

A critical look at the Communicative Approach (1)

Michael Swan

This (the first of two articles) examines some of the more theoretical ideas underlying the 'Communicative Approach'. These include the belief that we should teach 'use' as well as 'meaning', and some attitudes regarding the teaching of 'skills' and 'strategies'. A second article will deal with more pedagogical aspects of the approach, especially the idea of a 'semantic syllabus' and the question of 'authenticity' in materials and methodology. In both articles, it is argued that there is serious confusion in the communicative view of these matters. In particular, the Communicative Approach fails to take account of the knowledge and skills which language students bring with them from their mother tongue and their experience of the world.

Introduction

There is nothing so creative as a good dogma. During the last few years, under the influence of the 'Communicative Approach', language teaching seems to have made great progress. Syllabus design has become a good deal more sophisticated, and we are able to give our students a better and more complete picture than before of how language is used. In methodology, the change has been dramatic. The boring and mechanical exercise types which were so common ten or fifteen years ago have virtually disappeared, to be replaced by a splendid variety of exciting and engaging practice activities. All this is very positive, and it is not difficult to believe that such progress in course design has resulted in a real improvement in the speed and quality of language learning.

And yet ... A dogma remains a dogma, and in this respect the 'communicative revolution' is little different from its predecessors in the language teaching field. If one reads through the standard books and articles on the communicative teaching of English, one finds assertions about language use and language learning falling like leaves in autumn; facts, on the other hand, tend to be remarkably thin on the ground. Along with its many virtues, the Communicative Approach unfortunately has most of the typical vices of an intellectual revolution: it over-generalizes valid but limited insights until they become virtually meaningless; it makes exaggerated claims for the power and novelty of its doctrines; it misrepresents the currents of thought it has replaced; it is often characterized by serious intellectual confusion; it is choked with jargon.

In this article I propose to look critically at certain concepts which form part of the theoretical basis of the new orthodoxy, in an attempt to reduce the confusion which surrounds their use, and which unfortunately forms a serious obstacle to sensible communication in the field. I shall discuss in particular: (1) the idea of a 'double level of meaning' associated with such terms as 'rules of use' and 'rules of communication', and the related concept of 'appropriacy'; and (2) some confusions regarding 'skills' and 'strategies'.

In a later article, I shall deal with: (3) the idea of a semantic ('notional/functional') syllabus, and (4) the 'real life' fallacy in materials design and methodology.

I shall find it convenient to argue as if the Communicative Approach were a coherent and monolithic body of doctrine. This is, of course, far from being the case. Individual applied linguists and teacher trainers vary widely in their acceptance and interpretation of the different ideas which I shall discuss here. Some of the views quoted are becoming outmoded, and would not necessarily be defended today by their originators. But whatever their current status in academic circles, all of these ideas are familiar, widespread, and enormously influential among language teachers, and they merit serious scrutiny.

Meaning and use

A basic communicative doctrine is that earlier approaches to language teaching did not deal properly with meaning. According to the standard argument, it is not enough just to learn what is in the grammar and dictionary. There are (we are told) two levels of meaning in language: 'usage' and 'use', or 'signification' and 'value', or whatever. Traditional courses, it appears, taught one of these kinds of meaning but neglected the other.

One of the major reasons for questioning the adequacy of grammatical syllabuses lies in the fact that even when we have described the grammatical (and lexical) meaning of a sentence, we have not accounted for the way it is used as an utterance . . . Since those things that are not conveyed by the grammar are also understood, they too must be governed by 'rules' which are known to both speaker and hearer. People who speak the same language share not so much a *grammatical* competence as a *communicative* competence. Looked at in foreign language teaching terms, this means that the learner has to learn rules of communication as well as rules of grammar. (Wilkins 1976:10, 11)

This line of argument is often illustrated by instances of utterances which clearly have one kind of 'propositional' meaning and a different kind of 'function'. The coat example and the window example are popular. If you say 'Your coat's on the floor' to a child, you are probably telling him or her to pick it up; a person who says 'There's a window open' may really be asking for it to be closed. However, examples are not confined to requests masquerading as statements. All kinds of utterances, we are reminded, can express intentions which are not made explicit by the grammatical form in which the utterance is couched.

