

# **A critical look at the Communicative Approach (2)**

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*This (the second of two articles) looks at some of the pedagogical aspects of the Communicative Approach, including the idea of a 'semantic syllabus' and the question of 'authenticity' in materials and methodology. It is argued that the Communicative Approach generally presents an over-simplified and misleading account of these issues, and that a sensible approach to language teaching involves integrating semantic and formal syllabuses and combining authentic with specially-written teaching materials. It is also suggested that the Communicative Approach fails to recognize the crucial role of the mother tongue in foreign language learning.*

**Syllabus design**  
*The incompetent  
school-leaver*

'An English boy who has been through a good middle-class school in England can talk to a Frenchman, slowly and with difficulty, about female gardeners and aunts; conversation which, to a man possessed of neither, is liable to pall. Possibly, if he be a bright exception, he may be able to tell the time, or make a few guarded observations concerning the weather. No doubt he could repeat a goodly number of irregular verbs by heart; only, as a matter of fact, few foreigners care to listen to their own irregular verbs, recited by young Englishmen . . . And then, when the proud parent takes his son and heir to Dieppe merely to discover that the lad does not know enough to call a cab, he abuses not the system but the innocent victim.' (Jerome 1900).

Jerome K. Jerome was neither the first nor the last to observe that the language courses of his day were inefficient, or to propose ways of improving them. The learner who has studied the language for seven years, but who cannot ask for a glass of water, a cab, or a light for a cigarette, is regularly brought on to the stage to justify demands for a radical change in our approach to language teaching. Jerome's recommendations for reform were: more time, better qualified teachers, better coursebooks, a more serious attitude to language learning, and the application of common sense to education. These are modest, practical suggestions, but of course Jerome had no knowledge of linguistics. He would scarcely have expressed himself in such down-market terms if he had been writing today, with the benefit of an M.A. course in one of our better applied linguistics departments. Jerome would more probably have complained that his school-leaver knew grammar and words, but could not use them appropriately; could not express everyday notions, or perform basic communicative functions; lacked productive and receptive skills and strategies; was unable to negotiate meaning successfully; had learnt language on the level of usage rather than use; created text that was cohesive but not coherent; was not successful in relating code to context; and in general lacked communicative competence, which he could best acquire by following a good communicative course

based on a scientific needs analysis. On the whole, I think I prefer the original formulation.

**The communicative syllabus**

Defective language learning is often attributed to defective syllabus design: the student does not learn the language properly because we do not teach the right things, or because we organize what we teach in the wrong way. Recently the attention of linguists has been focused on meaning, and it has come to be widely believed that the secret of successful language teaching lies in incorporating meaning properly into our syllabuses. We can perhaps distinguish four common versions of this belief:

- a. 'Older language courses taught forms, but did not teach what the forms meant or how to use them. We now do this.'
- b. 'Older language courses taught one kind of meaning (that found in the grammar and dictionary), but did not teach another kind (the communicative value that utterances actually have in real-life exchanges). It is this second kind that we really need to teach.'
- c. 'Older language courses failed to teach students how to express or do certain things with language. We must incorporate these things (notions, functions, strategies) into our syllabuses.'
- d. 'Even if older structure-based language courses taught meanings as well as forms, they did so very untidily and inefficiently. A communicative syllabus approaches the teaching of meaning systematically.'

The first version (a) is no longer as common as it used to be, and it is not really worth wasting time on. I have discussed version (b) at length in a previous article (Swan 1985), in which I argue that the kind of meaning referred to ('rules of use') does not need to be taught, and cannot in any case be codified. Here I should like to deal principally with the issues raised by versions (c) and (d).

