# 1 What is communicative ability?

## 1.1 Introduction

One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view.

This chapter will look more closely at this communicative view of language, in order to describe the goal of foreign language teaching: communicative ability.

## 1.2 Structural and functional views of language

The structural view of language concentrates on the grammatical system, describing ways in which linguistic items can be combined. For example, it explains the operations for producing the passive 'The window has been broken' rather than the active 'Somebody has broken the window', and describes the word-order rules that make us interpret 'The girl chased the boy' differently from 'The boy chased the girl'. Intuitive knowledge of these, and of a multitude of other linguistic facts and operations, makes up a native speaker's linguistic competence and enables him to produce new sentences to match the meanings that he needs to express.

The structural view of language has not been in any way superseded by the functional view. However, it is not sufficient on its own to account for how language is used as a means of communication. Let us take as an example a straightforward sentence such as 'Why don't you close the door?'. From a structural viewpoint, it is unambiguously an interrogative. Different grammars may describe it in different terms, but none could argue that its grammatical form is that of a declarative or imperative. From a *functional* viewpoint, however, it is ambiguous. In some circumstances, it may function as a question – for example, the speaker may genuinely wish to know why his companion never closes a certain door. In others, it may function as a command – this would probably be the case if, say, a teacher addressed it to a pupil who had left the classroom door open. In yet other situa-

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tions, it could be intended (or interpreted, perhaps mistakenly) as a plea, a suggestion, or a complaint. In other words, whereas the sentence's *structure* is stable and straightforward, its *communicative function* is variable and depends on specific situational and social factors.

Just as a single linguistic form can express a number of functions, so also can a single communicative function be expressed by a number of linguistic forms. For example, the speaker who wants somebody to close the door has many linguistic options, including 'Close the door, please', 'Could you please close the door?', 'Would you mind closing the door?', or 'Excuse me, could I trouble you to close the door?'. Some forms might only perform this directive function in the context of certain social relationships – for example, 'You've left the door open!' could serve as a directive from teacher to pupil, but not from teacher to principal. Other forms would depend strongly on shared situational knowledge for their correct interpretation, and could easily be misunderstood (e.g. 'Brrr! It's cold, isn't it?').

### 1.3   Understanding functional meanings

A teacher wanted a child to pick up a towel and hang it on a rail. His first three attempts to communicate his meaning to the child resulted only in confusion:
'Would you pick up the towel for me, before someone steps on it?' (No action from the child)
'What do we do with the towel, Jimmie?' (Still no action)
'Well, would you like to hang it up?' (No action)
The child only understood when the teacher used a direct imperative:
'Jimmie, pick the towel up!'

It was clear from the child's reactions that he was not being insolent or deliberately uncooperative. This leaves three possible explanations for his failure to understand the teacher's first three attempts to get his meaning across:
– The *structure* of the first three sentences could have been outside the child's linguistic competence. This explanation is unlikely to be valid in this case, but would of course be a strong candidate if the hearer were a foreign learner.
– The child may have been unfamiliar with the use of interrogative structures for expressing commands, perhaps because his parents used predominantly direct imperatives to control his behaviour. In other words, the teacher's first three utterances

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may have been within his *linguistic* competence but outside his
*communicative* competence.
– He may not have possessed the appropriate *nonlinguistic* knowl-
edge for understanding the teacher's communicative intention.
For example, he needed situational knowledge about where the
towel was and where it belonged, as well as social knowledge
about the tidiness convention at school (a convention which
the teacher's second utterance explicitly appeals to).

These possible explanations highlight three corresponding aspects
of the skill involved in understanding meanings:
– the ability to understand linguistic structures and vocabulary;
– knowledge of the *potential* communicative functions of linguis-
tic forms;
– the ability to relate the linguistic forms to appropriate non-
linguistic knowledge, in order to interpret the specific func-
tional meaning intended by the speaker.

An important implication of the third aspect is that the foreign
language learner needs more than a 'fixed repertoire' of linguistic
forms corresponding to communicative functions. Since the rela-
tionship between forms and functions is variable, and cannot be
definitely predicted outside specific situations, the learner must
also be given opportunities to develop *strategies* for interpreting
language in actual use.

