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THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING: SOME IMPORTANT ASPECTS

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The past decade in the study and teaching of language — foreign languages (FL), English as a second language (ESL), and English as a foreign language (EFL) — has seen a shift away from perceiving language as 'code' (a linear sequence of structural elements) to perceiving language as the performance of communicative acts within social contexts. Up to the early 1970s language teaching was seen as a matter of exposing students to sequentially-graded grammatical structures (for example, the present continuous verb form, **I am walking** might be taught before the past form **I walked**) and invented language forms divorced from normal contexts (for example, Teacher: "Where is the book?" Response: "The book is on the desk.") with the intention of getting the student to internalise the language code. The ultimate hope was that the student would apply the code in communicating in actual situations.

However, the flaws in this approach are readily apparent: (1) the language to which the student is exposed is radically different in form and function from that which she/he is expected to produce; in fact, the "Where-is-the-book?-the-book-is-on-the-desk" kind of question-response is not 'real' language in the sense that it is only produced in the language classroom; (2) the structural approach assumes that the learner will somehow transform the input (the highly idiosyncratic, pedagogical version of the language being taught) into an appropriate output (the actual language needed for real communicative situations); and (3) there is no control over what grammatical form a student may choose to function meaningfully in a given social context. By the mid-1970s these and other perceived weaknesses in the structural approach convinced language specialists and curriculum planners that attempts should be made in the FL, ESL and EFL classroom to focus on language that would serve the individual in coping with the communicative needs that life in human society demands. In 1972, Dell Hymes provided a new term — **communicative competence** — which summed up well this new perspective. In his seminal article, "On Communicative Competence" Hymes pointed out that "a person who chooses occasions and sentences suitably, but is master only of fully grammatical sentences, is at best odd. Some occasions call for being appropriately ungrammatical" (p.277).

This article presents some of the areas involved in the communicative approach to English and language teaching and is directed to teachers and teacher trainers who are interested in FL, ESL and EFL methodology. Since such an overview can at best only be brief, a representative list of texts on the communicative approach to language teaching will be found in the Reference section.

Language Functions

When asked what is accomplished by speaking or writing, the average person will probably answer, "to transmit or communicate information." It is true, of course, that information is transmitted as one speaks and writes, but one finds during the course of a normal day that language which functions solely to communicate information occurs less than one might think. There are other, even more significant, ways that language serves human needs: to excite and enthuse; to direct and regulate others' behaviour; to soliloquize and think; to command others; to beseech; to insult and threaten; to promise; to 'let off steam'; to teach (only a part of this function involves the transmission of information); and so on. This list only scratches the surface of the range of uses to which humans put language. Furthermore, language is not used in isolation. It is used in settings and contexts that become an integral part of the communication. In fact, all of the various components that go into making up a communicative 'event' — the participants, the mode of communication (whether, for example, speech or writing is being used), topic, the context of the situation, and the function itself — become with the language employed a 'seamless whole' and in some linguists' eyes these components actually shape the language code.

As a way of understanding language functions better, two models are presented. The first, devised by Roman Jakobson (1960), suggests that when a key feature (small case letters) is focussed on in a communicative act, a particular function (block letters) emerges.

Jakobson's Model

The Addresser sends a Message to an Addressee. To be operative the Message requires a Context, seizable by the Addressee and capable of being verbalized, a Code, at least partially common to the Addresser and the Addressee, and Contact, a physical channel and psychological connection which enables the Addresser to engage in communication with the Addressee. When each of these six factors is highlighted, a corresponding function of language arises:

1. Addresser: EMOTIVE or expressive function (for example, "Bloody Hell!!").
2. Addressee: CONATIVE function; requires or requests the addressee to perform some action (for example, "Shut the window, please.").
3. Context: REFERENTIAL function; refers to the topic of the Message conveyed. Suggests cognitive, denotative aspects of human experience (for example, "I think it'll rain today.").
4. Message: POETIC function; centres on the message for its own sake (for example, children's rhymes).
5. Contact: PHATIC function: establishes the communication act (for example, "G'day matel.").
6. Code: METALINGUAL function; turns language back on itself (for example, 'noun', 'verb', "Let's talk about grammar," etc.).

Another view of language function comes from W. P. Robinson (1972, pp. 50-51) who, like Jakobson, lists a number of functions with foci on elements within the communicative act, but who extends the categories in the taxonomy. The following table represents an adapted and simplified form of Robinson's original model.

