What is communicative?

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The term ‘communicative’ has been used to cover a wide variety of approaches and methodological procedures. But it cannot account for both drills on the one hand and genuinely communicative activities on the other. In this article the word ‘communicative’ and the nature of communication are examined and a distinction is drawn between ‘communicative’ and ‘non-communicative’ activities, each of which has its place in a balanced approach to language teaching.

The meaning of ‘communicative’

Everything is ‘communicative’ these days. Published courses almost exclusively advertise themselves as being the latest in ‘communicative methodology’, and as having ‘communication’ as their main aim. Convention papers deal with the ‘communicative use’ of language, and the teaching of English as communication has changed from the title of an important article in an earlier issue of *ELT Journal* (Widdowson 1972) into a received truth of the English language teaching profession. No self-respecting teacher, materials designer, or applied linguist would think of teaching English as anything else.

The teacher, however, might be excused the obvious confusion he or she will feel when faced with the many different types of activity that are apparently communicative, since they range from drills to simulations, from dialogues to communication games. Johnson (1980a) shows how drills can be made communicative, and with Morrow (1979) uses the concept of an information gap to create conditions for this. Byrne (1979: Chapter 5) gives examples of written ‘communication tasks’ and Littlewood (1981) calls the reconstructing of story sequences (where four students have four different pictures which they use to create a story without showing those pictures to each other) a ‘functional communication activity’. Abbs and Freebairn (1980a) say that their approach is communicative in their textbook *Developing Strategies*, and Geddes and McAlpin (1978) list a number of communication games.

The fact remains, though, that no description of what ‘communicative’ really means can possibly embrace the drill and the discussion. It cannot satisfactorily include a controlled information gap exercise (where one grammatical pattern is being repeatedly practised) and the language use that occurs when students reconstruct story sequences. We cannot say that a controlled response drill is in the same class as a ‘describe and draw’ game (see Geddes and McAlpin 1978). Students are asked to do very different things in these activities, so that drills and discussions, for example, have exactly opposite characteristics, as do controlled information gap exercises and ‘describe and draw’ games.

One of the causes of confusion has been, perhaps, the idea that teaching is either communicative or it isn’t; that it is, in a sense, all or nothing. Certainly both Brumfit (1978) and Johnson (1980b) seem to be searching for a communicative methodology described by Johnson as ‘the Deep End Strategy’, where students are put into a communicative situation (thrown in at the ‘deep end’) as a prelude to any instruction: all subsequent teaching is
based on whether they sink or swim. But the mistake of searching for a communicative methodology is perhaps to suppose that the end and the means of arriving there are necessarily the same. Despite various claims for various methods, we do not know how or why people learn languages, nor can we say with any absolute certainty which techniques are more or less successful. Students can learn to communicate in many different ways and as a result of many different techniques. Few would deny, for example, the usefulness of formal grammatical study, but no-one would claim that therein lies the secret of language learning. Choral repetition is a technique that is still widely used (and still appreciated by many beginning students), but we would find it difficult to fit it into an exclusively communicative methodology. Good simulations may well meet a desire for communicative learning, but a controlled dialogue involving the functions of asking for and giving opinions, for example, can hardly be called communicative if students are only asked to apply an identical formula to different information. There is, after all, nothing especially communicative about teaching functions! All these techniques may well have a place in the EFL classroom, but the suggestion that there is a communicative methodology cannot account for their different characteristics.

What I am suggesting is that the concept of 'communication' and 'communicative' should not be applied to a methodology. Either it will prohibit the use of many tried and tested techniques, or it will have to have a definition so broad as to be meaningless. Despite, for example, Munby (1978), syllabuses cannot be communicative either. They can only supply you with lists of language or behavioural objectives. Abbs and Freebairn (1980a) say that their book is based on 'notional and functional categories of language', and that 'the approach, therefore, is communicative—what students need to express through language is the most important criterion for selecting, grading and organizing the language presented in the course' (iv). However, we must question the 'communicativeness' of the book if it is merely the language content that gives it this label.

In the teaching and learning and methodology of a foreign language, it is only activities within the syllabus and methodology that can be classed as communicative. Whatever the aim of any technique, only an assessment of what students are asked to do when it is being used can lead us to categorize it in terms of its communicative merits. The main purpose of this article is to suggest criteria by which to arrive at such assessments. We can perhaps do this best by coming to some conclusions about the nature of communication in real life.

**Communication: what it involves**

Communication is, of course, extremely complex, but there are certain generalizations that can be made which have particular relevance for the learning and teaching of languages.

When two people are involved in conversation, we can be fairly certain that the one who is speaking wants to do so. 'Want' is used here in a general sense, since speaking may be forced on the participants in some way, but they must still feel a desire to speak, otherwise they would keep quiet. The speaker also has a purpose; this may be to disagree or to charm, to flatter or to be rude; to give information or to express pleasure. In each of these cases he or she is interested in conveying that purpose to the listener. In order to do this, a speaker selects from his or her language store the language that he or she thinks will best help to achieve the purpose. In an effective piece of communication (where both participants want the com-
munication to succeed), it is probable that the listener will want to listen to what the speaker says and will be particularly interested in the speaker’s purpose—in other words, in what the speaker is trying to say. Although the listener may have a clear idea of the direction the conversation will take, he or she will nevertheless have to be ready to process a great variety of language in order to understand efficiently what is being said.

