

- MENU
- PRINTABLE VERSION
- HELP & FAQs

Creating the Conditions for Real Communication

Paul Lyddon

Seigakuin University

While many popular English as a Foreign Language (EFL) materials claim to use a “communicative” approach, careful analysis reveals that an oversimplified, mechanical view of communication often results in activities based on audiolingual principles. This paper re-examines the true nature of interpersonal communication and then outlines the conditions that support it. These conditions call for not only a focus on meaning, as championed by proponents of communicative language teaching (e.g., Harmer, 1991), but also attention to form, as advocated by a more recent wave of researchers (e.g., DeKeyser, 1998). Though not technically communicative themselves, language activities

relating form to meaning help students bridge the gap between linguistic and communicative competence, thus preparing the way for real communication (Littlewood, 1981). To facilitate the development of such activities, several strategies are suggested and an illustration of their application is provided.

好評である外国語としての英語教材の多くは「コミュニケーション・アプローチ」を用いているといわれているが、注意深く分析すると、コミュニケーションに対する過度の単純化された機械的な見解により、アクティビティがオーディオリンガル教授法の原理に基づいていることが明らかである。本論文は、対人関係のコミュニケーションの本質を再考査し、それを裏付ける条件の概要を説明したものである。その条件は、コミュニケーション・ランゲージ・ティーチングの提案者ら (e.g., Harmer, 1991) に支持されている意味(meaning)だけでなく、より最近注目されている研究者(e.g., DeKeyser, 1998)が提唱している言語の形態(form)にも目を向けている。厳密にはコミュニケーションではなくとも、言語の形態を意味に関係付ける言語アクティビティは学生の言語能力とコミュニケーション能力の差をなくし、それゆえ本来のコミュニケーションへ導く準備となる(Littlewood, 1981)。そのようなアクティビティの開発を円滑に行うために、いくつかのストラテジーが提案されそれを応用した事例も記載されている。

With the rise of communicative language teaching, many common EFL materials have come to bill themselves as using a “communicative” approach. As evidence of their claims, they offer scores of pairwork activities, many of which feature an “information gap.” While such activities may superficially resemble communication in a mechanical sense, they ignore two principal tenets of communicative orthodoxy: i.e., that information must be personally meaningful to those conveying it and that it must be conveyed for a purpose (Harmer, 1991). As

such, many so-called “communicative” activities are actually audiolingual exercises, their main purpose being to drill linguistic forms. Since the 1990s, a growing wave of research has been calling for renewed attention to form (DeKeyser, 1998), though not at the total expense of meaning. Drawing on the seminal ideas of Littlewood (1981), I illustrate an approach to activity design that incorporates both these two competing elements of meaning and form. First, however, let us take a closer look at the problem with the current situation.

Unmasking Audiolingualism

Richards and Rodgers (2001) remark that among the many textbooks purporting to be based on a communicative approach, some are “in fact written around a largely structural syllabus, with slight reformatting to justify their claims” (p.169). If this assertion is true, these “communicative” materials may really be little more than audiolingual ones in disguise. Furthermore, not just some, but many currently popular EFL materials fit this description. Below is an abridged model of a typical activity. Though created for illustrative purposes, it closely resembles those that actually appear in common EFL resource books.

Where are you from? Where do you live now?

Directions: Look at the table below. Take turns asking and answering questions with your partner. Fill in the missing information:

Example:

Student A: Where *is* Chris from?

Student B: He's from Portland.

Student A: Where *does* he live now?

Student B: He lives in Seoul.

Student A's Paper

Name	From?	Live Now?
<i>Chris</i>	<i>Portland</i>	<i>Seoul</i>
Bill		
Amy	Toronto	Bangkok
Your Partner		

Student B's Paper

Name	From?	Live Now?
<i>Chris</i>	<i>Portland</i>	<i>Seoul</i>
Bill	Sydney	Tokyo
Amy		
Your Partner		

In this example, the students each have information that their partner needs in order to complete the table, thus creating an “information gap,” a common device in communicative language teaching (Nunan, 1989). As teaching methods are often identified with the activity types they advocate (Richards and Rodgers, 2001), on the surface this activity might appear representative of the “communicative approach.” Nonetheless, while such an artificial transfer may nominally satisfy a mechanical definition of communication (cf. Shannon and Weaver, 1963), the activity can still be completed with little or no attention to meaning, as is evidenced by most students’

failure to recall, even minutes afterward, the information they have just “communicated.”