. . . this sentence (*The policeman is crossing the road*) might serve a number of communicative functions, depending on the contextual and/or situational circumstances in which it were used. Thus, it might take on the value of part of a commentary . . ., or it might serve as a warning or a threat, or some other act of communication. If it is the case that knowing a language means both knowing what *signification* sentences have as instances of language usage and what *value* they take on as instances of use, it seems clear that the teacher of language should be concerned with the teaching of both kinds of knowledge. (Widdowson 1978:19)

Put in general terms like this, the claim has a fine plausible ring to it—not least because of the impressive, if slightly confusing, terminology. There is of course nothing particularly novel about the two-level account of meaning

given here. It has long been recognized that most language items are multi-purpose tokens which take on their precise value from the context they are used in. What is perhaps more novel is the suggestion that the value of any utterance in a given situation can be specified by rules ('rules of communication' or 'rules of use'), and that it is our business to teach these rules to our students. Neither Wilkins nor Widdowson makes it clear what form such rules might take, and so it is a little difficult to deal adequately with the argument. However, let us try to see what might be involved in a concrete instance.

Widdowson asserts, effectively, that a student cannot properly interpret the utterance *The policeman is crossing the road* (or any other utterance, for that matter) if he knows only its propositional (structural and lexical) meaning. In order to grasp its real value in a specific situation, he must have learnt an additional rule about how the utterance can be used. Very well. For the sake of argument, let us imagine that an international team of burglars (Wilberforce, Gomez, Schmidt and Tanaka) are busy doing over a detached suburban house. Wilberforce is on watch. A policeman comes round the corner on the other side of the road. Wilberforce reports this to the others. Schmidt, who learnt his English from a communicatively-oriented multi-media course in a university applied linguistics department, interprets this as a warning and turns pale. Gomez and Tanaka, who followed a more traditional course, totally fail to grasp the illocutionary force of Wilberforce's remark. Believing him to be making a neutral comment on the external environment, they continue opening drawers. Suddenly Wilberforce blurts out, 'The policeman is crossing the road', and disappears through the back door, closely followed by Schmidt. Gomez and Tanaka move calmly to the wardrobe. They are caught and put away for five years. Two more victims of the structural syllabus.

Although the argument about rules of use leads to some very extraordinary conclusions when applied to particular cases, it occurs repeatedly in the literature of the Communicative Approach, and there is no doubt that we are intended to take it literally. Here is Widdowson again, this time talking about language production, rather than comprehension.

It is possible for someone to have learned a large number of sentence patterns and a large number of words which can fit into them without knowing how they are put to communicative use. (Widdowson 1978: 18, 19)

Well, no doubt this can happen. But is it necessarily or normally the case? One of the few things I retain from a term's study of a highly 'structural' Russian audio-lingual course is a pattern that goes something like this: *Vot moy nomer; vot moy dom; vot moy kniga*; and so on. I have done no Russian since, but I think I know when it is communicatively appropriate to say 'This is my room', 'This is my house', or 'This is my book' in that language, or most others. (And if I don't, it is not a communicative Russian course that I need; it is expert help of a rather different kind.)

Here is a final example of the 'usage/use' assertion; this time the term 'use potential' is introduced.

Not until he (the learner) has had experience of the language he is learning as use will he be able to recognize use potential. (Widdowson 1978:118)

I have just looked up the Swedish for 'Something is wrong with the gearbox'

in a motorist's phrase-book. It is (if my book is to be trusted) 'Någonting stämmer inte med växellåda'. I have no experience of Swedish 'as use'. However, I am prepared to hazard a guess that this expression's use potential is more likely to be realized in a garage than, for instance, in a doctor's surgery or a laundry (though of course one can never be certain about these things). I would also guess that this is true of the equivalent expression in Spanish, Tagalog, Melanesian pidgin, or any language whatever. And I know this, not because I am an exceptionally intuitive linguist, but because the fact in question is not just a fact about Swedish, or about language—it is a fact about the world, and the things we say about the world. A linguist may need, for his or her own purposes, to state explicitly that conversations about cars are likely to take place in garages, or that while 'The rain destroyed the crops' is a correct example of English usage, it is not an appropriate answer to the question, 'Where is the station?' But to suggest that this kind of information should form part of a foreign-language teaching syllabus is to misunderstand quite radically the distinction between thought and language.

Foreigners have mother tongues: they know as much as we do about how human beings communicate. The 'rules of use' that determine how we interpret utterances such as Widdowson's sentence about the policeman are mostly non-language-specific, and amount to little more than the operation of experience and common sense. The precise value of an utterance is given by the interaction of its structural and lexical meaning with the situation in which it is used. If you are burgling a house, a report of a policeman's approach naturally takes on the function of a threat or a warning—not because of any linguistic 'rule of communication' that can be applied to the utterance, but because policemen threaten the peace of mind of thieves. If you indicate that you are hungry, the words 'There's some stew in the fridge' are likely to constitute an offer, not because you have learnt a rule about the way these words can be used, but simply because the utterance most plausibly takes on that value in that situation.

