

"Post-Communicative" Language Teaching¹

*by Michael Byram,
University of Durham*

It may sound premature to teachers of foreign languages in secondary education to ask what the "post-communicative" stage in the development of foreign language teaching should be. After all, "communicative" has been a buzz-word for only a few years so far and the full meaning of "communicative language teaching" is still unclear to many. That CLT merely means the creation of "information gaps" with "pair-work" and "authentic material" is a minimal, simplified and even wrong-headed understanding, and yet it is the most common one because it is the most available and accessible in the brief periods of in-service training offered to teachers. This kind of superficial understanding is hardly likely to bring about fundamental changes. Thus in some ways I would agree that it is too soon to look for the next stage when the present stage has not had a worthwhile effect. Yet to ask questions about the next stage implies a critical understanding of the present and may therefore in itself improve present practices.

There are other reasons, too, for looking ahead before we get too stuck in the present rut. On the one hand we know that communicative language teaching was developed in the world of English as a Foreign Language much sooner than in Foreign Languages, and we ought to use this to our advantage and see where EFL is moving now, rather than waiting for the ten-year gap to elapse again. Perhaps we can profit from other people's experience and even reduce the gap between us. On the other hand the arrival of GCSE, though enough to cope with and a good reason, it might be said, for not looking to new developments yet, may itself turn out to be the most powerful pressure to stay in a rut there has ever been in language teaching — or any other kind of teaching for that matter. Because the criteria are for the first time "national", subject to scrutiny by a Ministry-appointed committee and because the criteria are as specific as they are, determining teaching by the backwash effect, then however good we may think they are at the moment, we are likely to be dependent on and controlled by them for a long time. After all they have taken so long to develop that it is natural to want to get the full benefit and suffer the full consequences for some time to come. I hope, however, that I am exaggerating and that the option to experiment will be developed and seen as a positive contribution to gradual change. This is the case for example in Denmark, where central control of the curriculum is an established fact but individual schools may easily obtain permission to experiment. It is certainly evident already that GCSE has specific weaknesses, which arise out of its strengths. On the one hand, the backwash effect is perhaps the only way in our circumstances to change language teaching practices, however superficially, towards a methodology which embodies a more accurate understanding of the nature of language as a social means of communication in a sense which involves more than passing messages (Trim 1983). On the other hand, exclusive concentration on "practical communication" (GCSE National Criteria Aim 1) together with the backwash effect can easily mean that all the other aims of language teaching written into the National Criteria will be ignored, — and thereby in fact encourage teachers and pupils to think of language simply as a means for passing messages. Above all, the omission of assessment of the aims which encourage insight into other cultures may well lead to an impoverished conception of the contribution of language learning to pupils' educational development as individual and social beings. We are then left with the task of training pupils in a few basic skills of survival in a hostile foreign world. Even if teachers continue to encourage cultural insight despite the lack of assessment credit for this, the practical communication view of language encourages pupils to think that the foreign language is simply a coded version of English, with the same meanings and connotations, which happens to be spoken by people living across the sea from us and having strange customs and eating habits. The effect is to separate language from all other cultural phenomena, with the not unreasonable purpose of making it more familiar and accessible, but with the

concomitant consequence that other cultural phenomena are made if anything more strange. The language becomes more accessible, the task of giving and acquiring information easier, and the strange habits of other countries have to be tolerated as aberrations from the natural way of doing things which is to be found only in England or at best in English-speaking countries. This kind of tolerance is perhaps better than none at all, but it is scarcely built on insight and understanding.

It may be felt that my interpretation is again exaggerated and it may be time to bring in some support for my argument from other sources. In a review of CLT in 1985, Quinn argues that "we are still a long way from a new 'paradigm'" (1985:64). He suggests there is "some evidence of the new questions being asked as our perceptions move away from a linguistics-based view of communicative competence toward a broader view of communication as seen from the perspective of humanist psychology" (1985:65). Now, although one might wish to quibble with his contrasting linguistics with humanism, the point he is making is a valuable one, namely that there is a, currently dominant, impoverished view of language teaching which is in a sense no more interested in *what* people say than older methodologies; it is concerned only with *how* people pass messages. Quinn argues that for successful communication to take place participants must be involved in what they are saying, which implies a more complex notion of communication than exchange of information. "Published communicative language teaching materials often give little help on this matter, and fall into the traps of either trivial and inconsequential content or frivolous debasement of serious subjects" (Quinn, 1985:65). From another point of view Mitchell has demonstrated that foreign language classrooms engender at least in the crucial early years a minimalist definition of communicative competence:

"The topics of discourse at issue during communicative foreign language (CFL) activities were largely restricted to the phatic and instrumental; very few CFL activities had a dominant informational purpose or involved the acquisition of new skills by pupils" (1983:45)

