

FORUM

PETER HUBBARD REPLIES TO "MAS QUE  
COMUNICACION" BY FERNANDO CASTAÑOS

This is in response to Fernando Castaños' interesting and eloquently argued MEXTESOL presentation, which appeared as an article in the April 1984 issue of the Mextesol Journal.

First, let me say that I share his preoccupation with the unsystematic and sometimes unprincipled way in which EFL methodology has been developing recently. I also agree with some of his views about the defects of a purely functionalist view of language. I suggest that the word 'communicative' has been dangerously abused by text-book writers and methodologists; and, preferably, should not be used at all without precise definition. The word 'competence' has been subjected to considerable definition and redefinition since it was coined by Chomsky; and 'communicative competence', rightly, more so. (Munby 1978: 6-22)

However, I do not regard the communicative movement, if it can be so called, as a gigantic conspiracy; nor yet is it a hoax. Precise interpretation of theoretical principles into classroom practice is, admittedly, difficult and, at times, devious.

But some of Prof. Castaños' points need challenging.

First, the point, which I take to be fundamental, that language is more than communication; that language is not merely a shadow or reflection of something outside itself; that language is not necessarily socially determined; that language is not solely the product of a process of evolution, be this Lamarckian or Darwinian.

Language - and, I take it, we are talking about human lan-

guage, not animal language or computer language - is a product of the human mind. This is the phenomenon which linguists study. Human beings have evolved biologically and so has the human brain. There is overwhelming independent evidence to support the view that the human brain is specially equipped for acquiring language. Languages have evolved within societies of human beings and, to a very large extent, as far as one can determine, their evolution has paralleled that of their society. Again, within languages, there have evolved sub-languages, reflecting social class, educational background, geographical divisions and specialist fields. As to why Babel, the answer is clearly political. In a world where we seem farther away than ever from solving problems as fundamental as mutual destruction, it is hardly surprising that languages have failed to cross frontiers. But even then there are signs that they are doing so. To take one example, computer terminology is fast establishing itself, at a lexical level, all over the world. In doing so, it is overstepping the grammatical restrictions of its own host language, English. The reasons for this evolution are, I am sorry to say, purely functional: there are strong motives for people from different nations to communicate succinctly about computerization. And these needs breed utter impatience with political restrictions or nationalism.

That language is also a reflection of personal, social or national identity is undeniable. However, to argue that language should restrict itself in conformance with a particular social group is absurd. As Prof. Castaños clearly shows, individuals choose from one occasion to another to demonstrate which group they wish to identify with. This, to my mind, is clearly part of communication. And functionally-oriented linguists were, I think, the first to point this out.

I would also subscribe to the view that language shapes thought; and, to a lesser degree, that languages shape cultures. Here, one is involved in the familiar Sapir-Whorf controversy. But this is largely sophistry. As far as language teaching is concerned,

we already have serious motivation to cross cultural boundaries - albeit on our own terms - and individual languages will not be allowed to get in our way.

As to the argument related to the internal function of linguistic elements, here I must confess that I do not see the relevance of this to language teaching methodology. It is more than likely that I failed to understand the points being made here. They seemed to be suggesting that languages, so far from being socially or politically determined, may be linguistically determined. This is an interesting speculation. Could one argue, for instance, that Greek was such a powerful language in the ancient world that it was responsible for the enormous intellectual achievements in the fields of science, history, philosophy and the arts? (Here, we are back with Whorf again). And that such a powerful language would determine its own development, through its effect on the minds of its users? Or, indeed, that the language is using the speakers, rather than the other way round? However, I repeat that I do not see the relevance of such a notion on the methodology of teaching a language to people who wish to acquire or learn it.

To summarize my position, I do not totally deny the thesis that Castañós has established, that language is not solely communication. Language is a multifaceted phenomenon which may be studied from different angles. It may be studied with reference to its internal structure; or it may be studied from an external point of view in regard to its function. This does not exhaust all possibilities either. Which particular angle is chosen for study is a matter of choice on the part of the researcher. This fact, Halliday, not always the most lucid of writers, must be given credit for recognizing (1973: 53-54). What concerns us here is which viewpoint yields the most to language teachers or methodologists. Or whether more than one viewpoint should be adopted.

Castañós has raised an interesting, though at times subtle, argument against viewing language purely from the functional or communicative viewpoint; and then gone on to say that we should

therefore abandon the communicative approach to teaching languages. This seems to me a non sequitur.

Now to methodology itself.

"The Communicative Approach" is, I admit, a vague concept. What has emerged from communicative methodology, if anything, is a commitment to view the language to be taught from a wider perspective than before. Not only should we pay attention to the form of language and its literal meaning; but also to its use in a reasonably wide range of conventional contexts. This includes acknowledgement of the fact that language users vary their codes according to the situations in which they speak. The targeted cross-section of language aimed at is, admittedly, much more complicated and difficult to teach.

Up to now, what I have said refers to syllabus design. As far as techniques are concerned, there has been a stronger emphasis than before (note: this is not pure innovation) on role-play and simulation; and an attempt to force students into classroom situations where communication must take place through the target language, come what may. It is, I think, generally acknowledged that 90% of that communication is not genuine in the strict sense of the word. But serious attempts are made to engender the motivation necessary for students to communicate via the target language during precious class hours. Sometimes, as in the 'deep-end' approach, deliberate frustration is induced before feeding in the necessary linguistic means of expression.

The philosophy behind this methodology - and you may call it 'dogma' if you wish - is that teaching the form of language will not give the students practice in communicating; but giving them practice in communicating may teach them, eventually, the form.

Actually, neither extreme need be adhered to rigidly. Most teachers would agree that a variety of simultaneous approaches should be adopted: both inductive and deductive presentation of

form; and communicative and non-communicative student practice. In fact, this analysis barely skims the surface. There are many much more complex issues to be considered - individual learning styles, to mention just one.

The point is that language teaching methodology is not as naive as it has been made to seem by Fernando Castaños' article. Nor are professionals in the field so influenced by academic applied linguists. As Chomsky said,

I am frankly rather sceptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology. Certainly the teacher of language would do well to keep informed of progress and discussion in these fields.... Still, it is difficult to believe that either linguistics or psychology has achieved a level of theoretical understanding that might enable it to support a 'technology' of language teaching.  
(Chomsky 1966)

There is a healthy scepticism alive in the field of language teaching and a certain spirit of irreverance for what the 'experts' have to say.

Be that as it may, certain eruptions from the volcano of academic activity have been received with respect by these eternal sceptics. And the 'communicative approach' has had far more effect on them than anything since behaviourism/structuralism.

We respectfully wait for the next eruption.

#### References

- Chomsky, Noam. 1966. "Linguistic Theory" in Robert G. Mead, Jr. (ed) Language Teaching: Broader Contexts, Northeast Conference Reports



Halliday, M.A.K. 1973. Explorations in the Functions of Language.  
Edward Arnold.

Munby, John. 1978. Communicative Syllabus Design. Cambridge,  
England: Cambridge University Press.