COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS*

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In this paper I want to look at our current model of language, and to see it in the context of our general understanding of human beings, as we view them in 1980. Such a discussion may make us feel pessimistic, because we shall realise how little we really know. But it should also make us feel optimistic, as we realise how much we succeed in doing in spite of not understanding fully what it is we do. There are grounds for pessimism of the intellect, but also for optimism of the will.

Attitudes to Language in the 1970s

The last ten years have seen a major shift in approaches to language which, for language teaching, may constitute a more genuine paradigm shift than anything that came in with transformational grammar. Let me start to consider it right outside language altogether. In a recent, much praised book Robert A. Hinde asked:

> Can we build a science, in the sense of an integrated body of knowledge, concerned with relationships between individuals? (Hinde, 1979:5)

Yet clearly if we are to gain any really helpful understanding of language as our students expect to use it, our understanding must be within the context of human relationships. Certainly, throughout the 1970s, linguists have found themselves increasingly concerned with the context of linguistic patterning. Syntactic studies lead inevitably into semantic studies, and semantic studies take us towards social context. It is by no means clear that linguistics can be, in any sense, an autonomous science; nor is it clear that its links are stronger with psychology than with sociology. Language studies have been caught up in the disputes between sociologists

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over the most appropriate conceptual frameworks to use, and the drift towards the social sciences is resulting in a re-appraisal of what it is for linguistics to be 'scientific', for the human sciences have conspicuously failed when they have attempted to take over models from the exact sciences.

This process is reflected in language teaching in increasing uncertainty over idealised models for teaching purposes. We are beginning to see such models as devices to assist the study of linguistics, but not necessarily as devices which are directly useful to learners of languages. We have less security, as a result of our more sophisticated understanding of variation in language. And to the extent that that makes us less dogmatic, it is good. It is bad, however, insofar as it leads us to abdicate our responsibility to provide a coherent and principled approach to language teaching.

The direct impact of the paradigm shift I have referred to has been to transfer our interest from language as a product, idealised into a discrete system, to language as a process of human interaction, a product of social and personal needs. This has led to two kinds of solution to teaching problems being proposed. One is to attempt to concentrate still on the idealised model of language, but to idealise in terms of the meanings being conveyed ('notions') or in terms of what is done with the language in interaction ('functions'). The other is to concentrate more fully on the strategies adopted by learners, as they make their language meaningful (one of the various competing definitions of 'discourse'). The latter approach, particularly, has considerable implications for teaching methodology. Both of these would claim that they are concerned with language as something we 'do' rather than something we 'have', but the former concerns itself with a description of the 'doings' and the latter with the process itself.

Attitudes to Language Teaching

This shift can be seen underlying a whole range of preoccupations of language teachers during the past decade. Our work is allegedly more learner-centred now. The basis of teaching languages for specific purposes (ESP) is a concern for what particular groups of students need to do with their language in order to perform social roles. Functional-notional syllabuses base their justification on their greater sensitivity to linguistic performance rather than linguistic knowledge. The idea of a Threshold Level assumes the need for a specified level of competence to enable students to perform certain activities in the language. Acquisition studies, and the concurrent development of theoretical constructs such as interlanguage, assume a concern for language in a condition of change, by definition unstable. And methodological discussion assumes, more frequently than in the past, that teachers should not control the linguistic output from students. Group-work, free discussion, role-play and simulation activities are expected in even the most traditional classes, and whole methodologies have been devoted to the

problem of increasing total commitment of learners so that the language comes from them and not from the teacher or textbook.

It would be unwise to over-emphasise the similarities between these various positions. However, they do share a number of features. They remove the focus from the teacher to the learner, and from the structure of the language to the process of linguistic interaction. Recently, however, a number of writers have expressed concern about a concentration on peripheral aspects of language learning at the expense of essential ones. It may not be sufficient to master the grammatical and phonological systems, but it is certainly necessary. The problem is that - given the enormous range and variability of linguistic performance - it is difficult to concentrate on these aspects without producing a model which is rigid and idealised and ignores precisely the variable features to which we have recently become sensitive. Do we have to choose between the communicative insights of the present and the grammatical insights of the past? It is not uncommon to assume that we do, but such an assumption is surely simplistic.