Of course, cultures differ somewhat in their behaviour, and these differences are reflected in language. Although most utterances will retain their value across language boundaries (if correctly translated), problems will arise in specific and limited cases. For instance, there may be languages where all requests are marked as such (perhaps by a special particle or intonation pattern), so that a simple unmarked statement such as 'There's a window open' cannot in these languages function as a request. Speakers of such languages who study English (and English-speaking students of these languages) will need contrastive information about this particular point if they are to understand or speak correctly. Again, there are phrases and sentences in any language which conventionally carry intentional meanings that are not evident from their form. (English questions beginning 'Where's my . . .?' often function as demands; 'Look here!' is an expostulation; 'Why should I?' is not a simple request for information.) However, both the contrastive and the idiomatic aspects of language use have already received a good deal of attention in the past. Although the Communicative Approach may have some new information and insights to contribute (for instance about the language of social interaction), there is nothing here to justify the announcement that we need to adopt a whole new approach to the teaching of meaning. The argument about 'usage' and 'use', whatever value it may have for philosophers, has little relevance to foreign language teaching.

In a recent paper, Wilkins makes it clear that he has now come round to this kind of view.

It seems reasonable to assume that the relation of linguistic and pragmatic features that we have referred to here is characteristic of all languages. If we consider second language learners, therefore, it appears that although there will be values, attitudes, norms and even types of information that are culturally restricted and consequently not known to the learners, they will be aware that such a relation does exist in principle and that much in their previous experience will remain relevant in the second language. What the learners have to learn is less that there is a connection between language and context than the forms and meanings of the second language itself, together with whatever differences there are in the society that might affect the operation of the pragmatic element in communication. The learners will also know that if they can convey the meanings that they wish, even without making their intentions (i.e. illocutionary forces) explicit, the hearer has the capacity to make appropriate inferences . . . Provided one understands the meaning of the sentences, in the nature of things one has every chance of recognizing the speaker's intention. (Wilkins 1983:31)

Appropriacy The argument about a second level of meaning often surfaces in a slightly different form involving the concept of 'appropriacy'. This is the notion that our choice of language is crucially determined by the setting in which the language is used, the speaker's relationship with the listener, and similar matters. So important is this (we are often told) that appropriacy is the real goal of language teaching.

What we want to do through language is affected by (the) relationship of (the) speakers, setting etc. Grammar and lexis are only a small part of this. (Alexander 1977)

Structural dialogues lack communicative intent and you cannot identify what *communicative operations* the learner can engage in as a result of practice. The result of purely structural practice is the ability to produce a range of usages, but not the ability to use forms appropriately. This is true even in cases where it looks as if communication is being taught. For example, the exclamation form 'What a lovely day' might be covered. But the interest is in the form, not on when and where to use it or what you achieve by using it. (Scott 1981:70, 71)

Nobody would deny that there are language items that are appropriate only in certain situations, or (conversely) that there are situations in which only certain ways of expressing oneself are appropriate. English notoriously has a wealth of colloquial, slang, and taboo expressions, for instance, whose use is regulated by complex restrictions. In French, it is not easy to learn exactly whom to address by the second person singular. Getting people to do things for you is a delicate business in most cultures, and this tends to be reflected in the complexity of the relevant linguistic rules. Although there is nothing particularly controversial or novel about this, it is an area where the Communicative Approach (with its interest in the language of interaction) has contributed a good deal to the coverage of our teaching.

We must understand, however, that 'appropriacy' is one aspect among many—an important corner of linguistic description, but not by any means a feature of the language as a whole. 'Appropriacy' is not a new dimension

of meaning, to be added everywhere to lexical and structural meaning. It is a category that applies to certain items only: the same kind of thing as 'animate', 'countable', or 'transitive'. Items such as the imperative, *had better*, *bloody*, *I want*, *get* are marked for appropriacy in one way or the other; students have to be careful how they use them. But most items are not so marked. The past tense, for instance, or the words *table*, *design*, *blue*, *slowly*, *natural*, or the expression *to fill in a form*, or the sentence *She was born in 1940*—these items, and the vast majority of the other words, expressions, and sentences of the language, are unmarked for social or situational appropriacy of the kind under discussion. Consequently they cause the learner no special problems in this area.

