Informal and formal approaches to communicative language teaching

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The main purpose of this article is to give some clarity to the use of the term 'communicative' in describing approaches to foreign or second language teaching. It is suggested that a distinction be drawn between 'informal' communicative approaches which promote second language 'acquisition', and 'formal' communicative approaches which promote 'learning'. This distinction between 'acquisition' and 'learning', which is taken from the work of Stephen Krashen, is carefully explained and the conditions for achieving both in the classroom considered. In addition it is suggested that there is a need actively to teach pupils how to make use of conscious 'learnt' knowledge in order to 'monitor' their performance in a second language appropriately.

There have been, perhaps, two major trends in second language teaching in the last ten years. The first concerns the recognition that successful language learning does not depend solely on good materials and good teaching, but also on the general and individual strategies employed by the learner. Learners are not computers which the teacher has to program; they actively construct their own syllabuses which influence (if not determine) the route that learning follows. The second trend concerns the nature of the linguistic descriptions which serve as the basis for language teaching approaches. There has been a shift from descriptions that view language as an independent and unitary system to descriptions that treat language as a form of social activity. In these descriptions the focus has shifted from what language 'is' to what language 'does' (e.g. Wilkins 1976). These two trends together contribute to what is now popularly called communicative language teaching.

The label 'communicative' has become a catchphrase in language teaching. Scarcely a text-book appears without the term in the title or tribute being paid to it in the book's preface. The term is applied to syllabus design, to teaching materials and to classroom practice itself (what I shall henceforth call 'methodology'). Furthermore the types of syllabus, materials and methodologies incorporating the 'communicative' label are often widely different. This suggests that the term has no clearly understood and received meaning when it is applied to language teaching. Rather it is used to cover a variety of approaches. The question which teachers often ask is 'What is the communicative approach?', but the question which needs to be asked is 'In what way is x approach a communicative one?'. In this article I wish to suggest a distinction between informal and formal communicative approaches which will, I hope, provide teachers with the means of answering the second question in an informed and systematic way.
An initial and central distinction to be drawn comes from the work that has been conducted into second language acquisition over the last decade, and in particular from the work of Stephen Krashen. Krashen (1977a) describes 'a monitor model of second language performance' in which 'acquisition' is distinguished from 'learning'. 'Acquisition' arises as the result of processes of 'creative construction' by which the learner internalizes the rules of the second language (L2) subconsciously; it takes place 'naturally' and is not amenable to instruction. In contrast, 'learning' is a conscious process that results from formal study and which can be influenced, therefore, by study. Krashen argues that adults as well as children are capable of both acquiring and learning a second language, and that both processes can occur inside and outside the classroom (1976). The knowledge that is derived from acquisition is used somewhat differently from that derived from learning: all the learner's use of the L2—spoken or written—is initiated by means of acquired knowledge, but in some contexts of use learnt knowledge may be called upon to monitor the utterances that are initiated from the store of acquired knowledge. Thus, for instance, in spontaneous conversation it is the learner's acquired knowledge that governs language use, but in written examinations all productions are likely to be inspected and monitored by reference to learnt knowledge. Krashen's distinction between learning and acquisition will be referred to throughout this article.

What Krashen is saying is that different kinds of communication call on different kinds of linguistic knowledge. From the point of view of language teaching methodology, then, the task can be seen as a three-fold one. First (and foremost) the student needs to acquire the L2; second he will probably need to learn the L2; third, he needs to develop strategies for making appropriate use of his learnt knowledge, i.e. he needs to monitor efficiently. All three—acquisition, learning, and monitoring—will usually be necessary if the student is to develop flexible communication skills in the L2.

One way of interpreting what is meant by 'communicative approaches to language teaching' is to ask what is needed to develop acquired and learnt knowledge, and effective monitoring skills. It is very unlikely that acquisition can be fostered by the same syllabus, materials, and methodology as learning, since the two processes—according to Krashen—entail different mental operations. On the contrary, it is fairly certain that different approaches will be required for developing the two different kinds of knowledge. Thus, for instance, the question that is being increasingly asked—Should we teach syntax? is a misguided one because it fails to give due regard to the kind of knowledge aimed at. The answer is both 'yes' and 'no': 'yes' if the target is learnt knowledge, and 'no' if the target is acquired knowledge. This will become clearer below when the criteria for classroom acquisition and learning are considered.