A Methodological Solution

One possible solution is to concentrate on methodology. This has several merits. It concentrates on something which is within the control of the teacher. It enables us to integrate insights deriving from experience of teaching with those that have a theoretical basis, and it is by definition functional, concerned with human activity, for methodology rests solely in the relationships between the inhabitants of classrooms. There is one other advantage which is worth mentioning, also, and that is that a concentration on methodology forces us to keep our theoretical constructs simple. Our categories are consumer-based and the consumer is the teacher, that is someone who has a job to do and is concerned with effective organisation rather than conceptual certainty. We need categories which make sense in practice, and which relate to the theory, but above all they must enable teacher education and teacher discussion and thinking to be efficient. Consequently, the constructs must combine practical applicability with clarity and conceptual simplicity.

One convenient way of doing this is to concentrate on the two goals of language teaching, accuracy and fluency. Wilga Rivers referred to esentially the same distinction, though in rather more behaviourist terms, when she talked about 'skill-getting' and 'skill-using' (Rivers, 1972:22). The traditional language classroom has assumed a static, idealised model of the language, and has taught this to students, concentrating on the accuracy of what they produce (in terms of grammar, pronunciation, lexical choice and appropriate stylistic choice). Although procedures which develop fluency have always occurred, particularly in reading and writing, they have often been subordinated to the need to develop accurate mastery of the code. Only occasionally, for example in relation to extensive reading and creative writing, has

fluency been given a specific place in teaching. It would not be unfair to summarise the assumptions of teachers and methodologists by saying that learners should first become accurate, usually bit by bit, in the code, and then learn to speed up, and to use skills in combination, so that they gradually become fluent. Fluency is thus conceived of as essentially a matter of speeding up what has already been mastered accurately.

But what if fluent language use is qualitatively different from self-consciously accurate use? If we see language use as essentially interactive, and the form as a product of that interactive process between speaker and speaker, or between writer and reader, then mastery of the formal possibilities in the abstract takes us only part of the way towards being fluent. We cannot operate with tokens that we are unaware of (so the teacher has an obligation to present the formal features of the language in as learnable a way as possible), but we must also have the opportunity to use those tokens in life-like interaction. And it is possible that the process of learning the tokens effectively will depend on our being able to experience using them fluently as well as having some awareness of accurate forms. Altogether, whether we take a strong fluency position, arguing that fluency work is necessary for most students to enable them to use the language accurately, or a weak position, arguing that even if they can acquire an accurate appreciation of the code by other means, such accuracy must be transformed to fluency by the use of appropriate methodological procedures, in either case we must allow fluency work an important position. Fluency work will occur only when students are using the language in the same way as they use their mother tongues - that is to say when they are using it as part of interaction, or as a means of conceptual clarification, without being concerned primarily with whether it fulfills externally-imposed formal requirements. Thus fluency work will be a side-product of small-group work, when discussion takes place in the target language, and will occur during improvisation in role-play exercises, whenever silent extensive reading is being performed, or writing for a purpose of realistic communication. It will be characterised by adaptation to the rapidly changing relationship between speakers, or between writer and reader, by negotiation of meaning, by reorganisation of assumptions, by errors in terms of formal accuracy which will only be corrected if they impair communicative efficiency, and by a concern with the message rather than the medium. The criteria for error will thus be difficult to ascertain, for they will vary according to the differences between participants, topic, setting and all the other constraints on the speech event. Any attempt to intervene and correct during fluency activities will therefore raise difficulties, for in normal life to concentrate on the medium at the expense of the message is usually rather rude. It is worth trying the experiment of correcting the pronunciation, or the grammar of a close relation for a few moments in order to appreciate the tension that can rapidly build up by consistently

breaking the discourse rule that we attend primarily to the message as co-operatively as we can.