What has happened here might be called the 'new toy' effect. A limited but valuable insight has been over-generalized, and is presented as if it applied to the whole of language and all of language teaching. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence in the communication sciences.

Interestingly, the discussion of appropriacy often obscures a perfectly valid point about the need for increased attention to the teaching of lexis.

We might begin our consideration of communicative language teaching . . . by looking at the discontent which teachers and applied linguists in the 1960s felt towards the kind of language teaching then predominant. This discontent is vividly expressed by Newmark . . . , who speaks of the 'structurally competent' student—the one, that is, who has developed the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences—yet who is unable to perform a simple communicative task. His example of such a task is 'asking for a light from a stranger'. Our structurally competent student might perform this task in a perfectly grammatical way by saying 'have you fire?' or 'do you have illumination' or 'are you a match's owner?' (Newmark's examples). Yet none of these ways—however grammatical they may be—would be used by the native speaker.

Most of us are familiar with this phenomenon of the structurally competent but communicatively incompetent student, and he bears striking witness to the truth of the one insight which, perhaps more than any other, has shaped recent trends in language teaching. This is the insight that the ability to manipulate the structures of the language correctly is only a part of what is involved in learning a language. There is a 'something else' that needs to be learned, and this 'something else' involves the ability to be appropriate, to know the right thing to say at the right time. 'There are', in Hymes's . . . words, 'rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless'. (Johnson 1981:1, 2)

Now the 'structurally competent but communicatively incompetent student' pictured here certainly has a problem, but it is quite unnecessary to invoke nebulous abstractions such as 'appropriacy' or 'rules of use' to account for it. Newmark's student doesn't know enough vocabulary. He may be structurally competent, but he has not been taught enough lexis. He is unaware of the exact range of meaning of the word *fire* (and perhaps thinks it can be used in all cases as an equivalent of *feu* or *Feuer*); he does not know the expression *a light*; he is (implausibly) confused about the meaning of *illumination*; he has not learnt the conventional phrase used for requesting a light. These are all lexical matters, and all the information the student lacks can be found in a respectable dictionary. It is perfectly true that 'the ability to manipulate the structures of the language correctly is only a part of what is involved in learning a language', and that there is a 'something

else' that needs to be learned. This something else, however, is primarily vocabulary, and the Communicative Approach can hardly take credit for the 'insight' that language contains words and phrases as well as structures.

The teaching of lexis has certainly been greatly improved by the recent concern with communicative competence. Teachers and course designers are more aware than before of the vast range of conventional and idiomatic expressions that have to be learnt if a student is to be able to perform ordinary communicative tasks (such as saying she has been cut off on the phone, asking a petrol pump attendant to check his tyre pressures, or indeed asking a stranger for a light). If we are now adopting a more informed and systematic approach to vocabulary teaching, that is all to the good. But we should understand clearly that this is what we are doing. Inappropriate references to appropriacy merely confuse the issue.

Skills and strategies

Discussion of language skills is no longer limited to a consideration of the four basic activities of reading, writing, understanding speech, and speaking. We are more inclined nowadays to think in terms of the various specific types of behaviour that occur when people are producing or understanding language for a particular purpose in a particular situation, and there has been something of a proliferation of sub-skills and strategies in recent teaching materials. As we have seen, it is often taken for granted that language learners cannot transfer communication skills from their mother tongues, and that these must be taught anew if the learners are to solve the 'problem of code and context correlation which lies at the heart of the communicative ability' (Widdowson 1978:87-8). If, for instance, there is a special 'comprehension skill' involved in interpreting messages, then surely (it is claimed) we had better teach this skill to our students. Otherwise they will 'comprehend' the words they 'hear' as examples of 'usage', but will fail to 'listen' and 'interpret' messages as instances of 'use'; they will respond to 'cohesion' but not to 'coherence', and so on (Widdowson 1978 *passim*). (One of the most bizarre features of current terminology is the deliberate use of pairs of virtually indistinguishable words to illustrate allegedly vital distinctions. Faced with terms like 'use' and 'usage' or 'cohesion' and 'coherence', one really finds it extraordinarily difficult to remember which is which.)