**Meaning in older courses**

Traditional structure-based courses have had a bad press. Current mythology notwithstanding, they did not systematically neglect the teaching of functions, notions, and skills. Older courses may indeed have failed to teach people to do some important things with language, and more modern materials, whose authors have access to checklists of communicative functions; have plugged a number of gaps. It is also true that many traditional courses adopted a very mechanical approach to drilling what was taught—that is to say, meaning was often neglected during the *practice* phase of a lesson. Nonetheless, it is quite false to represent older courses as concentrating throughout on form at the expense of meaning, or as failing to teach people to 'do things with language'. I have in front of me a copy of a typical structure-based beginners' course of the 1960s (Candlin 1968). The course has many of the typical defects of books of its generation (though these may seem greater to us, with our sharpened hindsight and different priorities, than they did to its users). However, by the end of Lesson 8, students have been shown perfectly adequate ways of performing the following language functions: greeting, enquiring about health, leave-taking, thanking, expressing regret, eliciting and giving information, offering, requesting goods and services, proffering, self-identification, asking for more precise information, confirming what has been said, exhortation, identifying and naming, describing, narrating, giving informal instructions, agreeing to carry out instructions, and enquiring about plans.

'Semantico-grammatical categories' are not neglected: students learn to talk about place and direction, to refer to states and processes, to describe past, present, and future events, to express concepts related to quantification, and so on. (In other words, they learn prepositions, verb tenses, singular and plural forms, etc. Structures have meanings, and traditional courses usually made a reasonable job of teaching them.) And of course the book provides a year's work on lexis—words and expressions are taught, and the notions associated with them are on the whole clearly demonstrated. Finally, the course (like many of its kind) uses the meaning category of *situation* as an organizing principle. Even if each lesson is designed to teach a specific structural point, it sets out at the same time to teach the language that is appropriate to a common situation. *Present-Day English* (like any book of its generation) does in fact have a quite clear and carefully worked out semantic syllabus. There are perhaps reasons why one might not wish to teach from this book, but it should not be accused of failing to deal properly with meaning.

*Putting meaning first*

For many people, the central idea in 'communicative' teaching is probably that of a 'semantic syllabus'. In a course based on a semantic syllabus, it is meanings rather than structures which are given priority, and which form the organizing principle or 'skeleton' of the textbook. Lessons deal with such matters as 'greeting', 'agreeing and disagreeing', 'comparison', 'warning', 'point of time', and so on. So we do not (for example) give a lesson on the comparative forms of adjectives, but on a notion such as that of relative size or degree, which may be expressed not only by using comparative adjectives but also in many other ways. In the bad old courses, where grammar was tidy and meanings untidy, students might learn comparative adjectives in June and the *as . . . as* structure the following February; they were never able to put together the various items they needed to express fully the notion in question. With a semantic syllabus, items which belong together semantically are taught together, even if they are structurally quite diverse.

The problem with this approach is obvious to anybody who has recently taught a beginners' class. Unfortunately, grammar has not become any easier to learn since the communicative revolution. If we set out to give a lesson to elementary students on the notion of relative degree, we are likely to run into difficulty straight away, for two reasons. First of all, the main syntactic patterns involved are complex (*as tall as*, *taller than*, *less tall than*, *not so/as tall as*, etc.), and if they are presented all together the students will probably mix them up, confusing *as* and *than* and so on. And secondly, it is not at all obvious to a learner how to form the comparatives of English adjectives: the rules are complicated, and can hardly be picked up in passing in the course of a notion-based lesson which introduces several other structural points at the same time. Experienced teachers often like to isolate and practise difficult structures (such as comparative adjectives) before combining them with others in realistic communicative work. They have excellent reasons for doing so.

Language is not *only* a set of formal systems, but it *is* a set of systems, and it is perverse not to focus on questions of form when this is desirable. Some points of grammar are difficult to learn, and need to be studied in isolation before students can do interesting things with them. It is no use making meaning tidy if grammar then becomes so untidy that it cannot be learnt properly. As Brumfit points out in his review of Wilkins's *Notional Syllabuses*,

the teaching of functions and notions cannot replace the teaching of grammar. 'The point about the grammatical system is that a limited and describable number of rules enable the learner to generate an enormous range of utterances which are usable, in combination with paralinguistic and semiotic systems, to express any function. To ask learners to learn a list instead of a system goes against everything we know about learning theory' (Brumfit 1978).