What are the criteria for the classroom acquisition of a second language? As acquisition is a natural process that occurs when the learner comes into contact with samples of the target language (provided, of course, that he or she has sufficient motivation to pay attention to these samples), the principal criterion must be the provision of a linguistic environment that corresponds as closely as possible to the authentic communicative settings in which the learner might find him or herself. To give this rather general statement greater precision, I shall examine three areas of language teaching.

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Syllabus design

What would a syllabus for language acquisition look like? Since the learner determines the route of acquisition, two possibilities seem to exist. The first is a syllabus which reflects the learner's own order of acquisition; that is, we should present language items in the same order in which the learner naturally acquires them. There are, however, some serious disadvantages to such a proposal: we have only a very incomplete picture of what the natural order of acquisition is, and in any case learners do not progress from no knowledge of a given grammatical form to a complete and accurate knowledge, but rather pass through a number of interim stages. Thus, progress can be observed in utterances which, if measured against the grammar of the native speaker, would constitute errors. Any syllabus based on the acquisitional order would have to be incomplete and would have to include steps that were 'ungrammatical'. The second possibility is that there should be no syllabus, but only a check-list which could provide the teacher with a means of recording the learner's progress. However, even a check-list is probably impractical, as different learners progress at different rates, thus necessitating individual records for each separate learner. Given these theoretical and practical difficulties, the soundest proposal at the present moment would be to do without a syllabus for acquisition.

Language teaching materials

Here a paradox is evident: if the materials are based on a description of what the learner is to acquire—and it does not matter whether this description is based on a theory of linguistic or of communicative competence—and are designed to focus on specific items of usage or use, then the conditions under which acquisition can take place will not have been met, for the environment will be 'unnatural' and the route a prescribed one. What is needed for acquisition is a linguistic environment which the learners themselves help to create and shape. Learners have to be given the opportunity to make their own subconscious selections of items to be acquired, based on what they individually find communicatively useful at each stage of their development. Communicative opportunity is both necessary and sufficient for acquisition to take place; the contribution of language teaching materials must be to provide this opportunity.

I suggest that materials can only be successfully used as a stimulus for acquisition if the following conditions are met:

1. The success of the enterprise generated by the materials must be demonstrated by the outcome and not by the process of the activity. (See Corder 1977.)
2. The focus of the enterprise must be on the message throughout, rather than on the channel, i.e. the speakers must be concerned with what they have to say rather than how they are going to say it.
3. There must be an 'information-gap', i.e. one speaker must not know what the other speaker is going to say, although at times he may be able to guess it.
4. The communication which the enterprise entails must be negotiated rather than predetermined. This will require the speakers to make adaptations both to what is said and to how it is said in the light of the feedback they receive.
5. The speakers involved should be allowed to use whatever resources—verbal and non-verbal—they possess, irrespective of whether these resources conform to normal native speaker behaviour or not.

A brief examination of many so-called 'communicative materials' will reveal that, with regard to acquisition at least, they fail to meet these five
conditions and hence, in this sense, are not communicative. For example, many of the exercises in *Starting Strategies* (Abbs and Freebairn, Longman, 1977), which states as its aim that the students should develop the ability to communicate intelligibly (an aim requiring *acquired* knowledge), fail to meet a single one of the conditions. Consider the following exercise:

Students work in pairs asking and giving their own names based on the model:
A: What’s your name?
B: Sally Baker. (see Teacher’s Book, p. 2)

The success of this exercise will lie in the process and not in the product, as in many cases the pupils will already know each other’s names. The focus is on the message: they have to copy the model provided. There may be no information gap, and certainly there will be no need for any negotiation either of content or of language. The resources for the enterprise are provided by the materials, rather than by the learner.

Consider now a ‘communicative activity’ from *Concept 7–9* (Wight, Norris and Worsley 1972) called symbol-drawing. In this the pupils work in pairs. One pupil has a card with a drawing on it which he attempts to describe to the other pupil, whose task is to draw it. In this activity it is the outcome rather than the process which is important, the focus is on the message throughout, there is an obvious information gap, negotiation will be required whenever the describer’s message is not clear or the drawer fails to understand, and the learners will need to call on a wide range of communicative resources. This is not to suggest that symbol-drawing is the total answer to the need for acquisitional materials. It is, doubtless, limited in the range of communicative events that it can stimulate. But it is capable of generating authentic communicative activity in the classroom.