What then should the next stage be? Mitchell's work suggests that a fuller definition of communicative competence is required, even within a linguistics-influenced view of communication. Quinn's argument implies that an even more complex view has to be acknowledged and the relationship between communication in language and understanding between people seriously introduced into language teaching. The inherent problems must not be underestimated of course. Quinn is talking of the problem of finding something worthwhile for learners to say to each other in the second language classroom. My argument implies that we have to find something worthwhile for English pupils to talk about with foreigners, and that is much more difficult if one considers that a common basis is needed for such a conversation. On the other hand, the lack of common ground, the presence of the unknown may be precisely the way forward, if handled correctly. For if the difference is recognised, if the unknown is perceived as something worth finding out about rather than just tolerating as strange, then negotiation of understanding in and through language introduces language inseparable from the rest of culture into the foreign language classroom. In other words, rather than communicative competence, focusing on language, as the aim of language teaching, I am arguing that the aim should be socio-cultural competence in which language is learnt in context. This does not mean of course that we aim to produce native-like socio-cultural competence any more than we aim for native-speaker linguistic competence. Nor does it mean that learners should be encouraged to abandon their own cultural views and values — which would in any case inevitably fail — but that they be in a position to *understand* the foreign culture rather than merely *tolerate* it.

What then do I mean by "negotiation of understanding in and through language"? Widdowson (1985:15) takes the sentence "The packet is in the drawer" and argues that if the sentence is *used* by a speaker in order to say something meaningful to someone else then that person has to draw on a shared background knowledge:

"Anybody actually producing this expression with the intention of being meaningful would suppose that the addressee can make an attachment (of meaning to linguistic expression), can relate the language to some shared conception or perception of the world and so achieve the intended meaning."

The speaker in this case is likely to know that the addressee shares specific background

knowledge, but in other cases he will have to assume that the addressee shares some general, conventional knowledge as a result of their belonging to the same society or culture. Some of this kind of knowledge has been described as 'scripts' that we have internalised during the process of socialisation; there are 'scripts' of how to behave and what to expect in a given situation. A well-known example will sound familiar to language teachers. It is 'the restaurant script' (Schank and Abelson, 1977:42) where a highly abstract account of the knowledge of how to behave in (American) restaurants is given, which is then brought into play when we recognise that 'this is a restaurant'. Scripts are acquired through socialisation and often rehearsed by children in play, but once acquired they

"serve as a guide to routine encounters with the world. They enable the individual to predict what will happen next in a familiar situation, to infer unstated propositions in a given context, and when well established, to run through a sequence of actions and interactions more or less automatically (. . .). And although we may find our way by guidance or by trial and error this process takes mental effort that is not required once the representation is in place. As adults we encounter relatively few unscripted situations. In fact we impart our expectations from well-known scripts onto novel situations, sometimes (as in foreign cultures) leading to misunderstandings." (Nelson, 1981:108-9)

The foreign language teacher will recognise not only the 'misunderstandings' but also the 'mental effort' required to modify in a foreign culture the scripts acquired in early life. The introduction to a new culture even in such a 'simple' situation as the restaurant requires a re-learning and modification of existing scripts, or 'background knowledge' as I called it above. However this does not mean merely giving 'background information', as has unfortunately been the tradition in foreign language teaching. For the script is realised largely but not exclusively in linguistic behaviour, in the use of language. The meanings of language are part of the script, as is evident when scripts from two different cultures are compared. 'Waiter' and 'garçon' do not have the same meaning, but the difference is not separable from other parts of the scripts. The problem of making learners aware of this, so that they acquire new cultural scripts parallel to existing ones, is not solved by some account which says " 'garçon' means 'waiter' but in a French restaurant or café he does this. this and this". The learner has to acquire a new representation, as Nelson says "by guidance or by trial and error" and with considerable mental effort. If, and only if, the learner experiences that process, can we begin to talk of understanding, rather than tolerance, of the foreign culture.

It is of course a tall order in the ordinary foreign language classroom. Indeed the implication is that it is not in the classroom but in the country in question that such experience can take place. Even there, providing the opportunity for a class of thirty pupils to learn a new restaurant script by trial and error is extremely difficult, especially when the situation is made more complex by the fact that pupils have probably not yet acquired an English restaurant script. However, this last point need not be a hindrance and could even be an advantage; it certainly reminds us that foreign language learning can literally expand pupils' experience of the world and contribute to their general socialisation.

Fortunately it is becoming more and more common for foreign language courses to include visits to the country. The implication of my argument is that such visits have to be an integral part of the course, because they are not just an opportunity for practice of the language learnt in class and confirmation of the 'background facts' related by the teacher. They are in fact the occasion for new learning which must be planned and guided by the teacher as much as any learning in the classroom. A corollary of my argument is that all pupils must be involved and that this integral part of the course should take place in term-time.

Clearly, there is much more to be said about both practice and theory. The purpose of the present article is to suggest that there is much more to foreign language teaching than the pair-work comparison of pictures or passing of messages which seems to dominate at the moment, if recent textbooks and workbooks are to be believed. This is a necessary part of the process of language learning but if we stop there, then neither language nor culture will have been taught or understood.

Note

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