## 1.4  Expressing functional meanings

In the preceding section, the incident between teacher and child
was presented as showing the hearer's failure to understand.
However, communication is a two-sided process, and it could
equally well be argued that the speaker had failed to verbalise his
message adequately. He had failed to judge the linguistic and
nonlinguistic knowledge of the child, and had therefore not
selected linguistic forms that would be interpreted as he
intended.

When we speak, we are constantly estimating the hearer's
knowledge and assumptions, in order to select language that will
be interpreted in accordance with our intended meaning. For
example, let us assume that the people in a room know that they
have been invited for a meal. The hostess may then utter the
single word 'Ready?' as a directive to come to the table and eat.
On the other hand, if they do not know that she has been prepar-
ing a meal, she must verbalise her meaning in greater detail, for
example with 'Would you like to come and have something to
eat?'. In each case, she takes account of the knowledge shared

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between herself and the others, and produces sufficient language to express her communicative purpose in that situation. As with the teacher, of course, she may find that she has overestimated her hearers' knowledge – perhaps the guests to whom she says 'Ready?' do not realise, after all, that they are to have a meal. In this case, again like the teacher, she must use their reaction as feedback about the failure of her attempt, and remedy it with new language.

The most efficient communicator in a foreign language is not always the person who is best at manipulating its structures. It is often the person who is most skilled at processing the complete situation involving himself and his hearer, taking account of what knowledge is already shared between them (e.g. from the situation or from the preceding conversation), and selecting items which will communicate his message effectively. Foreign language learners need opportunities to develop these skills, by being exposed to situations where the emphasis is on using their available resources for communicating meanings as efficiently and economically as possible. Since these resources are limited, this may often entail sacrificing grammatical accuracy in favour of immediate communicative effectiveness.

In the same way as for comprehension, then, the learner needs to acquire not only a repertoire of linguistic items, but also a repertoire of strategies for using them in concrete situations.

## 1.5    Understanding and expressing social meanings

As we saw in the preceding section, one factor determining the speaker's choice of language is the knowledge that he assumes the hearer to possess. A further important factor is his interpretation of the social situation in which communication is taking place: language carries not only *functional* meaning, it also carries *social* meaning.

The hostess who puts her head round the door and calls 'Ready?' to her guests is not only making assumptions about shared knowledge. She is also signalling her view that the situation is not formal. If she felt otherwise, for example because the guests were business acquaintances rather than personal friends, this would probably cause her to choose different language, such as 'Would you like to come and eat now?'. On an even more formal occasion, the socially appropriate form might be 'Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served'. Similarly, referring back to the communicative function discussed in an earlier section, a student

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might say 'Shut the door, will you?' to a flat-mate, but to a stranger on a train it would be more appropriate to say, for example, 'Excuse me, would you mind closing the door?' To use the formal version with a flat-mate, or the informal version with a stranger, would be equally likely to cause offence.

To a large extent, it is a question of a speaker conforming to linguistic (or rather, *socio*linguistic) conventions in order to be unobtrusive. He may choose socially appropriate speech in so far as his repertoire permits, just as he may choose socially appropriate dress in so far as his wardrobe permits. The process also works the other way, however: as well as the social situation determining the nature of the language, the language can help determine the social atmosphere of the situation. For example, the level of formality of the teacher–pupil relationship can be greatly affected by the level of formality of the teacher's language. In general, the use of informal speech not only reflects but also accelerates the development of a personal relationship. A foreigner may therefore be hindered in forming such relationships if he is unable to adapt his speech to the increasing familiarity and informality of a friendship. In effect, by using 'bookish' grammar, complete sentences and careful pronunciation, he may be sending out signals of formality and social distance unintentionally. Receptively, too, he may be unable to interpret the native speaker's attempts to move towards a more informal basis for the relationship, for example by tentative use of first name and colloquial turns of phrase. Therefore, as learners advance in competence, an important direction of progress is towards greater understanding and mastery of the social significance of alternative language forms. In the earlier stages, however, the emphasis is likely to be on achieving productive mastery of forms from a 'middle' level of formality, which will be acceptable both with friends and with strangers.