*Structural versus functional: a false dichotomy*

We really need to question the whole idea that one syllabus, whether structural or functional, should be 'privileged', acting as the framework on which a whole course is built. Language courses involve far too many components, and the relationships between the components are far too complex, for us to be able to subordinate everything to a tidy progression of structures, functions, notions, or anything else. When deciding what to teach to a particular group of learners, we need to take into consideration several different meaning categories and several different formal categories. We must make sure that our students are taught to operate key *functions* such as, for instance, greeting, agreeing, or warning; to talk about basic *notions* such as size, definiteness, texture or ways of moving; to communicate appropriately in specific *situations* (for instance in shops, on the telephone, at meetings); to discuss the *topics* which correspond to their main interests and needs (for example tourism, merchant banking, football, physics). At the same time, we shall need to draw up lists of *phonological* problems which will need attention; of high-priority *structures*, and of the *vocabulary* which our students will need to learn. In addition, we must think about performance as well as competence: we will need a syllabus of *skills*, to make sure that our students are trained to become fluent in whatever aspects of speaking, understanding, reading, and writing relate to their purposes.

Rather than taking either meanings or forms as our starting point, therefore, we really need to look at the language from two directions at once, asking both 'What words and structures are needed to express meaning X?' (semantic syllabuses) and 'What meanings do we need to teach for word Y or structure Z?' (formal syllabuses). At first sight, it might seem as if semantic syllabuses and formal syllabuses ought ultimately to cover the same ground (so that if we have one we can do without the other). After all, if we have listed the meanings we want our students to express, and worked out what structures, words, and expressions are used to convey these meanings, this should surely provide us with a list of all the forms we need to teach, and it ought therefore to be unnecessary to list the forms separately. It is important to realize that this is not the case.

First of all, semantic syllabuses tend to list only items that are specifically related to the functions or notions included in the syllabus. More 'general-purpose' items slip through the net. If we make a list of high-priority functions and notions and write down all the words and expressions that are needed to handle them, there is no guarantee that we will include, for instance, the words *umbrella*, *control*, *move* or *rough*. These words are, however, common and important, and will need to be included in most intermediate courses. To be sure of plugging gaps of this kind, we shall need to refer to a traditional lexical syllabus based on word-frequency. The same is true of structures. Grammar items that do not have an easily identifiable 'meaning' (such as points of word order) tend to get left out of notional syllabuses, though they may be of great importance for the correct learning of the language.

Secondly, and conversely, traditional structural/lexical syllabuses are not very good at catching sentence-length idioms and conventional expressions such as 'Can I just break in here?' or 'I'd like to make a reversed charge call'. They may also fail to pick up special uses of 'standard' structures which are important for the expression of certain functions: for instance, the English use of the co-ordinate structure in threats ('Do that again and I'm going home'). To be sure of getting such items into our teaching programme, we need to look at lists of functions and notions and their exponents.

It is, therefore, essential to consider both semantic and formal accounts of the language when deciding what to teach. Failure to do so will result in serious omissions on one side or the other. (There is a well known and deservedly popular 'communicative' beginners' course which gets through a whole year's work without teaching the names of the colours or the basic use of the verb *have*.) The real issue is not which syllabus to put first: it is how to integrate eight or so syllabuses (functional, notional, situational, topic, phonological, lexical, structural, skills) into a sensible teaching programme.

#### *Integrating semantic and formal syllabuses*

In discussions of communicative teaching, a good deal of confusion is caused by invalid generalizations. For instance, people often talk as if language courses had much the same shape at all levels from beginners' to advanced. In fact, the relative importance of the various syllabuses, and especially of the grammar component, varies crucially with level. It is fashionable to criticize old-style courses for being excessively concerned with teaching structure, and there is certainly some truth in the criticism. But it really applies only to lower-level courses (where grammar must in any case get a good deal of attention, even if this can easily go too far). At more advanced levels language textbooks have rarely given very much space to grammar: more typical concerns have traditionally been vocabulary-building, the teaching of reading and writing skills, literature and other 'cultural' matters, and the encouragement of discussion.

