

Crossing the boundary between logic and context: The inspiration of Wittgenstein's philosophy for the principled innovation of TESOL

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Abstract. The present study delves into the pedagogical implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical insights, particularly as they relate to the domain of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). In his seminal work, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces the notion that linguistic meaning is not immutable but is instead derived from the dynamic and context-specific ways in which language is employed – a concept he terms "language game". This challenges long-standing, static conceptions of language and offers a novel lens through which to view cross-cultural communication within the realm of college English education. Within the sphere of cross-cultural discourse, interlocutors typically emerge from diverse cultural milieus, resulting in linguistic expressions and communicative practices that are profoundly shaped by their respective cultural norms. Wittgenstein's model of language acquisition thus provides an intellectual foundation for academic institutions to focus on the impact of cultural variance on linguistic interaction, as well as to foster students' acumen and adaptability in engaging with various linguistic registers across different situational contexts. This paper elucidates the distinctive aspects of Wittgenstein's model of language acquisition and delineates its instructive value for enhancing cross-cultural communication competencies in college English, grounded in the theoretical underpinnings of his linguistic philosophy.

1 Introduction

The philosophical ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, especially his concept of "language games" as presented in *Philosophical Investigations*, have significant educational ramifications for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). By proposing that the dynamic and context-specific ways in which language is used generate linguistic meaning, Wittgenstein challenges static views of language.

English courses may help students become more adept at navigating the subtleties of cross-cultural communication by adopting Wittgenstein's views, which will eventually improve their academic and career paths. The communicative turn in linguistics and the turn

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in language pedagogy are in line with Wittgenstein's understanding of language as a social phenomenon as opposed to an unchangeable system.

By combining the concepts of teaching approaches with Wittgenstein's philosophy, an educational philosophy that transcends the concept of method is produced. This approach seeks to increase students' awareness and flexibility in dealing with multiple language registers in a range of situational settings while adhering to the educational concepts of particularity, pragmatism, and possibility.

To conclude, the philosophical ideas of Wittgenstein, especially his concept of "language games," provide a fresh perspective on cross-cultural communication in TESOL. College English programs may help students develop cross-cultural communication skills and become more capable of navigating the challenges of language engagement in a world that is becoming more interconnected by adopting his concepts.

2 The overview of Wittgenstein's thought

Early Wittgenstein posited that language constitutes a synthesis of propositions rather than a mere aggregation of names. The logical realm to which language refers is the self, denoted as 'I'. Language is construed as an external manifestation of thought, and logical reasoning can only be articulated through language, not evaluated for its potential in logic. As a symbolic framework, language can solely unveil the reality comprehensible by thought and cannot encompass phenomena beyond the domain of logic or be inconsistent with logical principles; otherwise, it would forfeit its significance. Thus, people may delineate language as demarcating the limits of thought.

However, the "language game" proposed by the late Wittgenstein seems to overturn the views expressed in his earlier work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, but it is a critical inheritance of his early thoughts. The logical world constructed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is a static world, where every object has a corresponding language, otherwise it is meaningless. Yet is the world really composed of logic and non-logic? Is logic outside of its traditional metaphysics? In the discussions with his friends and teachers, Ramsey, among others, late Wittgenstein critically evaluated his early work and proposed the influential "language game theory".

The theory first rethinks language itself. Wittgenstein proposed that the entire process of employing words may be seen as one of those games that help kids pick up their mother tongue. These games will be referred to as "language games", which might also include the activities of identifying the stones and repeating words after other people [1]. Language, as Ludwig Wittgenstein came to realize in his later reflections, defies the static and one-to-one correspondence with the objects of a logical world that he initially believed it represented. This early perspective posited a world where language served as a mirror, reflecting a fixed and unchanging reality. However, Wittgenstein's evolving understanding revealed that the logical world, and by extension the language that describes it, is not immobile. The fluidity of language's basic units – its words – and the shifts in their meanings over time, became a testament to the dynamic nature of the logical world.

Wittgenstein's insight into the limitations of his earlier views was prompted by the recognition that language is replete with non-nominal elements. These elements do not neatly correspond to individual objects but instead reflect a more complex and variable relationship. The application of language in the real world is thus characterized by its intricacy and adaptability.

This realization led Wittgenstein to discard the notion of a singular, unchanging essence of language. Instead, he posited that language acquires significance and structure through use, displaying varying degrees of similarity and connection in different contexts. His concept of "language games" emphasizes the role of context in shaping the forms and meanings of

language. Different language games, according to Wittgenstein, are governed by different sets of rules, reflecting the diversity of linguistic practices across various situations.