**Methodology**

A methodology that will encourage acquisition must ensure that the learner is left free to find his own route; it must be facilitative rather than prescriptive. There are perhaps two crucial aspects of such a methodology. The first concerns the allocation of roles in the classroom: if the teacher operates as the ‘knower’ and the pupil as the ‘information-seeker’ (Corder 1977), which are the traditional classroom roles, then it is unlikely that the learner will have sufficient independence for acquisition to take place. Two alternatives offer themselves: the teacher can function as ‘onlooker’, having set up pair or group work; or the teacher can act as a ‘partner’ in much the same way as does the parent in first language acquisition. This latter role will probably be possible only when the teacher ‘performs’ rather than ‘teaches’; that is, he or she must participate in activity with the pupil as an equal partner and not as the one who supplies ‘correct behaviour’. The second major aspect of a communicative methodology is feedback. This has to be provided in such a way that learners can subconsciously test hypotheses about the target language. Traditional error-correction procedures, therefore, may be of limited value for acquisition. What may be more useful are the kinds of devices used by the parent in communication with the child: repetitions, expansions, extensions, prompting and modelling. These are not so much pedagogic devices as the natural tools of communication for maintaining the flow.

A traditional methodology based on separate stages for presentation, mechanical practice, and contextual practice will not meet the requirements of a communicative methodology for acquisition. Thus, even if the
materials are 'communicative', their value for acquisition will be lost if the teacher insists on a pedagogic role and on rigorous formal correction procedures. Brumfit (1978) has argued that 'fluency' (which stems from acquired rather than learnt knowledge) can best be fostered by a methodology in which pupils first 'communicate as far as possible with all available resources', followed by presentation and drilling if a 'need' is demonstrated. Such a methodology certainly offers opportunity for communication in its initial step. However, the subsequent steps assume, along with the traditional methodology which it reverses, that where a learner lacks resources they can be 'taught'. Krashen's model suggests otherwise.

There are few classrooms where communicative language teaching materials that meet the conditions listed above, and a methodology that consistently encourages authentic communication, can be regularly found. The reason is simple; the conditions call for the teacher to relinquish control of the teaching/learning process in favour of the pupil, and understandably few teachers are prepared to venture so far. One approach that comes close to meeting these conditions is Community Language Learning (see Stevick 1976), where what is said is always in the hands of the learner (although not necessarily how it is said). As regards acquisition, however, the vast majority of self-labelled 'communicative' courses do not adopt a truly 'communicative approach'. This is not to dismiss them, as they may well contribute usefully to learning or monitoring, but it casts doubts on some of the claims made on their behalf and suggests that acquisition is frequently neglected in favour of learning.

Learning

It will have been evident from the above account of communicative approaches that contribute to acquisition that language descriptions have no obvious part to play. Acquisition is dependent upon the process of communication, whereas linguistic descriptions provide an account of the product of communication. This is as true of descriptions of language use as it is of language usage (Widdowson 1978). Whether the target is linguistic competence or communicative competence, the description provides only a statement of what has to be learned. This can be specified in terms of grammatical items, language functions or discourse structures and strategies, but in each case what is provided is a statement of the knowledge the learner needs to assimilate rather than a statement about how this assimilation is to take place. What descriptions provide are the ends, not the means.

Language learning, unlike language acquisition, can be legitimately based upon the product of language descriptions. Learning assumes a body of knowledge to be systematically built up in such a way that the learner is aware of what he has learnt. This suggests the need for selection and sequencing of items in such a way as to facilitate the learning of the information; the information needs to be tailored to suit the individual student's capacity for learning. One way to achieve this is to prepare materials which isolate specific items of linguistic knowledge (in terms of structure or functions) and to make use of a methodology which ensures that these items are learnt by providing sufficient practice and feedback. Of crucial importance to the whole business of learning is the choice of language description. It is this that will determine whether the approach is 'communicative' or not.