Equally, the role of 'grammar' in language courses is often discussed as if 'grammar' were one homogeneous kind of thing. In fact, 'grammar' is an umbrella term for a large number of separate or loosely related language systems, which are so varied in nature that it is pointless to talk as if they should all be approached in the same way. How we integrate the teaching of structure and meaning will depend to a great extent on the particular language items involved. Some structural points present difficulties of form as well as meaning (for example interrogative and negative structures; comparison of adjectives; word order in phrasal verbs). As I have already suggested, it may be best to deal with such problems of form *before* students do communicative work on notions or functions in which they will have to mix these structures with others. Other grammar points are less problematic, and can be taught simultaneously with work on a relevant notion or function. (For instance, students might learn to use *can* in the context of a lesson on offering, or requesting, or talking about ability, ease and difficulty.) Some functions and notions may be expressible entirely through structures which are already known: if students have learnt imperatives and simple *if*-clauses, and if they can make basic co-ordinate sentences, then they are already in a position to give warnings. Yet other functions and notions are expressed mainly through lexis, with no special grammatical

considerations of any importance (for instance greeting, leave-taking, thanking, speed, size).

How we organize a given lesson will therefore depend very much on the specific point we want to teach. A good language course is likely to include lessons which concentrate on particular structures, lessons which deal with areas of vocabulary, lessons on functions, situation-based lessons, pronunciation lessons, lessons on productive and receptive skills, and several other kinds of component. Many lessons will deal with more than one of these things at the same time. Designing a language course involves reconciling a large number of different and often conflicting priorities, and it is of little use to take one aspect of the language (structures, notions/functions, or anything else) and to use this systematically as a framework for the whole of one's teaching.

*The importance of vocabulary*

There is a certain air of unreality about the whole 'structural/notional' debate. Assertions which look plausible and persuasive when they are presented in general terms ('We should teach units of communication, not structures') tend to dissolve and become meaningless when one tries to apply them to specific cases. Part of the trouble is perhaps that pragmatics (the study of what we do with language) is grossly over-valued at the moment, in the same way as grammar has been over-valued in the past. The 'new toy' effect is leading us to look at everything in functional terms: we see the whole of our job as being to teach students to convey and elicit information, to describe, to define, to exercise and elicit social control, to express approval, make requests, establish rapport, warn, apologize, and the rest of it. It is important to remember two things. First of all, these functional categories are not themselves the names of things that have to be taught (though they may help to define how we *organize* what we teach). Students can already convey information, define, apologize and so on—what they need to learn is how to do these things *in English*. And secondly, when we have taught students what they need to know in order to carry out the main communicative functions, we *still* have most of the language left to teach. Students not only have to learn how information is conveyed or elicited, or how requests are made: they also have to learn the words and expressions which are used to refer to the things in the world they want to talk about, ask about or request. However good a lesson on the function of warning may be, it will not in itself enable students to say 'Look out—the top half of the ladder isn't properly fixed on'. Functions without lexis are no better than structures without lexis. And referential lexis is a vast field—it certainly makes up the bulk of the learning load in any general-purpose language course.

*Stereotyped and creative language*

An earlier linguistic school saw language use as being largely a matter of convention, involving a set of predictable responses to recurrent situations. Although this view of language is discredited, it is not so much wrong as only partially correct. A great deal of language does involve knowing what is conventionally said in familiar situations—interrupting, asking for a light, complimenting, leave-taking, buying stamps, correcting oneself and so on. This stereotyped, idiomatic side of language accounts for a substantial proportion of the things we say, and this is the area with which the Communicative Approach is perhaps mainly concerned, investigating the meanings we most often express and tabulating (in semantic syllabuses) the ways in which we conventionally express them. (For all its attention to

meaning, the Communicative Approach has a strong behaviourist streak.)