One of the comprehension skills which we now teach foreigners is that of predicting. It has been observed that native listeners/readers make all sorts of predictions about the nature of what they are about to hear or read, based on their knowledge of the subject, their familiarity with the speaker or writer, and other relevant features. Armed with this linguistic insight (and reluctant to believe that foreigners, too, can predict), we 'train' students in 'predictive strategies'. (For instance, we ask them to guess what is coming next and then let them see if they were right or wrong.) But I would suggest that if a foreigner knows something about the subject matter, and something about the speaker or writer, and if he knows enough of the language, then the foreigner is just as likely as the native speaker to predict what will be said. And if he predicts badly in a real-life comprehension task (classroom tasks are different), it can only be for one of two reasons. Either he lacks essential background knowledge (of the subject matter or the interactional context), or his command of the language is not good enough. In the one case he needs information, in the other he needs language lessons. In neither case does it make sense to talk about having to teach some kind of 'strategy'.

Another strategy which we are encouraged to teach is that of 'negotiating meaning'.

... speakers and writers perform an unconscious guessing game, because they have to establish what the agreed goals are (and this is not always clear, especially at the beginning of the conversation), as well as how much knowledge, or past experience, or understanding is shared. Thus if you ask me where I live, I may answer 'Britain' or 'London' or 'Surrey', or the name of the exact road, depending on why I think you asked me and how well I think you know south-east England. If I answer 'London' and you answer 'Whereabouts in London?' you are telling me that you want more specific information: we are negotiating about the purpose of the conversation, for you are showing that you really want to know, rather than just making a general social enquiry. ... It needs to be emphasized that everyone, in any language, needs to develop the skills of adjustment and negotiation. (Brumfit 1981:6, 7)

The point is not always made with such unpretentious clarity.

The shift towards a balance between form and function has had important methodological effects. If we see language as one part of wider social interaction and behaviour, deriving its communicative value from it, then we are compelled to introduce the *process* of interaction into the classroom. Learners now need to be trained and refined in the interpretive and expressive strategies of making sense amid a negotiable reality where the ground rules for understanding what partners mean are not pre-set entirely, nor unequivocal. In fact, learners have to come to cope with the essential problem of communication—to acquire the mutually negotiated and dynamic conventions which give value to formal signs. They have to learn how to agree conventions and procedures, for the interpretation of non-verbal and verbal language, with which they temporarily abide. (Candlin 1981:25)

Now this is very impressive, but it is simply not true. Language learners already know, in general, how to negotiate meaning. They have been doing it all their lives. What they do not know is what words are used to do it in a foreign language. They need lexical items, not skills: expressions like 'What do you mean by ...?', 'Look at it this way', 'Whereabouts do you mean?', 'I beg your pardon', or 'No, that's not what I'm trying to say'. Of course, there will be cases where the mother-tongue and the foreign language differ in the detailed approach used for negotiation. Where this happens, we need to know specifics—at what point, and for what purpose, does language X operate a different convention from language Y? (Perhaps in language X it is rude to ask somebody what she means, for instance.) Such specifics can be incorporated in teaching programmes for speakers or learners of language X, and this can be very valuable. But in general there is not the least need to teach our students 'the interpretive and expressive strategies of making sense amid a negotiable reality', even assuming that we were able to define what this involves. And to talk in these terms contributes nothing whatever to our understanding of how to teach foreign languages.

Guessing, too, is something which learners are apparently unable to do outside their mother tongue.

Clearly training in making intelligent guesses will play an important part in learning to understand the spoken form of a foreign language. (Brown 1977:162)

Assertions like this regularly pass unchallenged at conferences. As one reads the quotation, one is inclined to nod in automatic assent from force of habit: the sentiment is so familiar, so much part of the accepted orthodoxy. And yet, *why should* language students need training in making intelligent guesses? Are they less intelligent people, less good at guessing, than other groups in the population? Than language teachers, for instance? Is there any reason at all to suppose that they do not already possess this skill? And if they possess it, do we have any real evidence that they cannot in general apply it to learning a foreign language? And if we do not have such evidence, what are we doing setting out to teach people something they can do already? Most of the readers of this journal can probably understand the spoken form of a foreign language to some extent at least. How many of them have received systematic training in making intelligent guesses in the language in question?

