

Learning Theory Bases of Communicative Methodology and the Notional/Functional Syllabus

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the learning theories that underlie the philosophy and practices known as communicative language teaching methodology. These theories are identified first as a reaction against the behavioristic learning theory of audiolingualism. Approaches to syllabus design based on both the "weak" version of communicative language teaching—learning to use the second language—and the "strong" version—using the second language to learn it—are examined. The application of cognitive theory to second language acquisition theory is dealt with. Finally, a range of approaches to systematizing classroom language learning are highlighted, from traditional grading by linguistic or functional considerations to systematic consciousness raising, task selection, text analysis, and learner training in autonomy and learning strategy development.

One reason that the sort of fluency- rather than accuracy-focused classroom activities that became more prominent in second language (L2) classrooms in the 1970s and 1980s are often characterized as communicative methodologies rather than as the communicative method is that, as noted by Richards and Rodgers, (1986) while the early British proponents of this movement had a well-articulated view of the nature of language they had much less to say about the nature of learning in general or of second language learning in particular. It is easier to pinpoint the learning theory that communicative methodologies were heading away from than to generalize about where they ended up.

Many applied linguists, textbook writers and language teaching specialists seemed to have heeded Newmark's call in 1966 to abandon behavioristic audiolingualism in which "the requirement that one specify the individual behaviors to be reinforced leads (apparently inevitably) to an artificial isolation of parts from wholes... designed to teach a set of specific 'habits' for the well-formation of utterances, abstracted from normal social context," and placed in a structurally graded setting carefully controlled

"to combat the intrusion of the learner's native language," (Newmark, 1966: 51, 53). Many agreed with Newmark's call for a new "what" in syllabus design and theory of language. But those such as Wilkins, who published *Notional Syllabuses* in 1976, who weren't sufficiently backed by an alternative learning theory or innovative communicative classroom techniques—a new "how"—didn't quite make the leap away from lists of discrete points that learners were to learn in sequence.

Newmark saw the "what" he hoped learners would achieve as far more than linguistic accuracy. Learning a second language would involve developing the same capacities that are eventually attained in L1 by a child who becomes "a skillful native speaker capable of playing a wide variety of social roles with the appropriate language for each," (Newmark, 1966: 53). In 1962 Hymes spoke of the "question of what a foreigner must learn about a group's verbal behavior in order to participate appropriately and effectively in <a speech community's> activities," (Hymes, 1962: 102). Canale and Swain (1981) and Canale (1983) expressed the goal of L2 learning as communicative competence; not just grammatical,

but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Others characterized this broader view of language learning as the need to teach not just "forms" but "meaning." Wilkins (1976) saw grammatical knowledge of forms as the means to select the appropriate linguistic exponents to express meaning by conveying "notions" and performing "functions." Newmark (1966 : 52) had said that "we want the learner to be able to use the language we teach him, and we want him to be able to extend his ability to new cases, to create new utterances that are appropriate to his needs as a language user." In 1976 Wilkins supposed that at least for "special course design," "the learner's language needs can be anticipated with a fair degree of accuracy," (Wilkins, 1976 : 69) (and to help satisfy the needs of the Council of Europe, he even went about specifying the learner's needs for a "global course"). By 1981 Wilkins was hedging his bets a bit more: "choices may reflect some analysis of known needs, but will more often depend upon more subjective judgments of what is likely to prove most useful to the learner," (Wilkins, Brumfit, and Paulston, 1981 : 99).

Note that Wilkins, in discussing how a syllabus designer can analyze needs and select appropriate goals and the means to achieve them, is revealing not just his orientation to language but his pedagogical orientation. These "needs" are defined in terms of terminal behaviors to be used outside of the classroom, not as language to aid meaningful communication in the classroom, and certainly do not include the affective needs which would later be addressed by the humanistic branches of communicative language teaching. And there is no hint that the learners could truly be involved in an ongoing process of defining their own needs. This is a far cry from the retrospective view of communicative language teaching offered by Candlin in 1990: "if you can't declare that a single sentence means a single thing, who is going to offer you the alternatives? Now, I as a teacher can, or the learners can, and there was a lot of literature which we tapped into in the early '70s about the need to enfranchise the learners to make their own meanings, which called for a shift of

balance of power within the classroom," (Candlin 1990 : 13).