Not all language, of course, is stereotyped. Since Chomsky's ideas became widely known, we have become accustomed to seeing language as something that makes infinite (or at least indefinitely large) use of finite resources. As O'Neill points out in his article 'My guinea pig died with its legs crossed' (O'Neill 1977), most utterances are not conventional responses to familiar situations. Students need to learn to say new things as well as old things. A learner of English may need to be able to say 'Could you check the tyre pressures?'; but he or she may also find it necessary to say 'The car makes a funny noise every time I go round a left-hand bend', or 'I nearly ran over a policeman just by the place where we had that awful meal with your hairdresser's boyfriend'. Sentences like these are not predicted by any kind of semantic syllabus; they can be generated only by constructing sentences out of lexical and grammatical building blocks in accordance with the various rules of phrase and sentence construction.

Simplifying somewhat, one might say that there are two kinds of language: 'stereotyped' and 'creative'. Semantic syllabuses are needed to help us teach the first; only structural/lexical syllabuses will enable us to teach the second.

**Methodology**  
*The 'real-life' fallacy*

Teachers usually feel guilty about something: translating, or explaining grammar, or standing up in front of the class and behaving like teachers, or engaging in some other activity that is temporarily out of favour. Currently teachers feel guilty about not being communicative. Mechanical structure practice is out: it would be a brave trainee teacher who used a substitution table in his or her RSA practical exam.<sup>1</sup> Language work, we are told, should involve genuine exchanges, and classroom discourse should correspond as closely as possible to real-life use of language. Old-style courses, it appears, failed to take this into account. (At this point in the lecture the speaker usually does his 'Is that your nose?' number, where he reads aloud some appalling piece of pseudo-dialogue from a bad structure-based course and waits for the laughs.)

Of course one can hardly quarrel with the suggestion that classroom language should be as lifelike as possible. All other things being equal, authentic or natural-sounding dialogues are better models than artificial dialogues; it is good to demonstrate structures by using them as they are typically used in the outside world; writing and speaking practice should if possible involve genuine exchanges of information. The more we can (in Widdowson's eloquent formulation) 'contrive to make the language we present less of a contrivance', the better. And this is an area where the Communicative Approach has without question made an important contribution to language teaching. Whatever the defects of the communicative theory of language and syllabus design, the last fifteen years or so have seen enormous improvements in our methodology.

None the less, the classroom is not the outside world, and learning language is not the same as using language. A certain amount of artificiality is inseparable from the process of isolating and focusing on language items for study, and it is a serious mistake to condemn types of discourse typically found in the classroom because they do not share all the communicative features of other kinds of language use.

A common target for criticism is the use of questions to elicit feedback or to cue practice responses. If you say 'Is this my book?' or 'What am I doing?', it is objected that you are asking a question to which you know the

answer already; the response will not convey any information, and the conversation is therefore condemned as a piece of pseudo-communication which incidentally gives a misleading picture of how interrogatives are used in English. Now conversations of this kind may not be very interesting, and we may well be able to think of better ways of getting the responses we want, but it is not true that no communication is going on. The questions have the communicative value (common in classroom discourse) of eliciting feedback—of asking students to display knowledge of a piece of information; the answers show whether the student does in fact possess the knowledge in question. Students are always perfectly well aware of the illocutionary force of questions and answers in exchanges like these (they have been in classrooms before), and they are in no danger at all of going out of the classroom believing, for instance, that English-speaking people are always asking questions to which they already know the answers.

