Conceptualising ‘communication’ in foreign language instruction

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Introduction

With the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the early 1970s, foreign language instruction shifted perspective from linguistic form to meaning, and from a focus on language to a focus on learner, viewed as an active and creative language user (de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005, pp. 451–452; Legutke & Thomas, 1991). Rejecting Chomsky’s (1965) notion of formalistic, context free ‘linguistic competence’ as insufficient to account for the complex nature of language, linguists tried to expand on the concept of ‘competence’ to include not just the ability to understand and produce grammatically accurate utterances but also to communicate in ways that are contextually appropriate (see Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1971). Thus Chomsky’s ‘ideal speaker–listener, in a completely homogeneous speech society, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest’ (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3) gave way to Hymes’ real speaker–listener involved in interpersonal interactions.

The concepts of ‘culture’ (seen mostly as practices of everyday living), ‘speech communities’, ‘learner’s identity’ and, in particular, ‘communication’, became central to the field.

Even a cursory look at course outlines, textbooks and published teaching materials currently used in schools and universities in Australia reveals that CLT has become the dominant paradigm in the profession, and thus ‘communication’ is listed as the principal and ultimate aim of foreign language learning both by applied linguists and language instructors. This is not to say that language classrooms everywhere truly follow communicative practices – this is far from the case – but that the rhetoric of language teaching is dominated by this ideology even in programs in which very little ‘communication’ is encouraged.

And yet, the concept of ‘communication’ itself has hardly been defined or explored, let alone problematised. The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language (Crystal, 1987), for instance, includes ten entries for ‘communication’ and related terms in the index of topics, but the term is not defined in the text or the glossary. A similar situation obtains in other reference books and applied linguistics dictionaries. One of the most commonly cited texts in the field, Littlewood’s (1981) Communicative Language Teaching, to mention another example, includes a number of ‘communication-related’ index entries, such as ‘communication games’, ‘communicative ability’, ‘communicative activities’, ‘communicative competence’, ‘communicative function’ and ‘communicative needs’. The term ‘communication’ itself is generally taken as being commonly understood and is discussed only in its practical applications.

The main aim of this paper is to examine a number of CLT implementations as means of uncovering the conceptualisations
of communication underlying dominant current language teaching approaches and classroom practices. These principles will be compared and contrasted to the perspectives on communication evident in the work of applied linguists and communication scholars. The discussion reveals striking conceptual differences between what practitioners (i.e., teachers, curriculum designers, and textbook writers) and theorists (i.e., applied linguists, conversation analysts, and communication scholars) interpret as ‘communication’. I will, finally, discuss whether ‘communication’ as understood by theorists is a feasible aim of instruction or whether it conflicts with the pedagogical realities of most classrooms. Although the focus of examination is on tertiary education, the conclusions should be of relevance to foreign language teachers at other levels of instruction.

‘Communication’ in CLT Theory

CLT has its roots in theoretical perspectives on ‘communicative competence’ posited by Hymes (1971) and its implications for teaching discussed by Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983) and Savignon (1972, 1983, 1997), among others. It is, strictly speaking, an approach rather than a ‘method’, and thus scholars aligned with CLT do not represent a single and unified voice but include a number of perspectives embodying diverse goals and analyses that frequently disagree with one another. Common to all these strands within this paradigm, however, is the aim to ‘(a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching; and, (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication’ (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 155). We turn now to each of these aims.

Communicative competence: What does it involve?

Savignon, one of the first theorists to apply Hymes’ concept of communicative competence to language learning, initially defined ‘communicative competence’ as ‘the ability to function in a truly communicative setting’ (Savignon, 1972, p. 8). Having communicative competence involves not only having a knowledge of the grammatical structures (grammatical competence), but knowing how and when to use these structures (strategic competence) in written and spoken discourse (discourse competence) and in a particular sociocultural context (sociolinguistic competence) (Canale & Swain, 1980).

The above makes it clear that ‘communication’ was not envisaged as exclusively within one particular mode of interaction. Thus, Savignon further defined communication as ‘a negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, author and reader’ (1987, p. 236). She reiterated this idea in the introduction to the second edition of her book Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice (Savignon, 1997), when she defined communicative competence as applying to both ‘written and spoken language, as well as to many other symbolic systems’ (1997, p. 8; original emphasis). Very early, however, the emphasis in both theory and practice shifted towards a view of communication as oral interaction. An illustration of this trend can be seen in Candlin’s definition of ‘communication’ as ‘the exchange of information which is negotiated between speakers and hearers in the context of their talk and against a backdrop of their beliefs’ (Candlin, 1976, p. 238).