Robinson's Model

Functions	Manifestation	Prime focus of verbal act	General linguistic form	Examples	Has it worked?
Expressive (expression of affect)	Exclamations Swearing etc.	Addresser	Vocatives Swear words Terms of endearment	Oh my love! XXX Damn it!	Does the addresser feel better?
Encounter regulation	Greeting Leave-taking etc.	Addresser-Addressee interaction	Finite set of special words, noises & phrases Questions	G'day! Hi! Janel Ciao! What do you think?	Has contact been made? Attention attracted? Flow maintained? Satisfactory ending?
Aesthetics	Literature Drama Novel Rhetoric etc.	Message form	At the macro-level, above the sentence	Sonnets Tragedies Fables	Beautiful? Insightful? Moving?
Performative	Promising Betting etc.	Non-verbal accomplishment	Set of semantically - appropriate verbs used according to certain external conditions	I name this ship the QE2. I pronounce you man & wife. I'll bet you \$2	Has the intended act been performed?
Regulation of self: i)behaviour ii)affect	Internalised 'talking' Praying etc.	Addresser	Imperatives	Now, one teaspoon sugar. Pull yourself together	Is performance facilitated by talking? Is affective state changed or induced?
Regulation of others: i)behaviour ii)affect	Commands Requests Threats Jibes etc.	Addressee	Imperatives Closed questions Modal verbs etc.	Stop talking! Will you...? You must... You bludger! Puns etc.	Obedience obtained? Dis-suaded? Humiliated? Made to laugh?
Instruction	Teaching	Acquisition of new skills by addressee	Various	What is the capital of England? I want you to think about ...	Did someone learn?

Reference to non-linguistic world, involving discrimination, organisation, storage, transmission, instruction in spheres of knowledge: i) logic ii) science iii) ethics iv) metaphysics v) aesthetics	Stating Arguing Reporting Remembering Thinking Problem-solving Analysing Processing Synthesising	Correspondence of verbal act to non-verbal world	Declarative sentences	The cat is on the mat. If A, then B. Doggie will bite! All gone, Daddy.	Is the language true or false within the premises of discourse? Is the argument valid? Are the rules followed?
Inquiry	Questioning	Acquisition of knowledge for the addresser	Interrogative form	What is that all about?	Does the language serve to fill the appropriate gap in one's knowledge?

Speech Acts

The last column in the table above, "Has it worked?", is necessary as an evaluative category, since to have functional value a linguistic act must have an outcome. This generalization can be specified by saying that each and every time language is used, it is used with the intention of achieving some purpose which will effect a change in the language user's situation. The individual utterances performing a function — whether the utterances are spoken or written sentences, words, single syllables, etc. — are called **speech acts**. (Because speech acts suggest spoken performance the term **illocutionary act** is sometimes preferred). In many respects, 'speech acts' is a more powerful classification than are such traditional sentence categories as **indicative**, **interrogative** and **imperative**. For one thing, there is no necessary correspondence between type of sentence and the function it serves as in the following: indicative = propositions, interrogative = questions, and imperative = commands. For example, if an ad-

dresser wishes to cause an addressee to shut a window, one would expect an imperative sentence to be used; for example, "Shut the window!" However, the addresser might very well say, "My, it is certainly cold in here!" (indicative) or "Would you mind shutting the window?" (interrogative). This relationship between sentence and function can be indicated in the following chart:

In (a) one sentence (or in spoken form one utterance) can serve many functions according to its intention and the context in which it appears. For example, the sentence, "Is the dog in the house?" might signal a threat ("I'll let it bite you"), a request-command (Put the dog outside, Feed it, etc.), or it might be a referential question to which an answer is expected. Conversely, in (b) a particular function, say a request for salt, can be realized by a number of sentences (or utterances), for example, "Pass the salt, please," "Would you mind passing the salt?", "My food is quite bland," "Doesn't your food need salt?", "I would like the salt," "Did you forget to buy salt this week?" or even a finger pointed at the salt with appropriate verbal noises. By taking this perspective in language teaching, the teacher not only encourages the student to grasp the significance of language as **doing**, but also promotes in him/her the ability to develop a repertoire of language forms from which to select when attempting to communicate appropriately in various social contexts. (For a discussion of the role of semantic-based 'notions' in functional aspects of communicative teaching, see Wilkins, 1976).

Pragmatics

An area of linguistics that has recently commanded much attention, and one that will play an increasingly important role in communicative approaches to language teaching is **pragmatics**. In its simplest sense, pragmatics refers to the set of conditions by which language interaction operates. This includes such things as the addresser's and addressee's shared or common knowledge, what each assumes the other knows about

the communicative situation, how each goes about the task of constructing and reconstructing meaning as she/he attempts to make sense out of the other's vocalizations, the extra-linguistic rules under which certain speech acts are performed (for example, whether one has the authority to dub someone else 'Sir Knight'), the expectations an addressee has as to when and how a particular communicative act is performed, etc. We can see the importance of these pragmatic concerns for language students when we encounter an interchange like the one which follows (Williams, 1981):

Young son: Dad, dad. Do y'know what? Dad. Dad.

Father: Colin, I'm **trying** to read!

Young son: But Dad, I wasn't talking to you, I was just talking to myself.

Although neither speaker seems to attend to what the other says (the son's call for attention in the form of a question is met by a statement functioning as a command to be quiet, which in turn is responded to by a statement functioning as an excuse-apology), each is able to convey his intentions to the other quite clearly and in turn each is able to interpret these intentions appropriately. What enables father and son to do this is not merely a knowledge of the structural properties of their language, but their shared assumptions, past experiences, their ability to infer meaning, sensitivity to implications, etc. A regard for pragmatics, then, can lead teachers to an awareness that what speakers know about their language extends far beyond the code.