A great deal of learning takes place in settings which are remote from the situation where the skills or knowledge will ultimately be used. Kittens playing on a living-room carpet are learning aspects of hunting: stalking, hiding, pouncing, biting, reacting at speed. The fact that they are learning these things in the absence of any real-life prey does not seem to detract from the value of the practice that is going on. Again, in many kinds of learning there is an element of 'mechanical' repetition that makes the activity at times very different from the goal behaviour that is ultimately envisaged. A boy who takes up the violin may dream of one day playing the Beethoven violin concerto to a packed concert hall. But if he is to realize this aim, he is likely to spend much of his time in the intervening years working alone doing very 'uncommunicative' things: playing scales, practising studies, improving his bowing technique, gaining a mastery of positional playing, and so on. Somebody who wants to break the women's 1,500-metre record will train for a long time before her big race. But comparatively little of her training will involve running the full 1,500-metre distance at racing speed; and a lot of what she does (e.g. interval training, calisthenics) will seem artificial and remote from what she is training to do. Learning a language is not altogether the same thing as learning to play the violin, run races, or catch mice, and analogies can be dangerous. However, it should be clear that effective learning can involve various kinds of 'distancing' from the real-life behaviour that is its goal. We do not therefore need to feel that there is anything wrong if, among our battery of teaching activities, we include some (repetition, rote learning, translation, structural drilling) which seem to have no immediate 'communicative' value. If *all* our exercises are of this kind, of course, it is another matter.

*Communicative  
practice and  
'information gap'*

I have suggested that methodology is perhaps the area where the Communicative Approach has done most to improve our teaching. It is surprising, however, how often 'communicative' courses achieve the appearance of communication without the reality. A basic concept in contemporary methodology is that of 'information gap'. When one student talks to another, we feel that it is important that new information should be transmitted across the 'gap' between them. To this end, ingenious exercises are devised in which half the class are provided with data to which the other half do not have access; those who lack the information then have to obtain it by using language in an appropriate way. I do not wish to belittle the value of such exercises; the technique is a powerful one, and (if used intelligently) can generate interesting, lively, and useful work. However,



the information conveyed should ideally have some relevance and interest for the students. If (to take a familiar example) I give a student a paper containing the times of trains from Manchester to Liverpool, purely so that he can pass on the information to another student who is not in Manchester and does not wish to go to Liverpool, then we are perhaps still some distance from genuine communication.

Perhaps no classroom exercises can completely achieve the spontaneity and naturalness of real exchanges, but there are certainly more realistic and interesting ways of organizing information-gap work than by working with 'imposed' information of this kind. Each individual in a class already possesses a vast private store of knowledge, opinions, and experience; and each individual has an imagination which is capable of creating whole scenarios at a moment's notice. Student X is probably the only person in the class to know the number of people in his family, the places he has travelled to, what he thinks of a film he has just seen, whether he is shy, whether he believes in God, and what is going on in his head while the class is doing an information-gap exercise. If student X can be persuaded to communicate some of these things to student Y—and this is not very difficult to arrange—then we have a basis for genuinely rich and productive language practice. In many contemporary language courses, communication of this 'personal' kind seems to be seriously under-exploited. The tendency to get students to exchange unmotivating, imposed information can even go to the extreme where much of their 'communication' is about the behaviour of the fictional characters in their coursebooks ('You are George—ask Mary what she does at Radio Rhubarb'). Role play and simulation are all very well in their places, but there are times when the same language practice can take place more interestingly and more directly if the students are simply asked to talk about themselves.

#### *Authentic materials*

Like many of the other issues in this field, the question of using authentic materials has become polarized into an opposition between a 'good' new approach and a 'bad' old approach. Many teachers nowadays probably feel, in a vague kind of way, that there is something basically unsatisfactory, or even wrong, about using scripted dialogues or specially written teaching texts. These are (we have been told) 'unnatural', and contrived; they tend to lack the discourse features of genuine text; they are fundamentally non-communicative (since they were written essentially to present language data rather than to convey information). Often, of course, this is all too true, and the general quality of published EFL dialogues and prose texts is a powerful argument for the increased use of authentic materials, whatever problems this may entail. However, it is important not to lose sight of the principles involved. There is nothing wrong in itself with creating special texts for specific purposes, and illustrating language use is a purpose like any other. People use deliberately simplified language when writing for children; when adapting scientific articles for laymen; when creating advertising copy; when writing leading articles in the popular press. Why not, then, when writing for foreign learners? Of course, we must be careful about quality: the language found in older-style 'John and Mary' type dialogues, or in some elementary story-lines, is so far removed from natural English that it does nobody any good. But this is an argument against bad scripted material, not against the use of scripted material in general.