These comments do not just apply to two participants in a conversation, however. They also apply to people writing and receiving letters and to lecturers giving talks. They apply to novelists and radio announcers (and their readers and listeners).

We can represent these generalizations in the following way:

![Fig. 1: The nature of communication](image)

(As the dotted lines indicate, the speaker can become the listener, and vice-versa.)

Closely allied to this general analysis is the concept of the information gap. Suppose, for example, that A (a man waiting for a bus) has the following conversation with B (a woman at the bus stop):

A: Excuse me, could you tell me the time?
B: Certainly. It’s three o’clock.

A may have many reasons for speaking. He may, for example, genuinely want to know the time. In this case he has not got information that B has (the time) and there is therefore a ‘gap’ in the information they possess. A’s conversation is designed to close that gap. If, however, A’s question is merely an excuse to get into conversation with the woman, there is still a gap, though of a different nature. Now it is A who has some information (e.g. his desire to engage B in conversation) which B does not possess.

In many really communicative activities where students have a communicative purpose, a gap of this kind will be necessary, for if there is no gap there is often no reason (or purpose) to communicate.

Communicative and non-communicative activities

We can now come to some conclusions about what characterizes a communicative activity. We can say that students must have a desire to communicate, and there must be some communicative purpose to their communication. This implies, of course, that the students’ attention will be focused on the content of what they are saying, rather than the form. They will use a wide variety of language, and the teacher will not intervene. (By ‘intervene’, I mean tell the students they have made mistakes in their English, correct their pronunciation, etc.) In a communicative activity we would not expect the materials which the students were using would control their language (e.g. restrict it to the use of one grammatical form, etc.).

These characteristics can apply at one end of a continuum. At the other end of the continuum lie ‘non-communicative’ activities. For non-communicative activities there will be no desire to communicate, nor will
students have a communicative purpose. Where students are involved in repetition or substitution drills, for example, they will be motivated not by a desire to achieve a communicative objective, but by the need to attain accuracy. The emphasis will be on the form of the language, not the content, the teacher will intervene to ensure accuracy, and the materials used will often be designed to concentrate on a particular item of language. We can represent this continuum in the following way:

We now have a basis for assessing some of the activities mentioned at the beginning of this article. A 'communicative drill' (even where it is based on an information gap, thus creating a communicative purpose and perhaps a desire to communicate) is a contradiction in terms, since it hardly meets our communicative criteria. Drills are, after all, form-based and deal with only one or two language items at a time. The purpose of a drill, after all, is largely manipulative, to encourage the accurate reproduction of prescribed language. And even where students are left to work in pairs, the teacher will probably check accuracy by getting feedback. However, such information gap based activity is perhaps not as extreme an example of the 'non-communicative' as a drill from Abbs and Freebairn (1980b) in which students are given a prompt sentence and have to respond with a set formula. The example is as follows:

You are at a party.
Meet John. He teaches at the High School.
How funny! I used to teach at the High School too. (37)

Students then have to respond in the same way to sentences such as 'And this is Mark. Mark has just got an old black Volkswagen.'

Morrow's (1979) information gap activity (where the student has a train timetable with various bits of information missing which can be completed only by getting the information from his or her partner without looking at the partner's timetable) is moving towards the 'communicative' end of the continuum, but still suffers from materials control.

The 'Describe and draw' game, however, does meet our communicative requirements. One student has a picture which his partner must reproduce without looking at the original. The only way to achieve this purpose is to use all and any of the language at the students' command. The same is true of the 'reconstructing a story sequence' activity; students will use a great variety of language as they find out what is in each other's pictures, and use this information to construct a story. Although the desire to communicate has been created artificially, the students do have some communicative purpose to achieve through the use of language. Many of Byrne's (1979) written communication activities meet our communicative requirements: students have to write job application letters, which are then
judged by other students and on the basis of which a candidate is chosen; students write individual news items which are then assembled into news broadcasts, etc.

A genuinely communicative activity, then, must comply with the characteristics I have detailed here. Few people, however, would suggest a language programme based exclusively on such activities (but see, for example, Allwright 1976). Neither should a methodology confine itself rigidly to activities that omit any possibility of formal and controlled language work. There is nothing intrinsically ‘wrong’ with the drill with an information gap, or the example above from Developing Strategies. But neither is communicative or sits comfortably in a communicative ‘approach’. The job of a syllabus- or course-designer is surely to work out an efficacious balance between non-communicative and communicative activities, and the many possibilities between these extremes, of which only a small number have been mentioned here. Language learning can then be judged not according to whether it is communicative, but according to the balance of activities that students are involved in.

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Notes
1 This point was made forcefully by Brumfit at the VIIth MEXTESOL Convention in Acapulco, Mexico (October 1980). The approach to teaching outlined in his 1978 article, however, does seem to suggest an overall strategy.
2 I am grateful to Jane Willis for comments on an earlier version of the nature of communication and the communication continuum.
3 It is not being suggested that Developing Strategies is in some ways a ‘bad’ book; merely that it is (like other popular textbooks which it has been chosen as an example of) often non-communicative.

References

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