It is therefore not surprising that at the centre of current debates about communicative language teaching is the choice of the descriptive frame-
work (Wilkins 1981 and Brumfit 1981) and the design of the syllabus. I do not intend to attempt any elaborate review of the various alternatives as it is not necessary for the purposes of this article. It would seem logical to assume that the framework which provides the clearest information about how language is used communicatively is the most satisfactory basis for constructing a syllabus. Discourse analysis, which provides information about the part that specific language forms play in the cohesion and coherence of spoken and written texts, would seem capable of providing descriptions that are more helpful than those offered by a grammar or a functional taxonomy. (However, it could be argued that at the moment discourse analysis promises more than it offers and that descriptions based on grammar are less fragmentary and hence more viable.)

It is a question not only of deciding on the most adequate description to serve as a basis for a communicative syllabus, but also of determining what parts of the total body of knowledge provided by the description will be required by individual learners. It is this fact and the subsequent emphasis placed on needs analysis as a preliminary to syllabus design and materials production that has been prominent in many 'communicative' approaches to syllabus design (Munby 1978). Such approaches are attempts to specify what individual learners might want to do when they communicate in the particular settings in which they will use the language. It is, however, important to remember that such approaches, based as they are on elaborate descriptions of a communicative product, are not likely to contribute directly to acquisition. They are 'communicative' only with regard to learning.

It needs to be emphasized that learnt knowledge, although it does not play a part in the initiation of utterances, is nevertheless of crucial importance in many kinds of language activity. Literacy skills, for instance, which are dependent on an existing body of acquired knowledge, cannot be 'picked up'. They require formal teaching. The ability to 'encode' utterances with a high level of explicitness (as is required in many decontextualized uses of language) cannot be developed without training and a conscious awareness of the person at whom the communication is directed. For example, when we write a formal letter, construct a logical argument, describe a scientific process, issue precise instructions about a course of action, fill in an application form, prepare the minutes of a meeting, give a lecture or write a report, we constantly need to vet the output provided by our acquired knowledge, rejecting and remodelling by means of our learnt knowledge. We need to know what is correct and incorrect, appropriate and inappropriate, coherent and incoherent. ESP or EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses can help to provide this relevant body of information and so contribute to those types of communication that rely on learnt knowledge.

However, where learners are beginners, possessing zero or minimal fluency in the target language, learning cannot substitute for acquisition in the development of communicative skills. For a start, as Krashen (1977b) has pointed out, many of the rules of English are so complex as to defy description and, therefore, to be almost 'unlearnable'. The constant backsliding of L2 learners, evident even after rigorous training in specific structures, demonstrates the limitations of approaches based on learning. Nor does it seem to make much difference if the rules are presented through language functions. As learnt knowledge can operate only on the output of acquired knowledge it is clear that learning must follow acquisition. Such
Monitoring

Widdowson’s principal argument—that the learner needs to learn how specific rules of discourse, which he is familiar with in the use of his mother tongue, are realized in English—can be seen as an argument for the importance of monitoring. The learner needs to be aware of how specific types of discourse can be encoded in English; he needs to learn by careful and deliberate study of discourse how linguistic forms of English realize textual meanings. The courses which this approach has generated have in common the constant directing of the learner’s attention to specific aspects of language use, e.g. how to make generalizations, how descriptions reflect their purposes, how hypotheses are expressed—see the English in Focus series (Allen and Widdowson (eds.) 1975-80) and Reading and Thinking in English (Moore (ed.) 1978-80). The authors want the learner to be conscious of the kinds of strategies and structures that contribute to an understanding of discourse. These materials are designed to require use of cognitive as well as linguistic skills. As such they take the whole notion of language learning to its logical conclusion. The learner becomes a better communicator by learning rules of use, and practising how to apply these in monitoring activities that are cognitively challenging.

All learners will need to know how to monitor. As some learners appear to be better monitors than others (Cohen and Robbins 1976), language instruction needs to adopt as one of its goals the improvement of monitoring skills. Monitoring exercises can be directed at the textual uses of language as in the courses mentioned above, or, more simply, they can be directed at improving the learner’s ability to eradicate his or her own lapses. Such exercises can be very simple (e.g. underlining errors in prepared texts), or much more complex, like many in the courses referred to above. As well as learning how to monitor, the learner needs to learn when to monitor; there is a time to monitor and a time not to. Monitoring is not a skill that comes automatically to many learners, as is shown in Krashen’s (1977a) account of ‘underusers’ and ‘overusers’. Part of learning a second language is learning how to monitor appropriately.