There is little doubt that oral skills take precedence as the aim of foreign language instruction. Students typically mention the ability to interact with speakers of the target language through the oral channel as their goal for undertaking foreign language learning, and seem to assume that other modes of interaction only serve to support the acquisition of speaking ability. As Thompson argues:

> For most learners, the main uses they are likely to make of the language are oral: getting around in the foreign country if they visit it, talking to visitors from that country, etc. Even if they are unlikely in reality to use the language outside the classroom, learners are often willing to suspend their disbelief and act as if they might need the language for personal contacts. (Thompson, 1996, p. 12)

Many language instructors restrict focus to the oral medium. Thompson (1996), for instance, discovered that one of the misconceptions of language teachers in the UK regarding the meaning of CLT is that the method involves ‘teaching only speaking’ (Thompson, 1996, p. 11). Similarly, VanPatten (1998) notes that language instructors in the US equate ‘communication’ with oral proficiency, a conceptualisation which he suggests stems from the appearance of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines. While the guidelines’ aim was to provide a common yardstick for measuring communicative language ability (i.e., the so-called four macroskills plus cultural knowledge), the testing instruments designed and disseminated among teachers targeted mainly oral skills. Sato and Kleinsasser (1999), who used multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, and surveys) to document the views and practices of CLT by in-service teachers of Japanese as a second language in Australia, also conclude that teachers view CLT as concerned mainly with developing proficiency in speaking and listening.
WHAT MANY TEACHERS CALL ‘COMMUNICATION’ IS MORE OFTEN THAN NOT ORAL DRILLING OF THE TARGET STRUCTURES.

In classroom practice it seems that oral communication becomes the main target of foreign language instruction. To illustrate, at the strong end of the continuum of communicative methodologies, the Natural Approach (NA), which aims to replicate in the classroom the processes through which children acquire their first language, focuses on presenting learners with comprehensible input. The stated aim of the methodology is to ‘develop basic communication skills – both oral and written’ (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 67). However, although Krashen (2004) regards reading as a rich source of input, Dos Mundos (Terrell, Andrade, Egasse, & Muñoz, 2006), the Spanish language textbook developed along the lines of the NA, explicitly relegates reading and writing to the status of support activities to oral skills, to be completed as homework outside class time.

An examination of current foreign language course outlines used at university level in Australia provides further evidence of this trend. Explicit statements of method or approach in these outlines are invariably in communicative terms and thus, of sixteen first year (beginner) course outlines examined for this paper, all but two mentioned ‘communication’ either in the course objectives or course description. Interestingly, the word ‘communication’ is rarely found in descriptions of courses focused on developing reading and/or writing skills.

‘Communication’ is, thus, reduced effectively to one mode of interaction. Yet, practitioners do not agree on conceptualising ‘communication’ as ‘learner-directed conversations’. Thornbury (1996) argues that for many educators the ‘communicative’ simply means ‘that students are encouraged to interact, that pair and group work are valued, and that certain techniques, such as ‘information gap’ activities, are promoted’. He calls this ‘small-c communication – communication as a medium, irrespective of message’ (Thornbury, 1996, p. 57). This can be summed up in the second aim of CLT discussed by Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 155), namely, to develop procedures for teaching the target language.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING PROCEDURES

Communication scholars agree that communication has many purposes. Lee and VanPatten (1995), for instance, identify two basic purposes: social-psychological and cognitive-informational. Social-psychological goals involve ‘the use of communication to bond socially or psychologically with someone or some group or to engage in social behaviour in some way’ (Lee & VanPatten, 1995, p. 53) and include practices as diverse as phatic interaction, identity marking, and attempts to control reality (through prayers, etc.). Cognitive-informational goals involve accessing, sharing, and processing information for some purpose other than language practice. Crucially absent from all accounts is the view of communication as a means of language development. This aim, however, assumes great importance in the so-called ‘interactional approaches’ to second language acquisition, which view involvement in conversations not merely as a source of linguistic input but also as a tool to facilitate language acquisition (for a thorough discussion, see Long, 1980; Varonis & Gass, 1985; Pica, 1992; Gass, 2003; and, Gass & Mackey, 2006; among others). Long (1980) has cast this as the Interaction Hypothesis, noting ‘[n]egotiation for meaning, and specially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS [native speaker] or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways’ (Long, 1980, p. 451–452). Gass and Mackey (2006) focus on the crucial role of feedback in foreign language acquisition, which both ‘affects the linguistic input learners receive and pushes them to modify their output during conversation’ (Gass & Mackey, 2006, p. 3). Despite recognition that interactions play an important role in language acquisition, this role appears to be purely instrumental, as interactions are considered valuable insofar as they bring about interlanguage change, thus enhancing the developing second language linguistic system. There is little, if any, interest in interactions as social processes that impact on individual dimensions other than the cognitive, or on the social, cultural or educational contexts in which interactions take place.