The concept of a game itself, traditionally understood as a structured activity for entertainment with clear rules and boundaries, was problematized by Wittgenstein. He argued that not all games are played for fun, nor do they necessarily involve competition or have a clear winner and loser. Furthermore, not all games are confined to a specific space or time, nor are they always governed by fixed and precise rules. Despite these variations, Wittgenstein observed that games share a family resemblance, characterized by overlapping and intersecting features.

To address the complexity of language, Wittgenstein introduced the concept of "family resemblances," suggesting that language games are defined not by rigid criteria but by a more open-ended and descriptive approach. In this view, language games encompass the interconnected whole of language and the actions it informs, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of linguistic expression and its multifaceted role in human life.

The theory of language play has exerted great influence on the development of contemporary philosophy and linguistics. For example, the theory of speech acts in pragmatics, and the theory of intercultural communication can be seen in the shadow of Wittgenstein's philosophy. In *The Blue and the Brown Books*, Wittgenstein further describes that language play is a technique of employing symbols that are far less complicated than the way people use the symbols in our extremely complicated daily language [2]. These are the linguistic forms that a youngster learns to utilize words [3]. From this point of view, the use of speech is part of everyday behavior, and children learn the rules of language use and the meanings of words in language play (such as pointing to a plant or animal to name it). Through this language learning, children recognize and understand the world. If language and the objective world are regarded as two major fields, the role played by language games is the bridge connecting these two major fields.

Wittgenstein's theory of language games, grounded in a practice-oriented philosophy, offers profound insights into the field of education, particularly within the context of English language teaching in higher education. This theoretical perspective challenges the conventional pedagogical approaches that tend to isolate the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, and instead, it introduces an innovative Natural Approach to language instruction. This approach advocates for learning English in a manner akin to how children acquire their native language, emphasizing the critical role of comprehensible input in the teaching process. Furthermore, it bridges the gap with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), providing a cohesive framework for instruction that is grounded in both theory and practice.

The Natural Approach, informed by Wittgenstein's insights, suggests that language learning should occur in an environment rich with meaningful and understandable language use. This stands in contrast to the rote memorization and decontextualized drilling of grammatical structures that have traditionally characterized language teaching. By focusing on the natural acquisition of language through exposure to authentic contexts and engaging tasks, the Natural Approach aligns with Wittgenstein's idea that language is learned through its use in real-life situations.

Moreover, the integration of TBLT with the Natural Approach allows for a dynamic and interactive learning experience. Tasks that are meaningful and relevant to students' lives provide a platform for language use that is both purposeful and engaging. This approach not only enhances learners' linguistic proficiency but also develops their communicative competence, as it emphasizes the importance of language as a tool for achieving specific goals within a given context.

Wittgenstein's philosophy of language games provides a theoretical foundation for reimagining English language education in higher education. It supports a shift towards more student-centered, interactive, and contextually grounded teaching methods. By embracing the

principles of the Natural Approach and TBLT, educators can create learning environments that are conducive to the natural and effective acquisition of the English language, thereby enriching the educational experience of students and better preparing them for the complexities of a globalized world.

3 Language game

Language game, the concept of language games, repeatedly invoked in Wittgenstein's philosophy and in subsequent theories, stands as a fundamental and crucial notion. However, gaining a clear understanding of Wittgenstein's concept of language games is exceptionally challenging. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein does not provide a definitive definition but instead offers a multitude of examples. The scholarly community has offered numerous interpretations of this concept. This paper will primarily explore an analogical perspective, namely the analogy between language and games, to elucidate Wittgenstein's views on language and life.

Language and games, at first glance, do not seem to have a direct connection but are rather related through metaphor or analogy. Although one's initial impression might be that these concepts have no relation, Wittgenstein, at a philosophical level, identifies a commonality between them.

Rules govern games; without them, games lack meaning. Similarly, language must adhere to its own set of rules, otherwise, people would be unable to communicate effectively, or worse, be deemed to be speaking nonsense. "Obeying rules" can be considered the common starting point for both.

In Chinese, there is the term "polysemy", which refers to the phenomenon where a single word can express multiple meanings. The meaning of a word is not determined by the object it refers to but is governed by the rules of the entire sentence (grammar). Likewise, sentences are composed of words, and their use is determined by the rules of language. When different sentences are combined, they create context, or what people refer to as the linguistic environment. In different contexts, the same sentence may convey different meanings, leading to a situation where "the words do not convey the intended meaning." Thus, the setting is crucial for both language and games, just as in his words: "Like any other game, a language-game is 'played' in a setting" [4].

