

Semantic primacy and the communicative approach to foreign language teaching



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This article briefly outlines the historical and theoretical background to the 'communicative approach', in order to provide a linguistic basis for the discussion that follows on such practical matters as teaching materials and classroom activities.

Semantic primacy in language acquisition

Writing in 1968, Jakobovits heralded what was to become the most influential methodology of this century, the 'communicative approach':

'A radically new psycholinguistic theory of language acquisition has been proposed which emphasises the developmental nature of the language acquisition process and attributes to the child specific innate competencies which guide his discovery of the rules of the natural language to which he is exposed.' (Jakobovits, p. 89).

He was referring of course to Chomsky's theory of the 'LAD' (Language Acquisition Device) – the innate ability of the infant child to gather meaning from the language going on around him, and from this to construct an internal 'grammar'.

Earlier theories of language learning had insisted upon the importance of the environment upon the infant, who was thought to be a passive receiver. In the 1920s, Bloomfield believed that language learning was a mechanical activity that simply required practice. In the 1950s, Skinner strengthened this notion with the concept of 'stimulus-response': a correct response is followed by an immediate reward as a reinforcement in order to achieve successive approximation to any form of behaviour – including so-called 'verbal behaviour'.

For language teaching, this had led by the late fifties to the development of a methodology ('audio-lingualism') in which meaning, or 'semantics', played little part:

'Meaning has been postponed in order to stress development of automatic responses', the aim being to produce 'an automatic, non-thoughtful response'. (Chastain, p. 99.)

The impact of Chomsky's hypothesis, and the subsequent research into child language and second language acquisition that followed, led to a movement away from this mechanical concept of human behaviour.

The child was now seen as an active agent, who sought to relate cognitive processes to linguistic ones. Macnamara, referring to the findings of Piaget, pointed out that when infants start to learn language, their thought is more developed than their language, hence:

'... the infant uses meaning as a clue to language, rather than language as a clue to meaning' (Macnamara, p.1.)

Child language was no longer to be seen as a feeble and corrupt version of the adult ideal, but as an active construct in its own right, a regular series of rule-governed systems that gradually approximated to the adult version.

Macnamara hypothesised that children initially learn vocabulary items, work out semantic structures from them, and then in turn deduce syntactic ones from these. Plausibility for this idea – that children use meaning to learn syntax – comes from the observation that 'children acquire first those grammatical devices which have a clear semantic force, such as numerous uses of tense and number markers, and only later acquire those which, like gender, have not ...' (Macnamara, p. 9.)

However, it was assumed that learning a first language and learning a second were two very different processes. After all, as we apparently 'think' with language, when we acquire our first

language we also acquire a permanent system of thought; the effect on our cognitive processes is so great that it must inevitably affect second language acquisition. While acknowledging this, several researchers suggested that the 'LAD' might work for more than just the first language, and that differences in ease and success of acquisition might be due to other factors, such as:

'motivation, desire to be able to communicate with the native speakers, interest in and admiration of the culture to which the language gives access, willingness to endanger one's own established personality by using a different, less effective idiom, etc.' (Snow, p. 140.)

Catherine Snow, investigating the language learning abilities of infants, teenagers and adults, found that all these second-language learners used similar strategies; the similarities were due to: 'the primary role played by semantics in both (L1 and L2) acquisition processes.' (Snow, p. 159.)

In other words, the learners did not learn language structures divorced of concepts, but together.

The final assumption was that 'the innate language-learning strategies used for learning the mother tongue can also be used for learning a second language, and that the only essential condition for this learning to take place is exposure to the target language.' (Silva, p. 341.)

This was enough to cause the rejection of behaviourism and the launch of a new 'communicative' teaching approach which might be termed 'semantically prime', as it put the emphasis squarely on the meaning rather than the form of language. It further led to a reappraisal of the teaching materials then in use, and the genesis of a new type of syllabus – a 'semantic' or 'notional' one, based on content and not grammar.

Teaching materials

Prior to the 'communicative movement' of the early 1970s, it was normal for coursebook writers to organise materials on the basis of syntactic principles rather than semantic ones. Interestingly enough, the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen was voicing his criticism of this practice as early as 1904:

'The reader often gets the impression that Frenchmen must be strictly systematical beings who one day speak merely in futures ...' (Quoted by Oller & Obrecht.)

The old audio-lingual methodology had been discredited. It was only necessary to expose the learner to 'real' specimens of the target language and then he would, like the infant, work out the rules for himself. So the learner should simply be given samples of real language used in authentic and meaningful situations; indeed, almost anything but the meaningless drills of the audio-lingual era.

However, controversy now raged over the issue of selection: should the teacher carefully select the relevant items of genuine language, in order to present them to the learner in a carefully considered sequence? And if so, what should determine this sequence: the frequency of a particular item, its syntactical or phonological complexity, its usefulness ... ?

Jakobovits maintained that it did not matter. The second language learner acquired his communicative competence, and constructed his internalised grammar of the target language, in exactly the same way as an infant – by exposure to the target language being used in meaningful situations. After all, the infant possessed Chomsky's 'Language Acquisition Device', 'specific innate competencies which guide his discovery of the rules of the natural language to which he is exposed'. (Jakobovits, p. 89.)

This enabled him to gradually make sense of all the language (both grammatical and ill-formed) going on around him. The adult learner possessed the same 'LAD' and used the same learning strategies – perhaps even benefiting from his more sophisticated cognitive processes.