In fact, it is obviously desirable to use both scripted and authentic material at different points in a language course for different reasons.

Scripted material is useful for presenting specific language items economically and effectively: the course designer has total control over the input, and can provide just the linguistic elements and contextual back-up he or she wishes, no more and no less. Authentic material, on the other hand, gives students a taste of 'real' language in use, and provides them with valid linguistic data for their unconscious acquisition processes to work on. If students are exposed only to scripted material, they will learn an impoverished version of the language, and will find it hard to come to terms with genuine discourse when they are exposed to it. If they are exposed only to authentic material, however, they are unlikely (in the time available for the average language course) to meet all the high-frequency items they need to learn. And elementary students, faced with authentic material that is not very carefully chosen, may find it so difficult that they get bogged down in a morass of unfamiliar lexis and idiom. Eddie Williams, in a recent article, draws attention to 'the paradox that the use of authentic text with learners often has an effect opposite to that intended; instead of helping the learner to read for the meaning of the message, an authentic text at too difficult a level of language forces the reader to focus upon the code' (Williams 1983).

**The mother tongue in  
foreign language  
learning**

As far as the British version of the Communicative Approach is concerned, students might as well not have mother tongues. Meanings, uses, and communication skills are treated as if they have to be learnt from scratch. Syllabus design takes no account of the fact that students might already possess some of the knowledge that is tabulated in a needs analysis. (Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design*, for instance (Munby 1978) makes no significant reference to the mother tongue at all.) Communicative methodology stresses the English-only approach to presentation and practice that is such a prominent feature of the British EFL tradition. (Perhaps because this has made it possible for us to teach English all over the world without the disagreeable necessity of having to learn other languages?)

This is a peculiar state of affairs. It is a matter of common experience that the mother tongue plays an important part in learning a foreign language. Students are always translating into and out of their own languages—and teachers are always telling them not to. Interlanguages notoriously contain errors which are caused by interference from the mother tongue; it is not always realized that a large proportion of the *correct* features in an interlanguage also contain a mother tongue element. In fact, if we did not keep making correspondences between foreign language items and mother tongue items, we would never learn foreign languages at all. Imagine having to ask whether *each* new French car one saw was called 'voiture', instead of just deciding that the foreign word was used in much the same way as 'car' and acting accordingly. Imagine starting to learn German without being able to make any unconscious assumptions about the grammar—for instance, that there are verbs and pronouns with similar meanings to our verbs and pronouns. When we set out to learn a new language, we automatically assume (until we have evidence to the contrary) that meanings and structures are going to be broadly similar to those in our own language. The strategy does not always work, of course—that is why languages are difficult to learn—and it breaks down quite often with languages unrelated to our own. But on balance this kind of 'equivalence assumption' puts us ahead of the game; it makes it possible for us to learn a

new language without at the same time returning to infancy and learning to categorize the world all over again.

If, then, the mother tongue is a central element in the process of learning a foreign language, why is it so conspicuously absent from the theory and methodology of the Communicative Approach? Why is so little attention paid, in this and other respects, to what learners already know? The Communicative Approach seems to have a two-stage approach to needs analysis:

- 1 find out what the learner needs to know;
- 2 teach it.

