COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: TIME FOR REVIEW?

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INTRODUCTION

The communicative approach initially emerged in Europe in the late sixties in reaction to the artificiality and limitations of second or foreign language teaching practice prevailing at the time. A resetting of sights became necessary. The needs of rapidly increasing numbers of foreign language speakers whose work required them to communicate with the speakers of languages other than their own were an insistent reality, and these needs had to be met. The British school of neo-Firthian functional or systemic linguists provided the basis for a new "communicative" syllabus which specified what learners should be able to do with the language. There was a strong emphasis on the goals of the language learning/acquisition involved (specified in a list of notions and functions), coupled with a more eclectic attitude to teaching methods. It was felt, not unnaturally, that communication was of primary importance.

The movement was strengthened from across the Atlantic. At much the same time as these developments in Europe, Hymes (1972), who had interests in the interconnection between language, culture, and communication within speech communities, suggested that the term "communicative competence" be used to describe the appropriate use of language in social context: the observance of native-speaker sociolinguistic norms of appropriacy. Savignon (1971) who was engaged in classroom research to determine the effect of practice in the use of communication strategies, used the term "communicative competence" to describe the ability of L2

speakers to "interact with other speakers, to make meaning, as distinct from their ability to perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge" (Savignon 1990).

While communicative language teaching (CLT) was and remains eclectic with regard to method, certain ways of prioritising the need to negotiate meaning - games, roleplay, and pair and group activities - came to be strongly associated with it.

The CLT movement spread rapidly with pressing practical demands, which resulted in implementation's moving ahead of work and research. The rather specific language needs which led to its "invention" have also not always been considered in its application. One of the difficulties is that the approach lacks a clear theoretical base; unlike other methods and approaches we can at best speak of theories of language learning processes that are *compatible* with communicative teaching rather than ones from which it may be said to originate (Richards 1986: 72)

In South Africa a strategic decision was made by the committee involved in compiling the core syllabus. In 1986 South African high schools officially implemented what could be described as communicative syllabuses in English.

Language teaching had been dominated by a situational-structural syllabus and textbooks filled with drill exercises aimed at patterning firmly the rules set out in such absolute terms. Neither the rules nor the exercises could be said to relate to use. The sentences were isolated from any sense of social context - most of them clearly composed for the sole purpose of providing practice. Long lists of vocabulary made up the bulk of the rest of the textbooks. "Doing grammar exercises" was the staple diet of most second language classes. Consequently, the new syllabus, in order to move classroom priorities firmly in the

direction of function, forbade the teaching of grammar for its own sake. The intention of syllabus compilers was not to suggest that accuracy was unimportant, nor were they encouraging teachers to tolerate error. What they hoped to achieve was to focus attention on the more demanding goal of appropriacy, moving beyond the limitations of a focus on correctness towards "making sense in real situations". Errors were to be placed in the context of what was being achieved, and so what was accurate and appropriate was to be given due recognition. As Ridge (1986) points out, this was not to be confused with getting an obvious point across, but with dynamic management or strategic use of the linguistic resources available.

How the 1986 syllabus should now be reviewed requires careful reference to the needs of second language learners in South Africa. A prerequisite is that the questions to which answers may be sought with the help of linguistics must also be appropriate.

Teaching English as a second language in South Africa is complicated by the fact that English is the medium of instruction from the fifth year of school for the majority of pupils for whom English is not the mother tongue. Most of these pupils do not haave the benefit of opportunities for informal acquisition, since nearly 60% of black people are unable to speak English at all (van Vuuren and De Beer 1990), nor on the whole do they have the benefit of teachers who can speak English with confidence or fluency (MacDonald 1990: 39). Their situation is different from a minority of second language learners who live in an environment where informal acquisition is possible, and who have teachers whose own English is proficient.

The needs of all these pupils is not for a "second language", but for a language which will empower them to participate fully in

the economic and social life of the country. As Widdowson has reminded us (1990: 2) we have to review our techniques and approaches in the light of specific contexts of instruction. In order to see that learning objectives are being achieved we have to keep pace with present social realities.

> The context of language teaching like the more social contexts within which they are located, are continually challenging habitual ways of thinking and the patterns of past certainty. Unless there is a corresponding critical appraisal, there can be no adaptation, no adjustment to change (Widdowson 1990:2)

Coherent and effective solutions to these pedagogic problems have to be sought, but this paper can only touch on possible points of departure.

What "answers" does linguistics offer?