Wilkins saw syllabus as "a list of items we wish to teach," (Johnson, 1981a : 2) and simply expanded the list beyond the usual structural selection. Wilkins says that "the process of selection which is inevitably involved in the construction of language teaching programmes will, in the case of a notional syllabus require not only a choice of the types of meaning to be learned (and when they should be learned), but also by what linguistic forms those meanings are to be expressed...<and> which linguistic form should be taught at a particular stage," (Wilkins, 1976 : 57). (Again, syllabus designer or teacher decides these "shoulds.") He claims that the "cyclically organized course" of the "notional syllabus" he proposes, in which "semantic, situational and grammatical features" are to be addressed at progressively higher levels, is significantly different from "a grammatical syllabus" which "consists of a linear progression of the most significant grammatical structures," (Wilkins, 1976 : 58). But he still assumes that if the teacher puts the learners through their paces, for example, in role plays which "will require the learner to attempt to exhibit the very language behaviour that we have defined as the principal objective of language learning," they will learn just what the teacher has decided they will learn, (Wilkins, 1976 : 81). Note that learners are to exhibit language behaviour, not understand, or choose, or create, or develop resources for language use. This is still "the additive and linear" approach in which each behavior to be taught must be specified, that Newmark decried, (Newmark, 1966 : 50).

Corder had already said back in 1967 that we must go beyond the traditional idea of syllabus as "the control of input," and also take into account the learner's "built-in syllabus" which determines what becomes "intake," (Corder, 1967 : 23-24). In 1973 Dakin looked to Piaget for "cognitive principles of learning," and found three: "1. The need for experience, 2. The twin processes of assimilation and accommodation, 3. Developmental stages." Dakin says "Piaget suggests that, in the case of the intellectual development of the child, the process of accommo-

dation is determined not by what we may choose to teach, but by what he is capable of learning at a particular point. The child has, so to speak, his own inner syllabus, which, given experience and encouragement, will lead him through successive developmental stages," (Dakin, 1973 : 13). Dakin and Corder both quote Von Humboldt, Corder's translation worded as, "We cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way," (Corder, 1967 : 27). Contrast this with Wilkins: "We can keep within the basic philosophy of the notional approach, while...at the same time we will ensure that the grammar of the language is systematically acquired," (Wilkins, 1976 : 69). Wilkins seems to be coming from a traditional view of information being transmitted from teacher to student, rather than from the view of interlanguage that was developing around Wilkins, in which learners are said to acquire a language through the systematic evolution of non-target varieties of a language, guided by an LAD, a Language Acquisition Device, or perhaps through a process of hypothesis-testing. Whatever details of learning theory were to be worked out, more and more L2 educators were admitting that linear "teaching" of discrete grammar points does not for most learners result in accurate production of those points in spontaneous speech, let alone result in communicative competence. Why should the results of teaching discrete notional or functional points be any different?

Howatt speaks of a weak and a strong version of communicative language teaching: "If the former could be described as 'learning to use' English, the latter entails 'using English to learn it,'" (Howatt, 1984 : 279). This "using English to learn it" is the "experience" which Dakin advocated in 1973. But Wilkin's ideas on notional-functional syllabuses stayed within the weak version. He says: "Leaving the question of the learner's motivation aside, it is difficult to argue that language needs to be associated with actual communication from the beginning of the learning process" (Wilkins, 1976 : 69). But this is exactly what Prabhu would be arguing by 1987 as he developed his procedural syllabus, in which

attention switches entirely from code to communication, and "learners' abstraction of grammatical structure from relevant language samples" takes place through a task-based syllabus organized around meaning-focused activity with "an intense preoccupation with the meaning of language samples - - i. e. an effort to make sense of the language encountered, or to get meaning across in language adequately for given, and immediate, purposes," (Prabhu, 1987 : 15).