Just as words are situated within sentences, language games exist as words or symbols within a larger context, characterized by their natural abundance and intermingling. This intermingling is determined merely by the degree and criteria of classification, such as pure language activities like debates or speeches and impure language activities, including academic and everyday language games. In fact, there are no clear, immutable boundaries between language games. For instance, philosophical or theological languages, which arise from everyday life, necessarily blend and intermingle with everyday language games. It is merely a question of the depth of this intermingling.

In his later thought, Wittgenstein moved away from his early logical atomism to a broader perspective. The idea of his predecessor Gottlob Frege regarding the context principle – that words gain meaning in sentences – was an inspiration for Wittgenstein, and this is referenced in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. However, Wittgenstein's overall understanding of meaning goes far beyond Frege's, breaking away from the closed system of propositions to enter into the larger, more expansive background of cultural practices and social behaviors that constitute human life. Words find their meaning within sentences, and within the context of human life, sentences acquire meaning within language games. If sentences are removed from any specific language game and its context, their meaning will shift.

In the preceding section, this paper encapsulated the notion of language games and their salient features. While the concepts of language games and forms of life are indeed nebulous,

there is a pronounced interrelationship between them. As previously argued, language is not imaginable in isolation from human praxis; meaning is embedded within the matrix of human activities, of which language is an integral part. This interdependence underscores the intrinsic link between language and life. The things people utter are devoid of significance without a corresponding lived experience or contextual backdrop. To illustrate, if one were to explain the concept of the "Chinese Room" to an individual lacking a foundation in the philosophy of language or cognitive science, they might fail to grasp the content of the explanation; the discourse would be akin to jargon for them – a string of nonsensical words devoid of meaning.

4 Wittgenstein and language acquisition

Before delving into Wittgenstein's views, it is pertinent to first discuss Chomsky's model of language acquisition, given their different core. Chomsky's concept of "innate universal grammar" clearly inherits from Continental Rationalism, philosophically, as he challenges the Empiricist approach to learning. "I think he was wrong in his empirical assumption about the principles by which the mind is actuated, innate, and acquired" [5]. Chomsky posits that the acquisition of any language relies on innate abilities and that children are born with an innate familiarity with grammatical principles. When confronted with unfamiliar sentences, they are capable of comprehension and creativity. His most renowned assertion is that learning a language is akin to learning the latent rules that dominated it, and mastery of these rules allows for the creation of an infinite number of sentences.

Though Chomsky refutes Skinner's stimulus-response theory, this paper will not elaborate further on the theories of Chomsky and Skinner, as this is not the pith of the discussion. They are two important figures in TESOL, for Wittgenstein is different but similar to them.

Wittgenstein's model of language acquisition is one of connection. Wittgenstein reiterates Moore's model, but aims to reject the approach in favor of Common Sense about worldview [6]. Unlike Behaviorism or Chomsky School, the early Wittgenstein inherits from Moore's model and suggests that behind language lies a logical insight that serves as a bridge between subject and object, word and referent within language and propositions. Unlike some empirical schools of thought that exclude the opposite, Wittgenstein does not shake away from psychological methods, although his model of learning also emphasizes experience. In Wittgenstein's model of language acquisition, meaning takes precedence over any paradigmatic thinking centered on visualization or iconic representation. He relied on the activity of giving meaning and emphasized the proposition that the signs of language depend on their use.

Wittgenstein provided this precise explanation. Without these mental processes, the signs that make up our language appear lifeless; in fact, it may appear that the signals' sole purpose is to elicit these processes, and that they are the things in which people should actually be interested [7].

In his early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein articulated the limitations of language, and from this, he inferred the methodology of language learning. It is the essential connection between what language displays and its application that prevents humans from clearly expressing what is shown, leading to expressing ideas that are inconsistent with logical syntax. The idea that there is a distinction between say and display does not imply the existence of unspeakable thoughts beyond the limits of language, but rather that the limits of language – that is, everything necessary for humans to use language meaningfully – are essentially within human grasp. These are things that only manifest when meaningful speech is actually used, hence certain things are inherently unspeakable.

In his later works, such as *The Blue Book* and *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein emphasized that the meaning of a word or sentence lies in its use, and therefore, there is no

concept of fixed or independent meaning. He argued that one cannot point to certain features of an object to which a specific word refers as its meaning. There is no fixed meaning intended to cover all possible future uses of expressions, which are not bound by new contexts. Language, particularly grammar in a broad sense, generates a process of following rules, and the pattern of rule-following cannot be systematic or private, as it is based on shared practices, akin to the dynamic and public language habits of a community.