Reibel, probably in reaction against contemporary materials that were formal, dull, and over-explicit, advocated the use of short texts of 'raw' material:

'It has been noted that unedited texts of the target language contain in natural form the important, frequent and useful phonological, lexical and grammatical elements of the target language. The course designer's energies should be spent in making such texts usable as learning instruments, not in studying such texts for clues on how to build others like them.' (Reibel, p. 292.)

The strongest exponents went so far as to say that it was not only unnecessary to 'create' rather than find materials, it was positively harmful.

Inevitably, the language teaching profession seems to have been down this particular alleyway (or a very similar one) before. L. A. Hill, in his 'Survey of Teaching Methods in English', tells how grammar-translation was superseded by the 'Direct Method', in which students were plunged straight into the language:

'Unfortunately this also did not seem to work too well. Students who had a foreign language poured over them in large doses did not seem to absorb as much of it as was desired. So the next step taken was to select and grade vocabulary very carefully. This was the period of Vocabulary Selection . . . ' (Hill, p. 85.)

He goes on to explain why this didn't work either!

Probably the debate continues to this very day, but a compromise situation seems to have been accepted – coursebooks with a mixture of materials both 'authentic' and what we might term 'scripted authentic'. The intention is of course the same – to maximise communication and the resulting acquisition of the language; the difference perhaps lies in the amount of trust that is placed upon the adult 'LAD's' ability to decipher the rules.

Carl James, using Krashen's distinction between 'learning' and 'acquisition', makes out a case for using authentic materials in order to achieve acquisition even in the classroom:

The difference between the real world and the classroom is that the former always demands priority for communication and brings about subconscious, natural 'immersion' acquisition of the foreign language, while traditionally the classroom has catered for artificial and conscious learning of the same. Authentic materials are one way of narrowing the gap between world and classroom: by their use, acquisition and communication can be fostered, even in the classroom.' (James, p. 2.)

An all-embracing methodology:

It's possible to mark the emergence of the 'communicative' method by observing the shift in the titles of linguistic papers from the word 'teaching' to 'learning' – thus reflecting the actual change from teacher-centredness to learner-centredness. Similarly, we may note how the titles of modern coursebooks indicate the 'pedagogically-sound' principles upon which they are supposedly based: 'Meaning into Words' (CUP, 1983) is an appropriate example. The blurb on the book validates its claim to be 'communicative' – and much else besides:

The course systematically covers the functional, notional and grammatical areas that are important to students at this level. In each unit, students are taught the relationship between structures and meaning and learn how to use.

Structures in a communicative context

The above example, and the preceding section on 'Authentic Materials', reveal the uncertainty that exists as to the ideal type of communicative material to be used by teachers or coursebook

designers. The same uncertainty centres on how best to present the target language.

Back in 1969, a very cautious and all-embracing methodology was propounded by some:

'A learner seeks meaning in his tasks, and where this is made clear through carefully planned progressions of controlled, integrated phonemic, lexical and syntactic items in a context of unambiguous denotative discourse, a person develops successful strategies for self-discovery and problem-solving.' (Estacio, p. 194.)

By the early 1980s, however, a purist approach had evidently set in, with teachers striving to keep their classroom activities 'authentic' and 'communicative'. Of course, this may have gone too far in the opposite direction. In 1982, Tony Duff was complaining that:

' . . . having moved from an excessively rigid and over-directed approach to practice, many teachers now run the risk of giving learners no real help in acquiring new language items or in developing their linguistic range as they seek to encourage 'communicative' interaction in the classroom.' (Duff, p. 203.)

It may have been in response to this that Littlewood presented a compromise position, arguing (not very convincingly) that what now seemed to be the despised and old-fashioned classroom activities were not necessarily excluded from the communicative classroom. He makes the claim that communication is the goal but not necessarily the means:

'Even if the goal is communication, not every activity leading towards this goal has to involve communication.' (Littlewood, 1985, p. 2.)

Even drilling is permitted!

'Communicative' thus becomes an umbrella term under which any number of teaching techniques and methodologies (even those formerly thought incompatible) are subsumed. Of course, this is not the case for all: Krashen & Terrell with their 'natural approach', and Prabhu with his 'task-based syllabus', still advocate the use of almost exclusively communicative methods.

For the majority, the ideal seems to be a judicious mixture, with 'structures' and 'situations' providing a safety net, and communicative activities catered for by occasional lessons involving information-gap activities, interviewing, group and pair-work, role-plays, problem-solving, etc.

Writing in 1980, Brumfit echoed Littlewood's concern for a communicative intent rather than a communicative method, concluding, a little negatively perhaps, that:

'There is thus no great revolution in methodology, but a concentration on many techniques which some teachers have been using for years . . . The purpose of all these procedures is the same: to contribute towards the creation of a genuine language-using community (if only a very simple one) in the classroom.' (Brumfit, Oct. 1980.)

Implications for language teaching

The communicative approach, as we have seen, derives from important findings about the way in which children learn their first language; these findings in turn have been extended to include the nature of second-language learning. 'Meaning' has been shown to be of primary importance in both motivating learners and in enabling them to discover how a language works. All that is apparently required is (to use Krashen's term) 'comprehensible input'.

The aim is thus above all to communicate meaning; we might describe this by a variant use of the phrase 'semantic primacy' – using it to imply that purpose and meaning come first in all aspects of this particular methodology. Thus:

' . . . the major focus of activity in the classroom should be on communication – not just simulate dialogues – but genuine communication where the validity of a student's utterances will be judged on the basis of their content rather than on the appropriateness of their grammatical form.' (Tucker, p. 5.)