Krashen also believes that making sense is the key to language learning. Learners must receive comprehensible input, whether in an L2 or a content classroom, or in the wider world. Krashen contributed a great deal to both theory and methodology in second language acquisition by presenting bold principles that others rushed to examine, implement, and debate. He summarizes his five "hypotheses" on Acquisition-Learning, the Natural Order, the Monitor, Input, and the Affective Filter "with a single claim: people acquire second languages when they obtain comprehensible input, and when their affective filters are low enough to allow the input 'in'. In other words, comprehensible input delivered in a low filter situation is the only 'causative variable' in second language acquisition" (Krashen, 1981 : 57).

Not all communicative language educators wanted to go as far as Prabhu, or as MacNamara, who says that "the teacher's job is to set up the language class so that communication in the new language is essential to the students...to make the school more like the home and the street," (MacNamara, 1973 : 264-265). Because it "will not follow a systematic syllabus," Johnson had reservations about relying solely on what he termed a "'deepend strategy' since it involves risk-taking for which there has been no preparation," (Johnson, 1981b : 63) as when a person is simply thrown into deep end of a pool and told to learn how to swim. Brumfit hopes for a syllabus with "intrinsic cohesion" so that "it will be possible to present the system in a structured way so that the overall system is reflected in the organization and sequencing of the elements. A justification for such an organisation will rest on the fact that we learn by systematising, that we are naturally programmed to establish order and that we are more likely to

learn effectively what can be perceived as a system than what can only be perceived as unrelated items," (Wilkins, Brumfit, and Paulston, 1981 : 90-91). Johnson suggests alternating phases of systematic and non-systematic work, (Johnson, 1981a). Brumfit argues in 1984 for the need for both accuracy and fluency work, and proposes a learning model which "should lead us to place heavy emphasis on fluency activities on the grounds that through these conversion of conscious knowledge to unconscious knowledge will be facilitated" (Brumfit, 1984 : 66).

In 1991 the trend seems to be to allow for attention to system and not just unstructured communicative practice, but "system" can refer to not just the linguistic system, broadly or narrowly defined, but also to systematic approaches towards the process of learning in general or of language learning. Some teachers, instead of attempting to transmit a grammatical system, engage students in consciousness raising to explicitly or implicitly highlight features or rules which may not be accurately employed immediately, but may be put to use later. Ellis, (1990 : 29) says "We use consciousness raising techniques to develop the learner's capacity to notice specific things in the input...When the learners are ready to integrate the new information into their interlanguage, they will do so." The possibility for delayed integration and output can be accounted for by models of language learning such as Gass', which posits that some ambient speech will be noticed and become apperceived input, some of that will, through knowledge of universals and L1 and L2, become comprehended input, some of that will become intake which can be restructured through hypothesis testing, and some of that stored and integrated, leading to increased L2 proficiency reflected in output (Gass, 1988).

But this idea of calling the learner's attention to the systematicity of language needn't be confined to grammar in any limited sense. If functions are being introduced, one can teach not just an array of linguistic exponents of functions but also "what it is that governs the speaker's choice from among these different forms" (Wilkins, 1976 : 61-62). Although Wilkins recommends this systematic approach at the time of syllabus sequence decision-making, his crite-

ria could be directly taught to students to assist them in realizing their illocutionary intents. Much work has been done, ranging from the ethnography of speaking traditions of anthropology to the computerized analysis of authentic written and spoken texts. This information introduces new hope for systematically selecting and teaching the most productive linguistic forms and most typical sequences of speech acts, or providing students with background sociolinguistic knowledge to help them avoid pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure, (Thomas, 1983).