Communicative language classroom practices seem to be aligned with interactional approaches, and communication is both understood and encouraged as a means to foster the acquisition of the linguistic system. But the features of interactions in most classrooms set classroom communication aside from other interaction types. We explore some of these features by examining the selection and sequencing of materials, sequencing of activities, the nature and role of feedback, and assessment practices.

Selection and sequencing of materials

Despite the focus on meaning and communication ostensibly espoused by many language teachers, most programs...
and textbooks still have a strong focus on grammatical structures as the basis of selecting and sequencing material. Course objectives are still described primarily in linguistic terms (and relatively narrowly at that) that are easily testable. The focus of instruction, despite claims to the contrary, is still narrowly defined at sentence level and focused on morphosyntactic features. Discourse, pragmatics, culture, gender and other social and contextual variables that affect communication remain absent from the curriculum. What many teachers call ‘communication’ is more often than not oral drilling of the target structures. Thornbury (1998) notes that there is an inherent contradiction in setting up activities around preselected discrete lexical or grammatical items while purporting to be driven by the meanings the learners wish to express. He observes, ‘[s]ooner or later the two agendas are going to part company… In reality, where there are grammar rules, grammar rules’ (Thornbury, 1998, p. 111).

**Sequencing of activities**

In addition to using grammar as the basis of selection, sequencing of materials and activities is influenced by the amount of language that learners are expected to produce at each stage. A rapid evaluation of commercial textbooks used in language classrooms reveals that activities are typically presented in a sequence that ranges from the most controlled to the least controlled, more interactive use of the target language. The sequencing of activities is clearly pedagogically motivated. Using Dos Mundos (Terrell et al., 2006) again as an example, each chapter starts by introducing the vocabulary or structures targeted, followed by structured questions–answers, scripted dialogues, semiscr ipted dialogues, and pair interviews. Similarly, VanPatten (1982), in a paper that aims at enhancing classroom communication, recommends anticipating students’ capabilities and structuring the classroom by ‘hierarchical ordering’, which involves ‘sequencing of questions from yes/no type questions […] through alternative questions […] to finally arrive at more open-ended questions’ (VanPatten, 1982, p. 405), which would resemble real-life conversations. Communication, thus, serves as a way of reinforcing the lexicon, and grammatical structures and rules that students need to master, or, at advanced levels, as something learners can engage in once the basic target grammar is in place (the ‘icing on the cake’ approach). In actual communication this hierarchical ordering of conversational turns would be unthinkable.

Furthermore, although students are encouraged to interact, these activities bear little similarity to authentic conversations in which interactions are characterised by speaker–listener control of the topic, the structures used, and the flow of the conversation in terms of order, size, and relative distribution of turns (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Even the time allocated for each interaction and interlocutors’ selection is frequently decided by the teacher as a means to promote interaction between all members of the class and ensure that students are offered equal amounts of speaking time. These aspects of classroom management have been heavily criticised as detracting from, rather than promoting, communication. Legutke and Thomas (1991) summarise what they perceived as the typical language classroom:

In spite of trendy jargon in textbooks and teacher’s manuals, very little is actually communicated in the L2 classroom. The way it is structured does not seem to stimulate the wish of learners to say something, nor does it tap what they might have to say […] Learners do not find room to speak as themselves, to use language in communicative encounters, to create text, to stimulate responses from fellow learners, or to find solutions to relevant problems. Topicality is still sacrificed for the benefit of grammar and structure. (Legutke & Thomas, 1991, pp. 8-9)

This view is confirmed by analyses of transcripts of classroom interaction, which show that interaction is dominated by what Nunan (1987, p. 137) labels the ‘IRF cycle’ (i.e., teacher initiation–learner response–teacher follow-up), and by display, rather than referential questions that usually characterise interactions between adult speakers. Thornbury (1998) concurs, ‘[f]if learners interact at all, it is more often so as to exchange language tokens than to communicate meanings in which they have a personal investment’ (Thornbury, 1998, p. 110). This is because, despite lip-service paid to communication as the target of foreign language learning, classroom interaction still focuses primarily on language as an object of instruction and offers few opportunities for genuine communication between teacher and learner or, for that matter, between learner and learner, and for learner self-expression.