Saul Kripke provides a sort of solution to Wittgenstein's problems, suggesting that mental states and inner experiences cannot determine the meaning of terms in a way that can be shared with others in the community. The learning process does not depend on inner thoughts but on the use of language. Indeed, the method of learning language and the process of knowing how to use it must have an aim, which is simply to speak and communicate in a way similar to others in society. Whether learning is an adaptive process that absorbs both new and old language patterns is a pertinent question.

Creativity is an important component of language use, but one should also be aware of the limitations of language. Wittgenstein states, "Understanding a sentence means understanding a language. Understanding a language means mastering a technique." [1] Wittgenstein rejects the early model of thought language and emphasizes the training or practice process of language learning. Children need to be trained in how to speak, and the key is that they can learn language through language games, which are based on examples and training, not on translation and interpretation models. The conclusion from this model is that one can only demonstrate what an intelligent agent can learn but not articulate it, due to the strict limitations of language use.

In fact, this corresponds with theories of language acquisition. In teaching, people should acknowledge the effectiveness of grammar instruction for test-taking purposes, but at the level of language acquisition, teachers and language learners should naturally acquire language through communicative language acquisition methods. In this process, Wittgenstein's ideas can be taken as a guiding principle.

The framework of acquisition outlines the limits of language because it cannot be explained by the rules of language use, leading to an infinite regress. This infinite regression describes human scholarly knowledge as familiar prior knowledge. Thus, the creative element in language learning is hindered. The process of language learning through training also indicates that learning to think and speak in language is a process of learning how to think and speak, not merely one of imitation or translation through description.

Chomsky posits that human language is undoubtedly biological to some extent (the existence of different languages means that individual languages cannot be entirely innate), and the process of language learning and the creativity of language is closely related to the hypotheses of universal grammar and innateness. However, Wittgenstein is not as convinced in the biological model of language as Chomsky, yet he cannot ignore the debate over the value of the natural history of language learning.

Wittgenstein suggests that the creative aspect of language games provides us with the freedom to create new things, but people must recognize that this process is limited. Language is merely a common form of human life, and language games can be seen as a greenhouse for our primitive behaviors, as they share commonalities that help us share and understand each other's interests and learn.

5 Suggestions

Wittgenstein is not only a philosopher who considered how to teach but also a real teacher. He used to be a rural teacher and a professor in Cambridge. To inspire deep rather than superficial learning requires an ability to relate concepts to new ideas, previous knowledge and everyday experience, as well as that students 'aim to understand ideas and seek meanings'

[8]. The criteria for “teaching” (qua teaching) were said to include intentional acts that involve the giving of reasons or weighing of evidence, enabling pupils to rationally and autonomously assess and then adopt knowledge claims instead of holding ideas unshakably through stimulus-response (behaviorism) or dogmatic implantation by authority (indoctrination) [9].

This paper ends with the advice of Wittgenstein, who was a philosophical genius decades ago and also a practical educator: Let the students participate in the language game, participate in the whole process of the language game, to make dialogue connections. Wittgenstein held that a person cannot always be told something. Sometimes, indeed often, she has to see it for herself. This idea is expressed in many different ways throughout his texts, and to understand what it means is no mean feat. Yet to understand it authentically, or from within, requires such understanding [6]. Wittgenstein found a voice – a form of speaking and writing – that is appropriate, and deeply appropriate, not just for doing philosophy in a postmodern, highly individualized, bourgeois democratic society, but also a voice which is equally appropriate for doing political and ethical and religious and aesthetic debate (both with others and with oneself) in such societies [10].

6 Conclusion

Wittgenstein’s life was captured by education, first, as a privately tutored child at home, then, as a school pupil, and later, as a philosophy student at Cambridge University, a primary school teacher for seven years, and finally a philosophy professor, spoke to an interpretation of Wittgenstein as a pedagogical philosopher.

Although there are some elements in Wittgenstein's teaching methods that are not in line with the mainstream, such as the lack of a clear curriculum structure, the tendency of elite education in the classroom, and the question of the effectiveness of learning caused by the overbroad class topics, Wittgenstein's educational concept is still worth learning from leaving space for uncertainty.

In the process of TESOL, it is not necessary for educators to reveal all the possibilities as in grammar teaching. It is better for educators to stimulate language learners to learn deeply rather than superficially, to combine new concepts and ideas with previous knowledge, to generate students' interest in tasks, to understand ideas and meanings, and to enable students to truly learn the language and improve their intercultural communication skills.

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