A more valid model, in my view, would have four stages:

- 1 find out what the learner needs to know;
- 2 find out what he or she knows already;
- 3 subtract the second from the first;
- 4 teach the remainder.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers do not always appreciate how much new approaches owe to speculation and theory, and how little they are based on proven facts. We actually know hardly anything about how languages are learnt, and as a result we are driven to rely, in our teaching, on a pre-scientific mixture of speculation, common sense, and the insights derived from experience. Like eighteenth-century doctors, we work largely by hunch, concealing our ignorance under a screen of pseudo-science and jargon. Speculation, common sense, and experience do not necessarily provide a bad basis to operate on, in the absence of anything better, and somehow our students do manage to learn languages. However, the lack of a solid empirical 'anchor' of established knowledge about language learning makes us very vulnerable to shifts in intellectual fashion. A novel piece of speculation can have an effect out of all proportion to its value, especially since the purveyors of new doctrines are rarely as humble or as tentative as the situation merits.

As the theoretical pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, each exaggeration is followed by its opposite. We realize that we have been translating too much, so translation is banned completely. Grammar explanations are seen to have been over-valued, so grammar explanations are swept away. Generation A spends half its time doing structure drills; for generation B, structure drills are anathema. Contrastive studies promise the moon and the stars; when the moon and the stars are slow to arrive, contrastive studies disappear from syllabus design as if they had never been. One approach fails to give sufficient importance to phonetics, or modal verbs, or functions; the next approach does nothing but phonetics, teaches modal verbs for thirty minutes a day, or announces that functions are more important than grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation put together. Arguments for the current view are invariably highly speculative, extremely plausible, and advanced with tenacious conviction; if one looks back fifteen years, one can see that the arguments for the previous approach (now totally discredited) were equally speculative, just as persuasive, and put forward with the same insistence that 'this time we've got it right'. Each time this happens, the poor language teacher is told to junk a large part of his or her repertoire of materials, activities, and methods (because these are no longer scientific) and to replace them by a gleaming new battery of up-to-date apparatus and techniques. The students, as a rule, learn about as much as before.

It is characteristic of the Communicative Approach to assess utterances not so much on the basis of their propositional meaning as in terms of their pragmatic value. We should perhaps apply this criterion to the Communicative Approach itself. As with a religion, it may be more sensible to ask, not 'Is it true?', but 'What good does it do?' This is not a difficult question to answer. The Communicative Approach has directed our attention to the importance of other aspects of language besides propositional meaning, and helped us to analyse and teach the language of interaction. At the same time, it has encouraged a methodology which relies less on mechanical teacher-centered practice and more on the simulation of real-life exchanges. All this is very valuable, and even if (as with religions) there is a good deal of confusion on the theoretical side, it is difficult not to feel that we are teaching better than we used to. By and large, we have probably gained more than we have lost from the Communicative Approach.

In the same way, we shall probably benefit from the next language teaching revolution, especially if we can keep our heads, recognize dogma for what it is, and try out the new techniques without giving up useful older methods simply because they have been 'proved wrong'. (The characteristic sound of a new breakthrough in language teaching theory is a scream, a splash, and a strangled cry, as once again the baby is thrown out with the bathwater.) Above all, we must try not to expect too much. New insights can certainly help us to teach more systematically and effectively, but it is probably an illusion to expect any really striking progress in language teaching until we know a great deal more about how foreign languages are learnt. For the moment, talk of 'revolution' simply does the profession a disservice, raising hopes that cannot be fulfilled, and soliciting an investment of time and money which is out of all proportion to the return which can realistically be expected from the new methods. (It is a shock to realize that, after more than ten very expensive years of 'communicative' teaching, we cannot prove that a single student has a more effective command of English than if he or she had learnt the language by different methods twenty years earlier. Our research depends to an uncomfortable degree on faith.) The Communicative Approach, whatever its virtues, is not really in any sense a revolution. In retrospect, it is likely to be seen as little more than an interesting ripple on the surface of twentieth-century language teaching.

*Received June 1984*

#### Notes

1 The examination leading to the Royal Society of Arts Diploma in TEFL.

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