

THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO  
LANGUAGE TEACHING

C.J. Brumfit and K. Johnson (eds.)

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"The Communicative Approach" is a fashionable term in foreign language teaching today. However, while most teachers are acquainted with the term and are aware of many of its classroom implications, not all will feel that they have sufficient knowledge of the theoretical background to the development of the communicative movement to be able to participate fully in the continuing process of debate and evaluation. For those who are interested in placing recent developments in a wider context and in examining the underlying theories and arguments, this book offers an introduction. In the words of the editors:

It attempts to collect many of the important papers in the field... It is hoped that through these papers it will be possible to trace the major linguistic influences on language teaching from theory through to practical application in syllabus design and teaching materials.

The volume is divided into four sections, each accompanied by a short introduction by the editors. These sections are: The Linguistic Background, The Background to Teaching, Applications and Techniques, and Methodological Perspectives. There is also an appendix containing examples of commercially produced teaching materials.

Of the papers that are included, most are classics in the field, in that they represent the introduction of central themes and theories in the literature of communicative language teaching, or else describe early attempts to apply these theories. The inclusion of three specially written papers is explained by the editors in terms of the book's aims to cover the full theory-to-practice spectrum. The two final papers, written by the editors, go beyond this, in fact, and make explicit a position which is implicit in the structure and organisation of this volume. That is that, in the words of Brumfit: "The most lasting impact of the "communicative" movement in language teaching may lie more in a reversal of traditional methodological emphases than in a reorganisation of syllabus objectives."

The first section is prefaced by an introduction which points out the parallelism in recent developments in linguistics and language teaching, the latest of which has been the parallel "reaction against the view of language as a set of structures... a reaction towards a view of language as communication, a view in which meaning and the uses to which language is put play a central part". This shift is exemplified in the extracts which follow, taken from papers by U.H. Hymes: On Communicative Competence, and M.A.K. Halliday: Towards a Sociological Semantics. Hymes argues for a redefinition of the Chomskian notion of competence in order to take account of sociocultural factors. He claims that grammatical competence is merely a part of a wider

communicative competence and it is here that he makes his much-quoted statement that, "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless." Halliday in his paper defines language as "meaning potential" and places the use of language firmly within the framework of social behaviour in general. The bulk of the extract given here is devoted to the establishing of a "semantic network". That is an account of the range of meaning potentials in a given situation which "relate upwards.. to categories of some general social theory or theory of behaviour, and downwards to the categories of linguistic form at the stratum of grammar." As the editors point out, it is in this downward relation that the link with language teaching becomes clear.

The content of this section, then, is both interesting and relevant. A welcome addition, however, would be a sample of work on Speech Acts and the related notions of locutionary and illocutionary force. This is an omission which is felt within the context of this volume, as several subsequent papers assume an acquaintance with these concepts.

The second section looks at some of the discussions of the possible applications of linguistic insights to language teaching and to syllabus design in particular. The section heading could, perhaps, be a little more explicit on this point. With one exception, mentioned below, the editors' introduction does a good job of putting these papers in context, pointing out their historical impact and repercussions, and also suggesting the possibility of reconsiderations in the light of subsequent research and experience.

The section opens with two papers by Henry Widdowson. In the first, *Directions in the Teaching of Discourse*, Widdowson argues for the incorporation of discourse analysis into language teaching. A large part of the paper is taken up with the definition of the term during which he invokes and explains the by-now classic distinctions between text and discourse, cohesion and coherence. In the second paper, *The Deep Structure of Discourse and the Use of Translation*, he distinguishes three levels of equivalence between languages: Structural, semantic and pragmatic and, in speaking of the last two, makes appeal to the notion of universals. He goes on to claim that:

Scientific discourse expressed through one language, for example, is likely to be closer semantically and pragmatically to scientific discourse expressed in another than to different areas of discourse expressed in the same language.

This, of course, is one of the guiding ideas of the English for Special Purposes argument. It would have been helpful, therefore, if in their introduction the editors had pointed out more specifically how Widdowson's claims relate to ESP and to subsequent developments in materials production. Many of the ESP arguments are being questioned these days but, as the editors themselves point out, "...dissatisfaction cannot be expressed clearly... unless an understanding of the original arguments has been achieved."