1. A good starting place would be to take a brief look at the goal: communicative competence. The first problem is the term "communicative competence,". While Savignon (1990) says of "communicative competence" that since the 70s "the term has exacted reflection... and has not lent itself to simple reduction, and with it the risk of becoming yet another slogan", the South African experience does not entirely bear this out, and world wide athe matter has been the subject of some debate. Halliday has questioned whether knowing how to use the language is the same as knowing what one can do with the language. He prefers the term "meaning potential", which covers the process in which, as the child learns the potential within the language, he or she develops a meaning

potential for each function, and learns the roles in which this potential can be realized and even predicted. Some second language teachers have, in practice, had difficulty with the term, finding the term "proficiency" a more satisfactory one to describe the advanced communication skills which would be appropriate. More recently applied linguists have questioned the use of the term, suggesting that it lacks content. Communication seems to be all they will it allow it to mean. Clearly their responsiblity now is to provide a term that will help us to set our sights again. During the keynote address Professor Rudi Botha touched on the dangers of a theory of language which is synonymous with a narrow view of communication, and we would do well to take this cautionary note seriously.

2. The second point would be to examine a question which has been asked repeatedly, namely, whether the communicative approach is the best "method" of teaching a language. What we have here is a contradiction in terms. Communicative language teaching in the broader framework of linguistics is seen as applying to any approach that claims to be based on a view of language as communication. This precludes a 'standard' interpretation. While it is true that most adherents would emphasise the meeting of communicative needs as basic to the approach, it should be emphasised that no single set methodology or fixed set of techniques is prescribed; nor is there a set sequence or format. Not even pair and group work feature in all communicative materials (Berns 1990, Brumfit and Johnson (1982), Harmer (1981) Littlewood (1981). An even more important implication is that nothing is proscribed (Richards 1986: 67). Consequently any attempt to draw up a list of absolute "characteristics" of communicative language teaching would be inconsistent with the broad principle of the approach.

On the other hand, it is possible to adopt one of the many variations of the approach. A key guiding principle would be that the goal of language teaching should be kept firmly in mind and that methods or techniques should be less important than the learning goal of being able to use the language effectively. On the long-term this must keep the responsibility of doing all we can to offer our pupils a fair chance to compete for jobs in a harsh economic climate, and to participate fully in national life.

At primary school level there would seem to be a strong indication that a communicative approach will not offer the "cognitive bilingual academic proficiency" (Cummins 1984) that pupils need. In line with an approach taken elsewhere (Mohan, Early and Hooper: 1992), pupils' major need is for an English syllabus that systematically acts to provide them with the skills and knowledge they require in order to learn their content subjects successfully. A realistic view would recognize that this applies to high school pupils too. With the opening up of "white" schools, the pressure is on teachers in multilingual classrooms at highschool level as well; in otehr words, this aspect will have to feature in the high school curriculum too. Here the Canadian experiments may be useful pointers to the need for content teachers to become teachers of language in more than mere lip service, as well as to the kind of training that such teachers would need.

Chick (1992: 35) has appealed for a return to a communicative approach at a later stage "so as to develop the advanced communicative skills pupils need to negotiate crucial aspects of their lives...." However, Bonnie Norton Pierce (1989) questions whether a communicative approach

will indeed provide pupils with the access they need. She points out that in a post-structuralist theory of language, discourses are the signs and practices that organise social existence and social reproduction.

> "Language is a place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity is constructed" (Weedon 1987: 21)

If indeed, as her argument suggests, participation in the dominant discourses in South Africa may be a powerful means of constraining people into taking up subject positions, then "communicative competence" will not meet learners' need to challenge the conditions they find themselves in as a necessary condition for enjoying a more powerful role in society. Language teachers may well unlock the mysteries of the nature and function of sociolinguistic rules, but at the same time unwittingly be transmitting entrenched attitudes: English in South Africa is defined by its social and cultural context and thus is the "carrier of the perceptions, goals and attitudes of South African society" (Ndebele 1987:11). Communicative approaches have another potentially disadvantaging aspect. The strong emphasis on fluency in South Africa and its resultant minimalism is unlikely to equip learners for professional roles. Norton Pierce's suggestion of a "pedagogy of possibility" (1991) bears closer consideration.

