Alice C. Omaggio, in "Pictures and Second Language Comprehension: Do They Help?" *Foreign Language Annals* 12 (1979): 107-116; and by Thom Hudson, in "The Effects of Induced Schemata on the 'Short Circuit' in L2 Reading: Non Decoding Factors in L2 Reading Performance," *Language Learning* 32 (1982): 1-31.
5. On the importance of contextualizing student tasks, see William R. Slager, "Creating Contexts for Language Practice," in E. Joiner and P. Westphal, eds., *Developing Communication Skills* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1978); and Alice C. Omaggio, *Teaching Language in Context*: 91ff.
6. Note that the process of decoding is closely related to the process of "learning," as defined by Stephen D. Krashen in *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981), and *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982). Differentiation between language "learning" and language "acquisition," one of the basic tenets of the "natural" approach, as propounded by Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell in *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom* (Hayward, CA: Alemany/Janus Press, 1983), has not received the full support of language professionals, in part because of Krashen's and Terrell's failure to theorize a clear relationship between the two activities. The notion of schematizing has the potential to provide such a bridge, since schemata serve as models for organization of "learned" knowledge into the familiar patterns of "acquired" language. Available space does not permit further development of this relationship here, but it seems reasonable to suggest that schema theory offers solutions to some of the problems raised by the "natural" approach.
7. While it is hardly a properly theorized technical term, the notion of a "cruising speed" deserves to play an important part in schema theory. Perhaps a parallel

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example will best illustrate what I mean here. I remember those frustrating pedal-operated fire engines that kids used to drive. At first, the child would press on one pedal and the vehicle would go forward, then on the other pedal and the vehicle would back up. Eventually, however, the young driver would learn how to coordinate and accelerate the two actions—often with the help of a parent pushing the vehicle—so that pressing on both pedals alternately and in rhythm would make the vehicle move forward in a uniform and continuous fashion. Until the driver succeeded in establishing the appropriate speed and rhythm of pressing first one pedal and then the other, no acceleration was possible; once the lesson had been learned, however, an entirely new situation obtained. With schema theory, a similar pattern occurs. Until

decoding and schematizing begin to reinforce each other, the language learner needs help to break out of a static situation. Once cruising speed has been achieved, however, the two activities' mutual reinforcement creates a sense of perpetual motion.

8. The *discours/histoire* opposition is first presented in "Les relations de temps dans le verbe français," in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 237-250.
9. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970).
10. Especially J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1969).