The section continues with a paper by Christopher Candlin in which he stresses the inappropriacy of descriptive, sentence-based grammars for pedagogical purposes and argues the case for the organisation of pedagogical



language materials on a communicative basis. It concludes with two papers by D.A. Wilkins which follow appropriately on the heels of Candlin's argument. In the first, Grammatical Structural and Notional Syllabuses, Wilkins offers what the editors call "the standard opposition to grammatical syllabuses." He concludes by suggesting a possible framework for a notional syllabus based on two sets of categories: notions and communicative functions. In a second paper he discusses the production of such a syllabus for a specific crash-course situation.

The third section aims to give examples of how some of the previously discussed ideas have been implemented. Thus a paper by J.L.M. Trim defines the language teaching situation in Europe with reference to important socio-cultural factors and an article by J.A. van Ek exemplifies the next step. Here he starts from a diagnosis of behavioural objectives in order to arrive at a specification of potential linguistic realisations.

Important though these papers are, the issues are not thoroughly explored. We have taken a step into the area of needs analysis and it would therefore seem appropriate either to look at further examples of work in the field or, at least, to define its scope more explicitly in the introduction. Particularly, there is a need for a presentation of some of the theoretical discussion involved in the establishment of the parameters of such analysis. (Richerich, Munby, Mackay.)

The next article by J.P.B. Allen and H.G. Widdowson, Teaching the Communicative Use of English, deals with the practical aspects of the application of communicative theories of Language Teaching to the production of language teaching materials. They provide samples of materials suitable for students of English for science and technology. One point that does lack an echo from an opposite corner, though, is their argument in favour of the use of specially composed texts; there is a strong movement in language teaching which advocates the use of authentic materials.

In the last paper of this section Keith Morrow discusses the implications of communicative testing in terms of current concepts of validity and reliability. He argues for the use of performance-based tests and outlines possible solutions to the problems of extrapolation and assessment inherent in such tests. This is a polemic paper, as he points out, and doubtless there is more "blood to be spilt yet."

Section four opens with two classic papers advocating the reduction of teacher involvement in the classroom. Leonard Newmark writes against the structuralist and contrastive-analysis schools of language teaching and warns that abstraction of students from the context in which the language is used can constitute serious interference with the language learning process. At this point a paper on some aspect of Interlanguage theory (Corder, Selinker?) would have provided a useful illustration of how this view has been developed. In fact we move immediately to a more pragmatic level with Richard Allwright's paper which describes in detail a remedial course run at the University of Essex where a "minimal language teaching strategy" is actually put into action.

The last two papers by the editors as we have observed above, state the

case for paying greater attention to methodological considerations. Brumfit, with arguments similar to those expressed in interlanguage theory and "minimal language teaching strategy", advocates the use of a fluency-based rather than an accuracy based syllabus. He claims that the difficulty of specifying such a syllabus may not be as great as it appears but restricts himself here to a very general outline of a possible approach. Keith Johnson, reviewing the field, distinguishes two possible approaches to teaching:

In a synthetic approach the teacher isolates and orders the forms of the linguistic system, systematically presents them to the student one by one and thus incrementally builds up language competence. In analytic teaching it is the student who does the analysis from data presented to him in the form of natural chunks.

While agreeing that structural syllabuses are to be associated with the first approach he queries whether notional syllabuses automatically qualify for association with the second as the question of methodology remains a separate concern. The paper concludes with suggestions for the development of a communicative methodology which pose task-oriented teaching as a *sine qua non*.

Many questions are raised here and one hopes that readers will have acquired sufficient information to feel encouraged to weigh the issues themselves.

A final word on the appendix: This would be a useful teaching tool for a training course where the materials could be submitted for discussion and evaluation. It is difficult, in fact, to see their relevance outside the possibility of such discussion, as their respective communicative properties are variable.

In conclusion, the value of the book as a collection of seminal papers is indisputable. The fact that it gathers in one volume works from a variety of sources makes it a useful reference for those with knowledge of the issues discussed, as well as an introduction for those who are new to the field.

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