

GROWING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS:
STEPS TO COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCEMary Finocchiaro
Violet Hoch LavendaRegents Publishing Company
1977

This workbook/textbook for students at an intermediate level of English displays some of the characteristics we have come to recognise in the numerous articles and books by Dr. Finocchiaro: clarity of design, humour and common sense. The book contains ample notes to the teacher and students, an index of units with their topics and structures, and an extensive vocabulary list at the end. The book's major flaw is, for me, a conceptual one which concerns the relationship between the content and the second half of the title. To oversimplify for the moment: how can a book claiming to develop communicative competence fill a large part of its pages with mechanical grammatical and lexical drills and exercises? However, let us first examine the book in some detail before pursuing this point.

Each unit follows the same basic design. Students are directed to think about and discuss a situation, which is presented to them in a few sentences, as the one below, from Unit XV:

"There are certain people we like to be with and others that we don't like to be with. What makes the difference to you? In this passage, the visitor liked the fact that his hostess was not apologetic all the time and that she didn't ask any unnecessary questions." (page 85)

The introduction is followed by a vocabulary list (glossed in English) of words and expressions which will appear in the text. The text itself is usually no more than three or four short paragraphs, usually narrative. It is to be used for reading and listening comprehension.

A series of exercises follows each text. The first exercise asks the student to select the most appropriate title for the text from four alternatives. Comprehension questions about the text follow, either in the form of identifying true and false statements, or writing short and then long answers to questions about the content.

There follows a vocabulary section, in which students may be asked to find synonyms and antonyms for words in the text, convert adjectives to adverbs and provide missing prepositions in sentences. Next comes a grammar section which contains substitution and conversion exercises.

After the grammar exercises, students are asked to look at a sequential series of drawings, which again relate to the subject matter of the text presented at the beginning of the unit. They are directed to write two sentences describing each picture. Then, they are asked to write a brief summary of the text itself. In some units, this is followed by a cloze procedure exercise, also based on the original text.

In the final section of each unit, entitled "If There is Time", students are asked to learn dialogues related to the text, and to dramatise them. They may also be asked to write true sentences about themselves, and sometimes space is provided for them to write a dictation.

The book contains a total of thirty units, an admirable range of structures, and ample exercises. Generally, the texts and picture stories are entertaining and informative, and the exercises are carefully controlled to avoid possible semantic or structural ambiguities.

There are, however, a few editorial slips. One, on page 36, occurs where, above a picture of a woman sitting in a room, but at some distance from a table, the authors write

Example: The woman is sitting at the table.

This observation would be trivial but for the fact that the exercise which follows is designed to practise the use of prepositions. Another slip occurs on page 29, in a substitution exercise dealing with object pronouns - to him, to her, to us, etc. The pattern sentence given is

It's no use to talk to him.

The usual form is surely

It's no use talking to him.

The "If There is Time" section in each unit suggests another possible flaw by its very title. The wealth of purely mechanical substitution and conversion exercises which appear in both the Vocabulary and Grammar sections (and I must admit that the distinction between these two sections is unclear to me, since in a Vocabulary section

(page 23) there is an exercise which instructs the students to change a list of adjectives to adverbs, and in a Grammar section (page 37) students are asked to change a list of verbs to nouns), are better relegated to the "If There is Time" classification, or left for homework. Conversely, in the "If There is Time" section most activities (dialogues, original sentences and so on) seem much more suitable for classroom use, and, incidentally, much more in keeping with the expressed aim of the book.

The "If There is Time" section itself is not entirely free of problems. On page x of the Introduction, teachers are told that students are not to memorise the dialogues before dramatising them; however, in the textbook itself, the instructions to the student read

Learn this dialogue. Dramatise it.

It appears to be incumbent upon the teacher to decide for himself the functional difference between "learn" and "memorise" as used in the context, and to explain it to his students.

Furthermore, the dialogues provided are not fully exploited. Here is an example from Unit III (page 19):

B. Learn this conversation. Dramatize it.

- Did you hear about Joe?
- No. What happened to him?
- He won the National Science Award.
- I'm glad. He spent a lot of time working in the science laboratory.

C. In B above, change Joe to Jane. Make all necessary changes.

Although there are opportunities later in the book for students to write their own dialogues, it appears wasteful not to do more with this one, and others like it, than to change the names and pronouns (especially in a book claiming to develop communicative competence). After all, the book is designed for use by intermediate students. The underlining in the dialogue is mine, and indicates where other possible substitutions could have been recommended.

The above criticisms may (and perhaps should) be regarded as minor: particularly if it is felt that the book serves its purpose well. It seems undeniable that a structurally oriented

book such as this serves a real purpose in teaching intermediate level students. My question is this: does it serve the purpose it sets for itself, namely "to help students develop communicative competence, the principal objective of language teaching programmes today" (page vi); that the majority of language teaching programmes regard this as a principal objective is, in itself, dubious. Here in Mexico, for example, the principal objective of thousand of language teachers is to teach English: structures, words and basic language skills.

In fairness, it should be noted that most recent texts purporting to promote communicative competence have not, to this writer's satisfaction anyway, indicated how the content and arrangement of their exercises and activities actually do so. One suspects, however, that classroom practice which most closely approximates to the necessities of "real" communication - whatever that may be - might at least be a "step" in the right direction. Certain exigencies of real life can be duplicated in the classroom with an acceptable degree of verisimilitude. Some of these are: the necessity to narrate, to describe fluently; to greet, take leave, express sympathy, extend congratulations; to request, argue, command or complain; to rapidly adjust one's register and tone; to select one's vocabulary and phrases carefully, under pressure of time. Some, but in my opinion far too few of the activities suggested in this book are designed to give students practice in these types of oral production. In fact, the book seems more closely directed at developing the skills of reading and writing.

To the extent that the book works on vocabulary expansion and the manipulation of grammatical structures, it can be hoped, but not shown conclusively, that the students' accuracy and fluency will be improved in situations where real communication is necessary. But this is the same hope which authors of traditional grammars, authors of audio-lingual textbooks, and authors of structural-situational textbooks have always held.

The relationship between oral or written drilling and functional discourse remains unclear and tenuous.

That there is a relationship of some kind is confirmed by the experience of most teachers. But that mechanical drilling is a direct "step" to communicative competence is an assumption which neglects to examine the inconclusive results of teachers' experience and observations.

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