It can happen, of course, that a learner has difficulty in transferring a skill from his or her mother tongue to the foreign language, especially in the early days of language learning. When this happens (as it can with comprehension skills), it *may* be worth giving specific practice in the 'blocked' skill in question. However, we need to know *why* the skill is blocked. If a learner seems to be understanding most of the words he or she hears but not really grasping the message (not seeing the wood for the trees), this may simply be due to anxiety. More often, perhaps, it is a matter of overload—the learner's command of the language is just fluent enough for him to decode the words, but this occupies all his faculties and he has no processing capacity to spare for 'interpreting' what he hears. The problem will go away with increased fluency; practice in 'global' comprehension may appear to go well and may increase the student's confidence, but I doubt whether a great deal can really be done to accelerate the natural progression of this aspect of learning. At higher levels, students may perform badly at classroom comprehension tasks (failing to make sense of texts that are well within their grasp) simply because of lack of interest; or because they have been trained to read classroom texts in such a different way from 'real life' texts that they are unable to regard them as pieces of communication. Here the problem is caused by poor methodology, and the solution involves changing what happens in the classroom, not what happens in the student. We cannot assume without further evidence that students lack comprehension strategies, simply because they have trouble jumping through the hoops that we set up for them.

This 'tabula rasa' attitude—the belief that students do not possess, or cannot transfer from their mother tongue, normal communication skills—is one of two complementary fallacies that characterize the Communicative Approach. The other is the 'whole-system' fallacy. This arises when the linguist, over-excited about his or her analysis of a piece of language or behaviour, sets out to teach everything that has been observed (often including the metalanguage used to describe the phenomena), without stopping to ask how much of the teaching is (a) new to the students and (b) relevant to their needs. Both fallacies are well illustrated in the following exercise (Figure 1). It will be observed: (a) that the purpose of the exercise, as stated, is to develop 'conversational strategies' (a therapeutic procedure which might seem more relevant to the teaching of psycho-social disorders than to language instruction); (b) that students are taught a piece of discourse analysis and its metalanguage; and (c) that the actual English language input seems to be the least important part of the exercise—it is in

Announce an intention, make a suggestion	Raise an objection	Counter the objection	Object again	Play down the argument	Agree
	<i>Where is it? Oh, in Essex. That's too far.</i>	<i>Oh, it's not far. You can be there in under an hour.</i>	<i>You don't know my parents. My dad would have a fit.</i>	<i>Pam, you're not a kid any more.</i>	<i>Well, I suppose I could try.</i>
<i>I'm going to a pop festival on Saturday. Do you fancy coming?</i>	→ → →			Say Goodbye	
	→ → → → → <i>I'll go and ask Mary, then.</i>				
	Agree.	Express enthusiasm. Fix a date.	Fix a precise time.	<i>All right. See you then.</i>	
	<i>Where is it? Oh, in Essex, that's not far. We can be there in under an hour.</i>	<i>That's great. Look at all these groups. When shall we meet?</i>	<i>Let's say on Sunday, 8 p.m.</i>	Make other suggestions.	Agree.
			<i>8 is too early. 9 would be better.</i>	<i>Right, see you at 9 then.</i>	

Figure 1: A 'discourse chain' from an experimental teaching unit 'I wanna have fun' by Ulrich Grewer and Terry Moston, first published in the *Protokoll of the 7th Meeting of the Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Englisch an Gesamtschulen: 'Teaching Kits, Discourse Structure and Exercise Typologies'*, Hessen State Institute for Teacher In-Service Training, Kassel-Fuldatal (1975); reprinted in Candlin (1981) and reproduced here by permission of the publisher.

fact by no means clear what *language* teaching is going on here, if any at all. Exercises like this treat the learner as a sort of linguistically gifted idiot—somebody who knows enough language to express the (quite complex) ideas involved, but who somehow cannot put the ideas together without help. Normal students, of course, have the opposite problem: they know what they want to say more often than they know how to say it.

Conclusion

I have argued that the 'communicative' theory of meaning and use, in so far as it makes sense, is largely irrelevant to foreign language teaching. These considerations may seem somewhat over-theoretical. 'After all,' it might be objected, 'what does it matter if the theory doesn't really stand up? Theories about language teaching never do. The important thing is that students should be exposed to appropriate samples of language and given relevant and motivating activities to help them learn. This is what the Communicative Approach does.' I think there is something in this, and I should certainly not wish to condemn the Communicative Approach out of hand because its philosophy is confused. No doubt its heart *is* in the right place, and in some ways it has done us a lot of good. But theoretical confusion can lead to practical inefficiency, and this can do a lot of harm, with time and effort being wasted on unprofitable activities while important priorities are ignored. In the second of these articles I shall focus more closely on these practical issues, considering in particular the validity of the 'notional-functional syllabus', the question of authentic materials, and the 'real life' fallacy in communicative methodology. □

Received March 1984

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The author

Michael Swan was formerly Principal of the Swan School of English, Oxford, and has taught English in Britain and France. For the last few years he has worked full-time as a writer of ELT materials, and has published several textbooks, mostly with Cambridge University Press.