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*An Interview with Professor Henry Widdowson and
Professor Barbara Seidlhofer*

Interview by: *Farzad Salahshoor*



Henry Widdowson is an authority in the field of applied linguistics and language teaching. Widdowson is perhaps best known for his contribution to communicative language teaching. However, he has also published on other related subjects such as discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, the global spread of English, English for Special Purposes and stylistics. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* calls him "probably the most influential philosopher of the late twentieth century for international ESOL" (p. 674). Widdowson is Emeritus Professor of Education, University of London, and has also been Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Essex and Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Vienna, where he holds an Honorary Professorship. Since the 1990s, Widdowson lives and works in Vienna. He (HW) and his wife Barbara Seidlhofer (BS) were invited to give plenary talks at Shahid Madani University of Azerbaijan (Tabriz) in 2018. The following is an interview by Dr Farzad Salahshoor (FS) with these scholars at the conference venue.

FS: Good morning Professor Widdowson and Professor Barbara Seidlhofer. Thank you for your permission to have this conversation with you. I also would like to express my gratitude on behalf of staff members of Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University for your presence yesterday at our university and your lecture. It was very insightful, and your presence was unique, and it will remain unique for a long time for our university and will be remembered in the history of our university. I have a few questions and I hope I won't take your time very much. My first question concerns your previous career as language teacher. You are known today as an authority and even father of Applied Linguistics. But very few particularly from younger generations may know about your earlier career as language teacher. Would you please talk about that period, briefly of course?

HW: *Yes, I try to be brief. It's quite a long story. My first job was teaching literature in the University of Indonesia and I went to Indonesia on a British Council supported appointment in the University of Indonesia. There, I taught English Literature in a very much orthodox way, the orthodox being the way I had myself been taught English literature in Cambridge. And it became clear that it wasn't entirely appropriate, so I was aware of the need to look at the language in literature even at that point. Then I subsequently joined the British Council and was appointed as the English language officer in Sri Lanka, even though I had no qualifications to advise anybody about English language teaching. Then I went to Bangladesh, as it now is... , at that time it was East Pakistan. And again I was asked to advise the ministry as the inspector on teaching of English; I really had little expertise in this field. So I eventually persuaded the British Council to release me to do a diploma in Applied Linguistics in Edinburgh and that's how I sort of moved into academic life, so my original experience was very much as of a teacher aware of the problems of language in literature and then subsequently in general the problems of English language teaching, but really not having very much idea as to what I wanted to do about as the result of those problems.*

FS: Thank you. And you completed your PhD at Edinburgh University in 1969?

HW: *No. 1972-73 I think.*

FS: And may I ask who your supervisor was?

HW: *Pit Corder was my supervisor; and Geoff Leech was my external examiner. Yes, what happened was I went back. When I was doing my diploma in applied linguistics, I got interested in the English for Specific Purposes. And when I particularly did a little thesis, a small dissertation on the teaching of English through science, because I was interested in how you could integrate subjects into language teaching... and then subsequently, in Bangladesh I was working in the technical institute, say polytechnics, trying to find ways of teaching relevant English to the students ... and that again was obviously an ESP situation. So I then tried to persuade the British Council to let me go do a research, and they said: no they couldn't do that. To cut a long story short, I took a leave of absence and went to Edinburgh and fortunately Pit Corder had a temporary job there, so I was able to earn enough to keep myself and my small family alive and I did my PhD.*

FS: You had a pivotal role in the course books called Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics.

HW: *Yes. I did. I was a member of staff by then. So I was involved in writing for that course, but actually the person who was the main initiator really, the front runner, so to speak, for the whole course, was Patrick Allen. And Patrick had a considerable influence on me and the way I thought... and indeed he supported me when I was doing my own work. And he is something of an unforgettable figure, and he is not a name. He really was a very important influence in Edinburgh at that time.*

FS: And you had a joint publication, English in Focus series, with Patrick Allen.

HW: *Yes. That's right. Patrick and I worked through with a number of students. We worked through some of these ideas about how the English which is appropriate for the teaching of academic professional topics had to be reconsidered, it couldn't simply be a transference of the usual ways of meeting this purpose.*

FS: My next question is again related to your career as a language teacher. You already answered it, but, a question related to this is: If you had not been a language teacher, would you have been an applied linguist? In other words, is it possible for an applied linguist not to be a language teacher?