Or system can be introduced not so that it is internalized cognitively by the learner, but to influence the learning process through the principled selection of task types. Language acquisition theorists such as Long (1981) suggest that interactive negotiation of meaning contributes to comprehension and thus aids language acquisition. Brumfit advocated small group work because it "requires learners to operate with a great deal more than language alone, for other semiotic systems will come into play, and personal and social needs will be expressed and responded to, simply as a result of the presence of several human beings together for a co-operative purpose," (Brumfit, 1984 : 74). Research has been done on the varied effects of different choices of one-way or two-way information flow, native speaker-nonnative speaker versus nonnative-nonnative interaction, dyad or group work versus teacher-fronted tasks, display versus referential questions, etc. Teachers can decide if learners at the moment will best be aided by comprehensible input or comprehensible output. They can choose between tasks demanding spontaneous output or the type of planned speech that Crookes (1989) suggests results in more complex, although not necessarily more accurate production.

Theorists on the processes of reading and listening have learned much from the psycholinguistic and discourse analysis approaches about the interaction between top-down and bottom-up processing, and can now suggest ways to systematically assess and encourage the development and flexible use of both types of skills. We also have a more sophisticated view of the interaction between the producer and the interpreter-receiver of texts: "communicative language

teaching" can more and more involve systematic analysis of texts based on the awareness that "the way we express intents depends crucially on the contexts we are to express them in; our ability to express intents depends crucially on our ability to perceive how we will be interpreted in context." Relationships are "realized, not by rules involving binary correct/incorrect decisions, but by ones relating to felicity conditions, topic-comment relationships, distribution of information, and so on." With this knowledge we can include an "analytic component" by asking students to perform operations which will get them "exploring intent/utterance relationships...context/utterance relationships...and organization," (Johnson, 1983 : 250-253).

Johnson (1990) distinguishes between declarative knowledge which involves "knowing that," and procedural knowledge which involves "knowing how," and advocates language skills development through the principled grading of tasks to allow for the gradual automatization of production stemming from procedural knowledge applied in progressively more demanding circumstances. Hulstijn (1990) sums up the information-processing model of language learning theory based on the cognitive theories of J. Anderson (1980) and McLaughlin (1978, 1987), work which underlies Johnson's ideas:

we can view first and second language acquisition as the establishment of procedural knowledge (routine procedures) through the compilation of declarative language knowledge, and the gradual tuning and restructuring of procedural knowledge. The more sub-procedures get subsumed into overall procedures, the more language use can be said to take place fluently and automatically, requiring less attention. It should be emphasized that the acquisition of language skills is not merely a speeding up of the execution of essentially the same procedures originally formed from declarative knowledge. Rather, language acquisition essentially consists of the establishment of new procedures which reorganize a body of facts and rules previously acquired. (Hulstijn, 1990 : 32)

Another essential dimension of systematicity is that which teachers can help students develop in their own approach to their language learning. Holec (1987) developed an approach to assist L2 learners set their own goals for types and levels of attainment and to

choose appropriate materials and methodologies and to engage in systematic on-going evaluation of the learning process. Oxford (1990) advocates systematically assisting students to pinpoint their preferred learning strategies and to increase their range of options. Such approaches owe much to research on learning styles, cognitive strategies, etc., which have come out of psychological and educational research rather than applied linguistics. In a similar vein, both learners and teachers can be made aware of the principles and skills of cooperative learning and such arrangements can be systematically introduced into the classroom: positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, and development of interpersonal and small-group skills, (Gaies, 1989).

With so little known definitely about second language acquisition or about general human learning processes, it doesn't seem to be the time to latch onto one theory and use it to prescribe one rigid methodology. We are gradually learning more about the complexities of variation in interlanguage and of classroom interactional dynamics. We are asked to consider the effects of learner differences in learning style and aptitudes, motivation, goals, L1, age, gender, socioeconomic class, the setting for the acquisition and use of L2, etc., etc.. So it seems ever less likely that one would want to advocate The Method. One would rather choose to keep a dual goal of learning to communicate and communicating to learn, and choose whatever means suggest themselves (i. e., are suggested by academic experts, publishers, institutional authorities, teachers, or students) to achieve those means.

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