Similar considerations apply to other language forms that communicate interpersonal attitudes. Learners are sometimes misled by apparent structural or dictionary equivalents in their own language, which cause them to produce socially offensive forms in the foreign language. For example, Russian learners of English sometimes use the emphatic 'Of course!' in answer to a yes/no question, in a way that seems to suggest that the question is silly and the answer rather obvious. In fact, they are merely transferring a Russian lexical 'equivalent' that has no such overtones; they may remain unaware for years of the unfavourable effect they are producing on English-speaking listeners. Such errors as this are potentially more serious than any other, not

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least because few native hearers realise that their true source is
inadequate learning rather than offensive attitudes.

## 1.6    Summary

We can now summarise four broad domains of skill which make
up a person's communicative competence, and which must be
recognised in foreign language teaching. For the sake of simplic-
ity, they are here presented only from the speaker's perspective:
–  The learner must attain as high a degree as possible of linguis-
    tic competence. That is, he must develop skill in manipulating
    the linguistic system, to the point where he can use it sponta-
    neously and flexibly in order to express his intended message.
–  The learner must distinguish between the forms which he has
    mastered as part of his linguistic competence, and the com-
    municative functions that they perform. In other words, items
    mastered as part of a *linguistic* system must also be understood
    as part of a *communicative* system.
–  The learner must develop skills and strategies for using
    language to communicate meanings as effectively as possible in
    concrete situations. He must learn to use feedback to judge his
    success, and if necessary, remedy failure by using different lan-
    guage.
–  The learner must become aware of the social meaning of
    language forms. For many learners, this may not entail the
    ability to vary their own speech to suit different social circum-
    stances, but rather the ability to use generally acceptable forms
    and avoid potentially offensive ones.

## 1.7    Scope of the present book

The first of these four domains is not the main subject-matter of
this book. This should not be taken as an attempt to devalue
linguistic competence. On the contrary, its importance is here
taken for granted: it is one of the undeniable facts about language
use that we communicate by exploiting the creative potential of
linguistic structures. This has always been recognised in language
teaching, and as a result, we possess a wide range of techniques
for helping learners to master the linguistic system of a foreign
language.
     This book will concentrate on ways in which this repertoire of
techniques can be adapted and extended, in order to satisfy the
broader conception of communicative ability described in this
chapter. In particular, it will discuss ways in which:

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- Old techniques for controlled practice can be adapted so that the learner is helped to relate language forms to their potential functional and/or social meanings.
- The learner can be placed in situations where he must use language as an instrument for satisfying immediate communicative needs, and where the criterion for success is functional effectiveness rather than structural accuracy.
- The learner can be helped to use language as an instrument for social interaction, for example through role-playing activities, in which emphasis is on both the communicative effectiveness and the social acceptability of the language used.

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## 2 Relating forms to meanings

### 2.1 Introduction

The specific techniques discussed in this chapter will already be familiar to many readers. Here, the purpose is to show how they relate the acquisition of linguistic structures and vocabulary to the other three components of communicative ability described in the previous chapter, and how they therefore help to bridge the gap between linguistic and communicative competence.

The learning activities themselves are 'pre-communicative' rather than 'communicative'. That is, they aim to equip the learner with some of the skills required for communication, without actually requiring him to perform communicative acts. The criterion for success is therefore not so much whether he has managed to convey an intended meaning, but rather whether he has produced an acceptable piece of language. However, by emphasising the communicative nature of this language, the activities also aim to help the learner develop links with meaning that will later enable him to use this language for communicative purposes.

The term 'practice', as used here, includes not only activities where the learner's response is expected to be immediate (as in most drills and question-and-answer practice), but also those where the learner has more time to reflect on the operations he is performing (as in most written exercises). Each kind of activity has its role to play in helping learners develop both fluency of behaviour and clarity of understanding in their use of the foreign linguistic system. In each kind of activity, too, the linguistic forms may be more or less strongly related to communicative function and nonlinguistic reality. It is with this relationship that the present chapter is concerned.