HW: *Yes I think it is. It happens that the problem of how people cope with the language is what applied linguistics is all about. These problems happen to be problems of language education, English language education, in my case, in Indonesia and then in Sri Lanka, in Bangladesh and when I was working in British Council. But anybody who is aware that there are problems that people have in using language or languages in interacting with other people who might be disadvantaged by the lack of capability in language or whatever they may be. Anyone who starts with this problem and seeks inside theoretical or empirical work in linguistics for lightening these problems is doing applied linguistics. But you need this interrelationship; you can't do applied linguistics if you do not focus on the problem that applied linguistics needs to address. I think we will talk maybe a little later about this, but a classic case of course is English as a lingua franca. Because it is clear that there are enormous problems in the world concerning communication, a lack of communication, miscommunication, interpretation of text, and so on and so forth. So, many of the issues that confront us in the globalized world are essentially problems of communication. So if that's the case, one might look to studies in communication and theoretical studies, the discipline of communication study, including linguistics, to throw some light as how to help people actually tackle the problem. Then this is precisely why English as lingua franca is intrinsically, so to speak, an applied linguistics subject.*

FS: I knew for some time that you and Barbara have been working on the concept of ELF and yesterday you talked at length about this and also Barbara, I like to shift from previous questions to this near era of your career and ask how you relate this to your previous line of thinking? How did it develop? Did it develop naturally out of your previous experiences or as a parallel to them? Is ELF in line with your previous views in applied linguistics?

HG: *Yes, it very much is, I think. Because as the name suggests, English for specific purposes is concerned with purposes, and how the use of language is conditioned by what the purposes are in using it. I think for me the crucial change or development was that I, and I think most people working in ESP, have never considered that the purpose might not require Standard English, so all the ESP courses that I know of, and books and so on, all take what I would see as a normative attitude to it. They all assume there are quite stabilized ways of using English for specific purposes, certain specific genres that have to be adhered to, and therefore certain ways of linguistically realizing these genres and these are what you teach people in order to conform to what is the established way of dealing with these things. But with Barbara, we developed the idea that became clear that what has to go a step further is that if you are really interested in how language is achieved you can no longer adhere to this notion that there is a standard norm that you got to conform to because clearly it can become dysfunctional in terms of communication, so I think there is a consistency between English for specific purposes and almost an inevitability of the relevance of ELF.*

BS: *Should I be in here for a moment?*

FS: Yes, sure

BS: *You (Henry Widdowson) said that very clearly in the 1990s with your paper about the ownership of English. It was then when you gave the TESOL plenary and I really felt like I had to duck weather because tomatoes or knives might be flying any moment. You know, there was such a sense of tension in the room that Henry and TESOL were saying so in the States, that you, or we really do not own English and I think it was taken up very*

avidly by the world Englishes community and you were then asked to publish something like the EIL paper in world Englishes because cross-culturally there were parts that had common cause with world Englishes, eh... postcolonial Englishes, and for a while there was this sheer endeavour but of course there are also big differences between English as a lingua franca and world Englishes, yeah.. and that became clearer later. I just wanted to add that not only did your ELF thinking follow on logically from your previous ESP and EFL thinking, but also you were clearly saying things that were just like what you said in ELF. I think what has happened now is what we now have descriptive work on ELF that demonstrates empirically what you had been saying in principle.

HW: *Yes that was gripping. Barbara 's VOICE project is a massive move because one could talk speculatively about the relationship of English and how language has to be adjusted to purpose, and that appropriateness is more significant and more important than correctness. But what we needed at descriptive basis, and this is precisely what Barbara provided at the VOICE which was subsequently taken up in Asia with the ACE corpus and also a corpus in Helsinki for written English...*

FS: I inferred from what you said yesterday and today that there has been sort of resistance regarding this.

BS: *Yeah, very much which has even become a bandwagon. I remember the conference where I said I wanted to build a corpus of ELF in directions. That was a conference again very focused on native speaker language and literature; it was the European Society for the study of English dominated by literature people actually like so many English departments, hab?! And you know everybody wanted to be more British than the Brits and more royal than the king, and I was invited onto a panel about corpus linguistics which was the thing to do at the time. That was in 2000. And I, I just said you know, I think that seems most people in the world that use English among non-native speakers of English, we should be looking at how they do it because clearly it works, but it would be nice to know as a linguist how it works. And I remember there was a large audience because it was a kind of plenary panel and the reaction when I said I want to build a corpus of English as a lingua franca interactions, they were very mixed, and there was a group of Italian teachers in front of me, university teachers that said immediately: "Yes, that's what we need. It's exactly what we need." And most of other people were going.... They were literally shrugging their shoulders, going like this. You know, a couple of people laughed and left the room. Somebody said "Are you off your rocker? Why do you want to do this?"*

This kind of reaction I think has gone because most of the people have realized that it is so much a fact that you need to look at it. But of course, in that sense it has become a bandwagon, and people like to stick the label ELF on things you know. They want to make the claim, but the thinking behind it still very confused.