Now it is of course true that teachers are paid partly to perform this kind of rudeness on students. Students rightly demand feedback, and there must be times when it is provided. And a great deal of this feedback must be concerned with the accuracy of a student's mastery of the code. But the code cannot be an end in itself, only a means to an end. Students need to know, and - even more - teachers need to know exactly when accuracy is being pursued and when fluency is. Accuracy work may be very traditional and formal, and will be corrected, by the teacher or by students themselves. It is an essential part of language learning. But it is not enough in itself, and a substantial part of class time needs to be devoted to fluency work in which students behave as nearly as they can in native-speaker-like ways in whatever dialect of English they have so far developed. Whether we class what they produce as dialect or interlanguage is unimportant; what is important is that we provide the experience of using their own forms in genuinely user-type situations, constrained only by the limitations imposed by the institutional setting of school.

By such fluency work each student's level is self-monitoring, the relationship between content and form is natural, language must be used functionally, by definition, and an opportunity is provided for the linguistic items which have been offered through formal teaching or informal exposure to be brought to the surface and to enter the student's active system. Further, the strategies which are already possessed by all who can speak one language can be utilised for another. If (and it is not yet clear to what extent this is a major problem) the strategies used turn out to be inappropriate for English, when subsequent work can help to remedy the deficiency. But the emphasis is on what students can do rather than on what they cannot, and the language they use proceeds from their needs, wishes and interests as far as possible in the school situation.

Finally, and not the least important point, an emphasis on fluency does not require totally new materials, nor total retraining of teachers, nor a fundamentally new kind of syllabus. It extends tendencies which have always been present in sensitive teaching, and invokes procedures which many teachers have been using for many years. Since the basic emphasis is on methodology, any teacher can immediately move towards a more communicative teaching by a process of self-examination and self-consciousness in relation to teaching for accuracy and teaching for fluency.

Language, Teaching, and Relationships

Teaching, I earlier maintained, is about relationships. So too, though

in a different way, is much language use. The language teacher must necessarily be responsive to these claims - and of course it is awareness of this need that has led to a great deal of contemporary work on 'whole-person' teaching. The biggest risk in a 'scientific' account of language learning is that it claims objective value as a basis for teaching, and foreign and second language teaching has suffered particularly from lack of an educational perspective. The main difficulty is that description is not the same thing as performance. As teachers we are concerned with helping learning, not with describing what happens when we learn. Description of course has a value to us, but it is not the same thing as what we do. Helping someone requires a complex combination of abilities, perhaps too subtle for analysis, and certainly dependent on the personalities involved. I have used the analogy with marriage before, but it is not inapt - if not pressed too far. There are sociological observations to be made about marriage, and there are genuine pieces of advice to be given about probable successes and failures in marriage - but we do not choose who to marry on the basis of sociological studies or predictions. We cannot allow theorising to become a substitute for the genuine relationship which develops between good teachers and their students, something which responds to the particularities of each situation, and not to the general trends which can be studied. A methodology of language teaching may be based on general principles, but any precise implementation of these principles must be the responsibility of the teacher and the students, for - because each human being is different - each class must be treated as a new group with needs and abilities which will never precisely reflect the needs and abilities of other groups. The teacher's responsibility is to develop a human relationship as fruitfully as possible, and to steer that relationship towards effective language learning. The successes of thousands of teachers show that this task, while demanding, is far from being impossible.

Teaching and Research

Seeing teaching as part of human relationships has a number of important implications for the language teaching profession. One minor one, which it is worth referring to at the outset, is that it makes us question the value of a heavy emphasis on testing. There is a role for testing in any educational system, for some device is necessary to relate educational work with the requirements of society outside the school. But such a relationship can be accommodated within a fairly limited system of tests. The model which has most heavily influenced methodological development in recent years, however, has been one based on the empirical sciences in which experimental work has been carried out and has been evaluated in as formal a way as possible. This has a number of disadvantages for language teaching. One is that it tends to place great emphasis on the easily measurable formal patterns of the language at the expense of the less measurable ability