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Probably due to prior language learning experiences, learners seem to be as constrained as teachers by the assumption that the aim of classroom interaction is to facilitate their acquisition of the linguistic system. Kinginger (1994) examined the nature of learner/learner talk in pair and small group activities to evaluate the extent to which learners treated these activities as occasions to exercise their initiative and become involved in interactions as conversational partners. She tested four types of tasks that varied in the degree of
control of formal properties of language, presupposition of language to be used, focus on meaning, and presupposition of the outcome of the interaction. She noted that when learners are constrained by formal considerations or provided with predefined language and structures as a basis for ‘conversation’, their talk had many of the same characteristics as form-focused teacher talk. She claims that only when learners have opportunities for structuring their interactions in ways that are learner-centered and content-driven do they experience interactions that resemble what scholars in communication describe as ‘conversations’ (Sacks et al., 1974) that have the potential to impact upon the development of discourse and strategic competence.

Feedback and assessment
The focus on grammar becomes more evident when considering feedback and assessment of learning outcomes. On the former, feedback in spontaneous adult conversations usually serves as a regulatory device, to clarify a message before communication breakdown and, thus, sustain the conversation. Sacks et al. (1974) discuss repair mechanisms to deal with turn-taking errors and violations. Negative feedback is seldom found in non-classroom-based interactions or in naturalistic language acquisition. Classroom feedback, however, rarely focuses on meaning per se, or on appropriateness, interest or relevance of language used, but on accuracy in areas such as vocabulary, morphology and syntax. The aim of classroom activities is to facilitate the acquisition of the formal properties of the language rather than skills to communicate effectively in that language.

Another example is a first year Indonesian course, which similarly aims at developing communicative competence, but lists as criteria for the oral examination:
- ability to speak with pronunciation as close as possible to that of native speakers
- expressions appropriate for conveying what the speaker intends
- variety of vocabulary for interesting dialogue, and fluency.

Although here the exam is partly evaluated on fluency, only 40 per cent of the total course marks are awarded to this assessment item; remaining assessment consists of written exams that evaluate grammatical and lexical knowledge. It is not surprising, then, that students facing exams devote most of their study time to grammar and tend to focus their energies on accurate production of target language tokens. Basing assessment on the mastery of grammatical structures sends a clear message to students about where priorities lie.

Communication in the foreign language classroom
If second language acquisition is stimulated by the linguistic environment, the quality and quantity of linguistic input to which students are exposed should play a significant role in the process. This is particularly relevant in the foreign language context, where students have limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Several scholars have, therefore, highlighted the importance of using the target language exclusively or predominantly in class as a necessary – and for some, sufficient – condition to stimulate acquisition (Ellis, 1984; Krashen, 1982, 1985). A number of researchers, however, have questioned whether the linguistic environment that characterises most language classes is rich enough to promote the development of an internalised grammatical system, and have identified limits in both the quantity and quality of the linguistic input.

Duff and Polio (1990), in one of the few empirical studies examining the quantity of target language input through classroom observations, sampled thirteen university level classes teaching a variety of languages. They found a wide variation in the amount of target language input in the classes observed, ranging from 100 percent in the highest case to ten percent in the lowest, a clearly insufficient amount of language to stimulate acquisition.

Moreover, if, as proposed by Swain (1985, 1995), learners’ output plays a significant role in language acquisition, we need to examine how different participation opportunities that teachers make available...
to their students impact on the process. The picture is not very encouraging. Reduced government funding of language programs has meant that class student numbers are increasing and many courses offer fewer contact hours. It is now common to find language classes of up to 30 students in Australian universities. This means that in a teacher-fronted two-hour class the total amount of speaking time per student would be three minutes at the most, provided teacher talk is kept to a minimum. Most teachers try to maximise opportunities in this situation by organising pair or small group conversations. Nevertheless, feedback to students can only be very limited and, most likely, insufficient to promote interaction that is conducive to acquisition. Some programs try to remedy these limitations and create opportunities outside the classroom for further interaction (Eisenchlas & Hortigüera, 1999; Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985). Organising these programs is highly complex and, therefore, tends to be restricted to courses with small student intake.