HW: *Yes, this is in a way the danger that is happening with the communicative language teaching and so many other so called improvements. People cease upon the appearances without really understanding the implications of this. I mean there is, for instance, a widespread assumption that ELF must always be in some sense deviant and non-conformist. The idea that language can only be defined as a form persists, because you can only say that you are only talking of language of ELF being incorrect or non-conformist in terms of form. I mean, instead of shifting the emphasis to communicative purpose, and then you can have an image of perspective. And actually it raises whole range of emphasis - I think Barbara will agree - that what is interesting about ELF is it raises the fundamental questions about the very nature of language association in communication. It raises, for instance, the question about what is grammar for. Most learners of English, and learners of any language, are told that they have to learn grammar, but it is never explained why you need grammar because in many cases you don't. In many cases of normal use of language - one's own language and anybody else's - you don't need the grammar. We all take shortcuts. If you look at transcripts of spoken interactions, there is very little regularity of grammar. Why is that? You only need grammar if the context doesn't provide you with enough information. You only need the grammar to supplement what people are aware of already. It is a support mechanism. That is all. And then you realize that if that is the case, there are lots of things that have developed grammar over the time which have no communicative function whatever. They are only there because that is the customary way people behave. So it is a kind of cultural artefact. It has little relevance...*

BS: *And again you have said this very clearly before. And it was just kind of interesting to be able to see it was played out so clearly in a paper on nonsense of grammar learning and in your 1990 book.*

HW: *Farzad, I think knows about this book. "Aspects".*

FS: *I'm afraid we are running out of time. Given the fact that you are tired and you have a plan to visit around Tabriz, and then we have a long trip to Isfahan tonight; so I'd like to ask my final question, which is about your interest in Iran. I'd like Professor Widdowson to answer this since this interest was first expressed by him in AILA 2002 Conference in Singapore during lunch time conversation we had together. How much of your expectations has been realized so far, now that you are in Tabriz?*

HW: *Yes, as far as my interest in Iran is concerned, I've always been intrigued by something quite vaguely about the history, and of course in the history of this part of the world, with empires rising and falling and Persia –Iran – has always been a central part of the whole history including the eastern Europe, and it has always struck me that there is some historical curiosity that it is now being sort of closed off from the outside world. It seemed to me that here was a place that was in many ways so intimately related to Europe and at the same time dissociated from it, and I found this very intriguing, and I have always wanted to come, Barbara too, we have always said we would like to come to Iran. In a way, because it counts to some sort of mystery I think; a kind of strange and unknown land. When we arrived, what - I think Barbara would agree with me- amazed us, we expected a degree of hospitality and kindness, but we have been absolutely overwhelmed by - I don't know what to call it - the affection, the openness with which we have been received, and it is extremely heart-warming and ego-boosting, of course. So this was totally unexpected. It says in the guidebook - you know - that the Iranian people are very friendly and something like that. Yes they were friendly, but this went beyond friendliness and being so we have been here for about 24 hours or a bit more than 24 hours, but it's really been already an extraordinarily moving experience for us. It is early to start to really formulate what that means in terms of impressions, but the general impression is of overwhelming openness.*

I think there is something, I don't know about other people coming to Iran, but I can see that there is a danger assumedly because in some sense Iran is closed off; that nothing interesting is happening in Iran. But intellectually it's clear that there is an extraordinarily vibrant activity going on, and there is much to be learnt by coming to Iran. It is –as we've said yesterday, it's very much a bilateral conversation; it is a dialogue. And one has to see this crucially in the dialogue; and not as some kind of unilateral, sort of, bringing up the good news, and I think there is a danger, and in the past, this has happened often because in our field, for example, which is dominated by English-speaking people in the world, there is a real danger of the assumption that this is a one-way traffic, that we have the enlightenment because it happens to be written in English, and disregard the intellectual activities of other people.

FS: --- Thank you very much for your time and sharing your views with us. We enjoyed it.

HW: *Can we just say at the end, you have expressed your pleasure having us here; we should very much like to express our pleasure being here. It has been rewarding.*