This perspective also excludes other important factors which the teacher must control, and which are discussed in other methodological handbooks. One of these is the level of linguistic complexity which the learner is expected to cope with. This must clearly be adjusted to suit his learning stage within the course. Another is the linguistic relationship between prompt and response. At one extreme, the response may be composed largely of material already contained in the prompt, with very

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little reorganisation (e.g. 'Do you think she's British or American?' – 'She's British'). At the other extreme, the prompt may give little help, since the response is related in meaning rather than in structure (e.g. 'Can you tell me the time, please?' – 'Yes, it's half past eight', or the instruction to 'Describe this scene'). The importance of these factors must not be underestimated. They are crucial in enabling the teacher to adjust the linguistic demands made on learners and gradually extend the linguistic competence on which their communicative ability will ultimately depend. Again, however, the present chapter is concerned with the links that exist between the forms produced and their communicative function.

In the examples, 'P' stands for 'prompt', such as the stimulus in a drill or a question put by the teacher. 'R' is the learner's 'response', whether spoken or written. 'Cues' are devices such as pictures or printed items, which help determine the content of what the learner says.

## 2.2  Structural practice

This form of practice is included here to provide a point of departure for other, more communicatively oriented activities.

Many of the audio-lingual drills produced up to the end of the 1960s are of this type, where the focus is exclusively on the performance of structural operations. Here, for example, learners must produce the correct form of the simple past:

P:  John has written the letter.
R:  He wrote it yesterday.
P:  John has seen the film.
R:  He saw it yesterday. (and so on)

I am not suggesting that learners are never aware of meaning in this sort of activity. However, this awareness is in no way essential to performing the operations, and it is likely that many learners will focus only on the structural changes that they have to make. Indeed, they are encouraged to do this by the nature of the relationship between prompt and response, which belong together only by virtue of their grammatical structure, not because they might be expected to occur together in the course of a real exchange of meanings.

Many teachers now exclude purely structural practice from their repertoire, in favour of the other forms to be discussed in this chapter. Nonetheless, we are still too ignorant about the basic processes of language learning to be able to state dogmati-

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cally what can and cannot contribute to them. Structural practice
may still be a useful tool, especially when the teacher wishes to
focus attention sharply and unambiguously on an important
feature of the structural system.


## 2.3 Relating structure to communicative function

The example just discussed can be easily adapted so that it
rehearses the same structural facts, but in language which
sounds more communicatively authentic:

P: By the way, has John written that letter yet?
R: Yes, he wrote it yesterday.
P: Has he seen the film yet?
R: Yes, he saw it yesterday.

The items now serve to illustrate communicative facts as well as
structural facts: the prompt is an instance not only of a 'perfect
interrogative' but also of a question, while the response is not
only a 'past declarative' but also a 'reply'. That is, it is now pos-
sible to recognise the *communicative function* as well as the *structure*
of the linguistic forms. We have begun to take account of the
second domain of communicative skill described in chapter 1.

As we also saw in Chapter 1, communicative function is
closely bound up with situational context. A further step in pro-
viding links between structure and function is therefore to con-
textualise the language and ask learners to practise responses
which would be (a) realistic ways of performing useful com-
municative acts in (b) situations they might expect to encounter
at some time. For example:

Your friend makes a lot of suggestions, but you feel too tired to
do anything.
P: Shall we go to the cinema?
R: Oh no, I don't feel like going to the cinema.
P: Shall we have a swim? (*or* What about a swim, then?)
R: Oh no, I don't feel like having a swim.

Structurally, the learner is here practising the use of the gerund.
Functionally, he is learning ways of making and rejecting
suggestions. This functional aspect can naturally be emphasized
by the teacher as he presents the activity. Also, as we shall see in
chapter 7, the internal organisation of the course may highlight
the communicative functions that students are learning to
express, as well as (or even more than) the structures and vocab-
ulary they are learning to use.

In these activities, then, the student is learning to relate

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