On input quality, classroom instruction has been criticised for lacking the authenticity of the language products it fosters. Scholars have particularly called into question whether the exchanges conducted in classes can be considered instances of ‘conversations’, or whether ‘authentic conversations’ and classroom interactions are phenomena that differ from each other. Warren defined a conversation as ‘[a] speech event outside of an institutionalized setting, involving at least two participants who share responsibility for the progress and outcome of an impromptu and unmarked verbal encounter consisting of more than a ritualized exchange’ (Warren, 1993, p. 8, cited in Seedhouse, 1996, p. 18). Classroom exchanges, as discussed above, are characterised by teacher-control, predetermined content, structures, conversational flow, and other features that set them aside from ‘natural’ conversations. Drew and Heritage (1992) consider conversations as ‘a kind of benchmark against which other more formal or ‘institutional’ types of interaction are recognized and experienced. Explicit within this perspective is the view that other institutional forms of interaction will show systematic variations and restrictions on activities and their design relative to ordinary conversation’ (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 19). Classroom communication can, thus, be seen as an institutional phenomenon shaped by cultures and structures at work in educational systems (Gebhard, 1999, p. 545). Similarly, Liddicoat (1997) considers classroom talk as a form of institutional talk, in which the roles of the participants in the interaction are both defined and constrained by the task, the context and the relationships between interlocutors.

The discussion above does not suggest that classroom interaction is inferior or deficient in comparison to ‘authentic’ communication. The view that there is something like ‘authentic’, ‘natural’ or ‘genuine’ communication is one of the assumptions of the communicative orthodoxy concerning second language teaching (Seedhouse, 1996), and suggests the idea that some kind of ‘pure’ communication exists independently of a context. All communication is contextual and the classroom just happens to be one such context. Yet, the above does imply that the development of ‘communicative competence’, as defined in some course outlines that aim to prepare learners for participation in ‘authentic conversations with native speakers’, may be too ambitious a goal for the language classroom to achieve and should be re-examined in light of the constraints on foreign language classroom teaching.

**DESPITE THE ESPoused ADOPTION OF A COMMUNICATIVE RHETORIC, MANY OF THE PRACTICES IMPLEMENTED IN CLASSROOMS ARE STILL GUIDED BY GRAMMAR-DRIVEN AGENDAS.**

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored how the field of foreign language teaching conceptualises ‘communication’ through the examination of principles and practices currently used in classrooms aligned with a communicative approach to language teaching and learning. It has argued that, despite the espoused adoption of a communicative rhetoric, many of the practices implemented in classrooms are still guided by grammar-driven agendas. Evidence for this conclusion has been shown in the discussion of content selection and sequencing, activities progression, assessment, and the conceptualisation of conversations as tools to foster the acquisition of the formal aspects of the language. I have also drawn comparisons with how communication is conceptualised in applied linguistics. Despite the lack of theoretical cohesiveness in the field, there is some consensus among scholars on how to view ‘communication’. It points to a wide gap between theoreticians and practitioners. In particular, ‘communication’ in foreign language classes seems to have been reduced from a process that is expected to apply to all macro-skills to a limited focus on oral interactions, and from an activity in which individuals freely elect to participate in order to exchange ideas, feelings, expectations, to a means of consolidating vocabulary and grammatical structures.

The above critique does not imply that communication should be abandoned as a goal for foreign language instruction, but that teaching objectives and practices need to be re-evaluated, taking into account the constraints of the foreign language classroom in times of increasing student numbers, and diminishing government funding to universities that forces reduced contact hours.
A positive response to this situation is through re-examining the role of the classroom in the acquisition process. Savignon (1987) has argued that '[r]egardless of the variety of communicative activities in the classroom, their purpose remains to prepare learners for the second-language world beyond, a world on which learners will depend for the development and maintenance of their communicative competence once classes are over. The classroom is but a rehearsal' (Savignon, 1987, p. 240). Taking the classroom as simply a rehearsal for ideal interactions that, for many learners may never take place, may explain why learners usually feel frustrated by the foreign language learning experience. Dewey expressed this very eloquently, claiming:

The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits, and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for the future. We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (Dewey, 1963, p. 49, cited in Legutke & Thomas, 1991, p. 1)

Some scholars propose focusing on the centrality of the classroom not only as the main – and often, only – source of linguistic input and the primary site of language development (cf. VanPatten, 1999), but also as a meeting place in which students and teachers come together to create a community of learners engaged in a common goal. In this perspective, ‘the classroom – and the procedures and activities it allows – can serve as a focal point of the learning–teaching process… it can become the meeting place for realistically motivated communication-as-learning, communication about learning, and metacommunication’ (Breen & Candlin, 1980, p. 98). The classroom thus conceived becomes a unique social environment rife with communicative potential waiting to be exploited, rather than a poor imitation and substitute of the real world.

References


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