Text and Discourse

An area that has come under close scrutiny within the language-as-communication approach to FL, ESL and EFL teaching is **text** and **discourse**. Some linguists use the terms interchangeably, while others restrict text to formally-organized genres of language, and discourse to acts of language performance. In this sense, discourse can be seen as a 'stretch' of language, in which units like speech acts have more relevance than phrases, clauses and sentences, and text as operating at the 'supra-sentence' level. **Coherence** of text/discourse is achieved by encoding relationships between speech acts; **cohesion** is achieved by means of formal links between propositions, for example, **anaphora** (back-referencing as in "Tom liked **his** own work") and **cataphora** (forward-referencing as in "When **he** visited home, John got sick"). In conversational discourse, such devices as turn-taking, adjacency pairs and contrastive

stress are the means of effecting cohesion; for example, interactants must co-ordinate their interaction through turns which result in such patterns as question-answer, greeting-greeting, etc. and they can add special meaning to normally neutral messages with emphases like "I **told** you he would come!"

Speech and Writing

Whether language is spoken or written (that is, the mode of discourse) is significant for its functional use and the social relationships that exist within communicative settings. Obviously, when the mode of discourse between addresser and addressee is written, the lack of feedback signals, viz. eye contact, vocal noises and body language, causes the language to incline towards more formality than if the mode of discourse were spoken. Formality produces greater impersonality, which in turn means that writing is well-suited for explaining, describing, analysing, synthesising, etc.: therefore, topics like science, theology, philosophy, history, and grammar studies have developed almost exclusively through writing. Although in Europe writing was intended in its early stages to visualise spoken language, with the rise of literacy, mass education and printing, it has evolved as a separate, but parallel, communicative form. This line of development has allowed writing to be a suitable mode for the logical exposition of ideas in a form rather foreign to speech. Yet writing as a record of speech is still apparent, as is evidenced in cartoon comics and play scripts.

Register and Style

The language-as-communication perspective may strike language teachers who are attuned to structural approaches as giving heavy emphasis to language diversity. For example, in the discussion of speech acts above, it was implied that referentially-equivalent forms (that is, forms having the same meanings) performing the same or similar functions become differentiated by virtue of the context in which they appear. Thus, requesting someone to pass the salt in formal settings would result in "Would you mind passing the salt please?", whereas in less formal settings, where the addresser is more likely to know the addressee, one would expect the more direct, "Pass the salt, please" or even, "Salt, please, love." Language learners need to regard such variety as significant, since no user of language can use only one grammatically-correct form for all situations. Rather, function, topic, context, participants, etc. are elements

which dictate grammatical forms to be used. And, as the Hymes' quote cited earlier suggested, some occasions might even call for being appropriately ungrammatical.

Where function, participant relationship, topic, and mode of discourse are reflected in the pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary choice, grammatical forms used, etc. **register and style** are in evidence. Register is the variety of language according to its **use**. (Regional and social dialects, on the other hand, refer to language variety according to the **user**.) Thus, if one wished to advertise a rental unit in a daily newspaper, one would not write, "I've got a fully furnished unit in West Perth that you might like to rent. It's got two bedrooms and access to a swimming pool. It's located in Kings Park Road. By the way, you can park your car undercover. It'll cost you seventy-five dollars per week. If you're interested, ring me on 272 4051." Rather, with a full linguistic range at one's disposal, one would choose those forms incorporating the factors mentioned above and write, "West Perth Kings Pk-rd 2 brm f unit u/cover park swim pool \$75 272 4051." It can also be observed that the forms are sequenced as discourse that communicates the message efficiently: **where** the property is located; **what** it consists of; **how much** it costs; and **how it can be obtained** by the interested reader. The fact that the announcement appears in the rental property section of the newspaper means that the reader will have certain assumptions regarding the abbreviated language and will interpret the message accordingly.

Style can be seen narrowly as language variation that focusses on social relations within the communicative act. In this light, style deals with the degree of formality implicit in the situation. For example, as mentioned above, one might be inclined to use the indirect form, "Would you mind passing the salt?" in formal settings where the addressee is not well-known, while in more intimate settings where the addressee is known, one is likely to say, "Pass the salt, please." Martin Joos (1967) has suggested five language styles — Frozen, Formal, Consultative, Casual and Intimate — which reflect in the choices of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and intonation the social relationships that exist within a communicative setting.

Although no linguist has so far joined all these disparate, yet intriguing areas into a unified, coherent theory, they are collectively of interest to the language teacher who feels that language teaching should involve more than merely teaching the language code. Paul Goodman

has encapsulated well the communicative approach in his epigrammatic statement, "language is not a lifeless tool, but an act of coping" (1973, p. 49). Promoting the communicative use of language will indeed give language learners the ability and confidence to cope with any need and any situation.

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