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William Littlewood

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# Communicative Language Teaching

An introduction

*William Littlewood*

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## Introduction

### Purpose of the book

The purpose of this book is practical: to help teachers broaden their repertoire of techniques, so that they can enable learners to communicate more effectively in a foreign language.

The book is not intended as a first introduction to foreign language teaching. I have assumed that the reader is already familiar with basic techniques for teaching the structures of a foreign language, such as presenting new language through situations, conducting question-and-answer practice, or using oral drills. My purpose has been to suggest activities through which teachers can help learners to go beyond the mastery of these structures, to the point where they can use them to communicate meanings in real situations.

The discussion is directed mainly towards a teacher whose learners need to acquire a general communicative ability, which will enable them to cope with everyday situations. It is concerned primarily with the type of learner whose needs are described in the Council of Europe's 'Threshold Level', to which I will refer again in chapter 7: 'people who want to prepare themselves, in a general way, to be able to communicate socially on straightforward everyday matters with people from other countries who come their way, and to be able to get around and lead a reasonably normal life when they visit another country'. Accordingly, the main focus of the book is on the development of oral skills rather than the use of the written word, though many of the activities discussed can be adapted to provide practice in writing or reading.

My personal experience of foreign language teaching has been both with adults and with young school learners. In writing this book, I have had both types of learner in mind. It goes without saying, however, that the reader will consider some activities as more suitable for adults, while others are more suitable for schoolchildren. In any case, quite apart from age, groups differ in what they enjoy doing and what helps them to learn most effectively. It is therefore only the individual reader who can judge whether a particular activity is suitable for the groups that he or she teaches.

## Introduction

As I have already indicated, the focus of the book is on the practice rather than on the theory of foreign language teaching. However, if the practice of teaching were completely divorced from theory, it would merely be random activity. I have therefore tried to provide a coherent rationale for the techniques, in the hope that this will help the reader to relate them to the goal of communicative ability and integrate them into his or her own teaching methodology.

## Background to the book

The book has its main roots in the so-called ‘communicative’ movement, which has been influential in foreign language teaching since the early 1970s.

There is nothing new, of course, about the basic idea that communicative ability is the goal of foreign language learning. This is the assumption that underlies such widely used approaches as situational language teaching or the audio-lingual method. If developments since the 1970s have any special claim to the label ‘communicative’, it is because the implications of this goal have been explored more thoroughly and explicitly than before. These implications form the subject matter of this book, but two of them are so fundamental that I will pick them out in advance:

- 1 A communicative approach opens up a wider perspective on language. In particular, it makes us consider language not only in terms of its structures (grammar and vocabulary), but also in terms of the communicative functions that it performs. In other words, we begin to look not only at language forms, but also at what people *do* with these forms when they want to communicate with each other. For example, as we shall see in chapter 1, the form ‘Why don’t you close the door?’ might be used for a number of communicative purposes, such as asking a question, making a suggestion or issuing an order.

We can therefore combine the newer *functional* view of language with the traditional *structural* view, in order to achieve a more complete *communicative* perspective. This enables us to give a fuller account of what students have to learn in order to use language as a means of communication. It also suggests an alternative basis for selecting and organising the language items that we need to teach.

- 2 A communicative approach opens up a wider perspective on language learning. In particular, it makes us more strongly aware that it is not enough to teach learners how to

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manipulate the structures of the foreign language. They must also develop strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in real situations and real time.

We must therefore provide learners with ample opportunities to use the language themselves for communicative purposes. We must also remember that we are ultimately concerned with developing the learners' ability to take part in the *process of communicating* through language, rather than with their perfect mastery of individual structures (though this may still be a useful step towards the broader goal).

These points will become clearer in the course of the book.

### **Description of the book**

The starting point is a discussion, in chapter 1, of what it means to take a communicative view of language and language learning. The chapter leads to a description of communicative ability, from which I have drawn the main framework for the rest of the book.

The main core of the book (chapters 2 to 6) is concerned with classroom methodology. Chapter 2 discusses some ways in which familiar activities, such as drills, can be adapted so that they help learners to relate language forms more clearly to their communicative functions. Chapter 3, chapter 4 and chapter 5 are all concerned with various kinds of communicative activity, through which learners can increase their ability to convey meanings with the foreign language. Chapter 6 looks at activities for developing learners' listening skills.

Chapter 7 moves the focus from 'how to teach' onto 'what to teach': it considers how a communicative approach might affect the teacher's decisions about the content of a course. Finally, chapter 8 draws some threads together and considers some more general implications of a communicative approach to foreign language teaching.

In a short book such as this, it is obviously impossible to include as much detailed discussion as one would like, either of the underlying rationale or of the practical examples. I have therefore included a section 'Further Reading' at the end of the book. This contains suggestions, chapter by chapter, for readers who would like to pursue the main topics further, whether in a theoretical or in a practical direction. It also identifies publications which I have cited by title only in the text and

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includes additional references to published teaching materials which exemplify the techniques discussed.

Where I have used specific language-examples, these are in English. Otherwise, however, the activities are equally suitable for learners of other languages. I have taught German and French in addition to English as a foreign language, and have always been aware of the concerns shared by the teachers of different languages, especially where classroom methodology is concerned.

Finally, a word of apology to female readers. The words 'learner' and 'teacher' are conveniently neutral as regards sex, but the English pronoun system has forced me to choose between 'he' and 'she'. The fact that I use 'he' from this point on is of only superficial significance: learners and teachers are female as well as male.