to operate effectively. Even more important, it tends to devalue aspects of teaching which cannot be measurable because they are qualitative rather than quantitative and subjectively perceived rather than objectively. It is possible, indeed, that too much concern with easily measurable results, when we are dealing with a process which is complex, closely bound up with individual personalities, and long term, will damage the process of learning by its very presence. Language learning is certainly such a complex process. If its complexity means that typically learning is by slow accretion, with learners using different strategies at different times, operating different kinds of motivation at different times, and learning peripherally as well as centrally, holistically as well as sequentially, then the possibility of evaluating successful teaching in any simple way, even over the relatively short term, is greatly reduced. It may be worth asking ourselves how long a gap there may be between initial exposure to a particular linguistic item, and the ability to use it fluently - that is without thinking whenever the item is appropriate. Many text books, and a large number of tests, assume that use can follow teaching, sometimes in the same lesson, frequently in the same week. But, while it will differ considerably with different items, most teachers will agree that it is optimistic to expect real use of items 'taught' in less than six weeks or so, and often it will be substantially longer before items are fully internalised. And of course, even for native speakers there will be many linguistic items whose use is solely receptive. Even when fluency work enables students to use as fully as possible the systems of items they have learnt, the process of activation will be complicated and slow. Too much emphasis on pay-off through evaluation must be dangerous if we consider a model of language as a sequence of separable items as inappropriate.

There is a more important reason for considering teaching in its human aspects, and that is that it centres teaching on the classroom and the relationships that are found there. Now this is an area in which there can only be one expert: the teacher. Students are limited by only having had the experience of working as one person at language learning, while the teacher has had a close acquaintance with many learners. Researchers have studied and attempted to describe, but they have not, in their capacity as researchers, experienced directly the process of organising and interacting with a class. Only the teacher has both breadth and depth of experience in using the relationship between themselves and their students to promote effective learning. Only they are in a position to understand their students with any appreciation of their full complexity as human beings. There is, as all teachers know, a 'feel', a 'gut response', an 'intuition' which cannot be gainsaid when something is working particularly well - that is when the relationship is both positive in human terms and productive in educational ones. Such intuitions are subjective and are consequently risky; they may be misplaced. But they are not necessarily misplaced, and they reflect - more than anything we can measure precisely - an important aspect of successful teaching.

The point of all this discussion is that teaching is an activity with an expertise of its own. It cannot be encompassed within an expertise of psychology or linguistics or sociology, and nor will the descriptive procedures appropriate for those or other disciplines be appropriate for the investigation of teaching. The shift in emphasis in language study referred to in this paper reflects an attempt to renew the connection between theoretical linguistics and language behaviour. Teaching, also, needs to look at its relationship with research. If language teaching and language use are really as complex as everyone seems to agree, the relationships between theory and the practice of teaching must also be complex and indirect. Teachers are expert in a process. Theorists have something to contribute to our understanding of that process, but only teachers experience it directly. One of the features of the past decade has been too heavy a reliance on untried, and often insensitive theorising. What has been neglected is the relation with the practice of teaching. Any serious research programme for the next decade would do well to consider how sensitive, pragmatic responses to the need for language learning relate to current theories. We should, for example, look at the work of major writers like Harold Palmer, Michael West or Charles Fries in the light of our current preoccupations. We should, perhaps, reconsider some of the areas which have been for some time under a cloud. For example, if a notional syllabus is concerned with developing increasing sophistication with concepts, how does this relate to traditional concerns relating the teaching of language to the teaching of literature, or civilisation? What role should methodological devices like the use of translation play? Should we look again at the use of bilingual dictionaries, or the uses of wordlists? Above all, should we look more carefully at the role played by successful language teachers (judged both in terms of results and on the subjective opinions of colleagues and students) in relation to communicative principles? Sometimes, as one studies research reports and theoretical discussion, it appears that we have had syllabus-centred study, materials-centred study, student-centred study, but - with one or two conspicuous exceptions - scarcely any teacher-centred study. Methodology has not eliminated the teacher variable, but it has successfully - or rather unsuccessfully - ignored it.

We cannot escape a relationship with research, as teachers. Indeed, serious research is essential for our continued improvement. But we must be informed by it, not dictated to, and more researchers need to understand teaching from the inside. The outlook is good, in some ways better now than it was ten years ago, for we are less dogmatic now, and better informed. But there are some worrying tendencies to look for new truths. We are often apparently searching for a proven firmer truth about teaching - a new humanism if not a new scientism. But the search is misplaced because that truth is not there.

If teaching and language are about human relationships, then their processes will change as relationships change. There must be methodological principles, but they will be worked out in relation to individual classes and situations. In methodology, as in language, we must look for a process, not a product.

REFERENCES

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