3. The next aspect which poses a problem is the issue of the teaching of grammar versus the sufficiency of comprehensible input. Though one could debate the content of the term "comprehensible input", the term will be granted its face

value for the purpose of this paper. The dichotomy between acquisition and learning has been largely rejected (a point made economically in van der Walt's paper) but a useful illustration of the inadequacy of the strong non-interface position can be gained by examining the experience of immersion approaches described by Krashen as possibly "the most successful programme ever recorded in the professional language teaching literature" (Krashen 1984:61). Hammersley (1991: 2) claims that there does not seem to be a single report that claims fluent and accurate speaking skills as a result of such programmes. He quotes the findings of six studies which indicate that fossilisation is a feature of such programmes, with little linguistic development after the second or third grade. Hammersley clearly feels strongly about these language programmes and indicts the system in the following way:

> ... teachers are usually unwilling to point out and correct linguistic errors and tend to praise any act of communication regardless of grammaticality. Thus the use of 'ingredients' inappropriate to successful language learning and the lack of those essential to it result in a nutritionally deficient 'stew' which, if fed daily to students over two or three years will inevitably cause 'permanent linguistic rickets' (Hammersley 1991: 7)

Although we would have to concede that Hammersley has yet to offer a tried and tested alternative, there can be little argument that there are differences between input and intake. Mere exposure to comprehensible intake does not appear sufficient for second language acquisition. Widdowson (1990: 97) firmly reminds us of the value of being able to recognise the function of a grammatical device and

challenges teachers to provide learners with this powerful resource so that they can achieve meaning in a purposeful way. For him there can be no compromise: "a communicative approach properly conceived does not involve the rejection of grammar."

This is an area where we look to linguistics to investigate approaches that will lead to a higher level of successful acquisition. Clearly a return to a narrow focus on the formal properties of language is not being advocated. What is necessary is a sense of the way grammar functions in the achieving of meaning. Long (1983) is among those who appear to offer some useful pointers to effective activities. His interaction hypothesis claims that comprehensible input which results from attempts to negotiate communication difficulties helps to make salient grammatical features which are problematic to learners, and thus facilitates acquisition. His model emphasises the importance of interactional adjustment in two-way communication in acquiring implicit knowledge (Fotos and Ellis 1991: 609).

Swain (1985) provides another possiblity. For her the answer appears to lie in the learner's having to make an effort to produce **pushed output** (output that is precise, coherent and situationally coherent) and in that sense comprehensible to interlocutors if mastery of the grammatical markers of the language is to be achieved. Such mastery is a direct outcome of the work involved in the negotiation process itself.

Ellis and Fotos (1991) and others like Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1988) consider that conscious-raising

techniques or communicative, grammar-based tasks increase knowledge of L2 rules, both sociolinguistic and grammatical. They have used Long's (1989) four general points regarding the effectiveness of different task types.

1. Two-way tasks produce more negotiation of meaning than one-way tasks, since the former make the exchange of meaning obligatory, whereas the latter do not.

2. Planned tasks, where learners prepare their speech beforehand or think about what they will say beforehand, encourage more negotiation than unplanned tasks.

3. Closed tasks where there is a definite solution or ending produce more negotiation than open tasks, where there is no clear resolution.

4. Convergent tasks, where the participants must agree on a solution, promote more negotiation than divergent tasks, where different views are permitted.

These tasks relate clearly to a perceived need to know for a clear purpose - thus the "formal instruction" is closely linked to opportunities for natural communication. Ellis's view is that formal instruction is effective in developing explicit knowledge - and it is this kind of knowledge that learners are subsequently able to use to acquire implicit knowledge. If he and his fellow researchers are correct, then teaching practice will have to be adjusted accordingly.

It seems that we have misinterpreted a change of emphasis. "Function rather than form" has become "function and not form". Widdowson (1990:21) points out the absurdity of that position. What it suggests is that if "you think carefully, choose, your

words, take your time before making your conversational contribution you cannot communicate, or at any rate very effectively, because you are interfering with the natural function of the acquired system. And since acquisition depends on communication, your deliberate delivery will impede your progress in learning language well".

It appears that formal input is important.

Widdowson has provided us with a neat summary of the situation.

> It seems that students need something in the way of formal instruction as well as acquisition by natural exposure and engagement. It is not just that one supplements the other: effective learning would appear to be a function of the **relationship** between formal instruction and natural use.

What seems clear is that the "strong" form of communicative teaching, especially where it has been overly influenced by a blind faith in Krashen, is not the appropriate one for South Africa. Where it has entrenched itself it must be resisted. Ultimately, we have to recognise that our teaching task is to meet the needs of our learners first. As Widdowson (1990) so sanely points out, principles are an abstraction. We have to be sure that the learning objectives we promote take full account of the needs of our pupils, and this will mean that there will have to be a constant process of critical appraisal for timely adaptation and adjustment to be made.

Ellis (1990) should perhaps have the last word. He suggests that we language teachers should not look to research to provide us with **answers**, and instead "accept that it is only likely to provide *insights* or *clues* about what happens when teachers try to intervene in the process of language learning. We will always

need to interpret the clues with the help of common sense based on our practical experience of what works and does not work in the classroom." (Ellis 1990: 204)

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