Informal and formal approaches

I began by suggesting that there have been two major trends in second language teaching in the last decade; one is the increasing emphasis on the learner’s role, and the other has resulted in attempts to devise rigorous descriptions of language as communicative activity. I then went on to suggest that the notion of ‘communicative language teaching’ is in need of clarification, and that an important clarifying distinction was that made by Krashen between acquisition and learning. It should now be fairly clear how the two trends relate to this distinction: on the one hand there is growing interest in how the learner gets to know a second language, both inside and outside classrooms; evidence of this interest is to be found in the accumulation of information about acquisition, its route, social and
psychological constraints on it, and the role of communicative activity in
the acquisition process. On the other hand, various attempts have been
made to describe the different pragmatic aspects of language. These have
contributed to our understanding of how a second language is learnt and
how we might assist the learning process.

In the light of these trends and the acquisition/learning distinction, it is
perhaps possible to identify two kinds of approach that might qualify as
‘communicative’.

1 Informal communicative approaches
The goal of such approaches is ‘acquisition’. The means used to reach this
goal are activities which are designed to engage the learner in the process of
actual communication in the classroom by emphasizing the use of language
as a means to some behavioural end (such as performing a task or
influencing the behaviour of others). An informal communicative
approach requires that the teacher abandon his or her traditional role as
the ‘knower’ and assume that of ‘onlooker’ or ‘performer’. The job of the
teacher is to manage or supervise activity rather than language. The ‘input’
will be determined by the natural processes of adaptation and negotiation
that all communicative enterprises generate. Informal communicative
approaches are concerned with the process of communication.

2 Formal communicative approaches
The target of formal communicative approaches is ‘learning’ and the
development of appropriate monitoring skills based on the learnt know-
ledge. To qualify as formally communicative, approaches must be based on
descriptions of the language as activity, making use either of taxonomies of
language functions, or of accounts of the structures and strategies of
discourse. Such approaches will follow traditional language teaching in
selecting and grading items of knowledge to form units that can be
comfortably learnt. Formal communicative approaches will differ from
traditional language teaching because they will emphasize the importance
of careful needs analysis as a basis for selection. Formal communicative
syllabuses are likely to be specific rather than general. But in either case
they are concerned with the product of communication.

Conclusion
The argument which I have pursued has been heavily reliant on Krashen’s
monitor theory. This I feel is justified; Stevick has described the
acquisition-learning distinction as ‘potentially the most fruitful concept for
language teachers that has come out of the linguistic sciences in my life
time’ (1980 p 270). There is, however, one important question concerning
Krashen’s model that needs to be addressed: that is, the question of
transfer. Krashen (1977b) makes it clear that in his opinion no transfer of
knowledge from the learned to the acquired store takes place, since both
derive from different experiences involving different inputs. Thus, no
matter how effectively the student learns a language, the learning will not
contribute to his acquired knowledge. However, such a view seems
counter-intuitive and contrary to the experience of many language learners
(Snvick 1980), who are able to put learnt knowledge to rapid use in sponta-
nceous conversation when the need arises. It may be that communicative
opportunity is necessary as the switch that starts the flow of learnt to
acquired knowledge. If transfer is possible in this way, the informal com-
unicative approaches serve a double function. By offering the oppor-
tunity to participate in authentic communication, they cater directly for

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acquisition, but by activating the switch they also provide the means for the transfer from learnt to acquired knowledge. If transfer does take place, it can also be argued that formal communicative approaches are not entirely irrelevant for acquisition, provided of course that opportunity for authentic communication is also available, either inside or outside the classroom.

It has perhaps not been fully faced in the language teaching profession, though it is powerful supported by linguistics, that the best way of getting to know a language is not necessarily through adaptation of the best language description. Traditionally language teaching, like all other kinds of teaching, has craved a ‘content’ and has looked to linguistics to provide it. But in communication, language is only a means to some end, seldom the end in itself (poetic uses of language excepted). There is a need now (long recognized by ‘fringe’ methodologies, such as CLL or the Silent Way) to rationalize the role of linguistics in language teaching by giving greater emphasis to the role of the learner, particularly when the target is that of acquiring a language. The notion of relevance in language teaching must be applied not only narrowly in determining the learner’s specific communicative needs with regard to some description of the target language, but also broadly, by deciding initially whether the target is to be acquisition or learning, or both.

Received June 1981

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