As meaning is the primary focus of all *natural* language use (Littlewood, 1981), this activity falls short of being “communicative” in a pedagogical sense. In fact, though it is student-negotiated (rather than teacher-mediated), it is really little more than a substitution drill, wherein students take turns supplying prompts and responses (e.g., “Where *is* X from?” “*He/She’s* from *place*.”). Finnochario and Brumfit (1983) identify drilling as a basic technique of audiolingualism, but they list several other characteristics that would also clearly put this activity in the audiolingual camp. The most salient of these are prescriptive language use and emphasis on form over meaning. By contrast, communicative language teaching activities value meaning above all else and allow students to use any language they like to complete the task (Finnochario & Brumfit, 1983).

The fact that an activity draws attention to linguistic structure and entails practice through drilling, however, does not necessarily make it bad. DeKeyser (1998) notes that most published work of the early 1990s shows a focus on form to be useful “to some extent, for some forms, for some students, at some point in the learning process” (p.42), though he adds that this tenuous statement is all most researchers are willing to agree on. In this light, it is not surprising that activities like the one above are mistakenly labeled as “communicative.”

To use such activities without caution, however, can prove counterproductive, particularly with less-motivated students. One criticism of the audiolingual method has been that the learning experience leaves students bored and unsatisfied (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). This dissatisfaction with audiolingual methodology may stem from its underlying assumption that motivation will arise from an interest in the

structure of the language (Finnochario and Brumfit, 1983). While teachers may see the value in learning for learning’s sake, many students do not. For the average learner, a key factor in language learning motivation is “personal relevance” (Williams & Burden, 1997). As such, a communicative approach to language teaching, wherein language is personally meaningful to the learner (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), would be more appropriate in most cases. Nevertheless, two fundamental questions remain: What is real communication? And how do we facilitate it?

The Conditions for Real Communication

In his classic ideas on the nature of conventional conversation, Grice (1989) describes it as “quasi-contractual” and underscores some of its characteristically cooperative features:

- The participants have some common immediate aim.
- The contributions of the participants are mutually dependent.
- The transaction continues in an appropriate manner until both parties agree to its end. (p.29)

That said, our earlier information gap activity arguably meets all three of these criteria, though the exchange it engenders is clearly unnatural. The problem is that Grice, unconcerned with second language teaching, does not address its particular contextual constraints. Of chief importance is the teacher’s role as the ultimate orchestrator of all classroom activity, no matter how “student-centered” it may be. In other words, the aim of the exchange and even the reason for having it could originate outside the two participants. Moreover, in addition to transaction completion, there is a language learning goal to consider. As

such, without contradicting Grice, I use the more formal term “communication,” which I qualify in the following four ways:

- 1) The information being conveyed must first be important to the speaker, who would otherwise have no reason even to possess it.
- 2) The information must also be potentially important to the listener, or there would be no reason for its transmission.
- 3) The speaker and listener must have a combined set of cognitive language skills adequate to ensure that the information can be encoded and decoded faithfully.
- 4) The listener must actively process the information to evaluate its potential and then decide on a course of action.

The following conditions would then be necessary for this type of interaction to take place:

- ◆ A personal desire for both parties to communicate
- ◆ A meaningful, socially acceptable purpose for communication
- ◆ Sufficient communicative competence for accurate information transfer

While Grice no doubt makes these same assumptions about ordinary conversational exchanges, he does not state them explicitly as he does not deal directly with the classroom language teaching situation.

The first two of these conditions derive from Harmer’s (1991) principal criteria for judging the degree to which classroom activities are communicative, though the second one has been modified to preclude exchanges on overly sensitive topics. Then,

whereas Harmer’s attention shifts to relaxing language control so that students may use whatever linguistic resources they already have, mine turns to providing structural support to help students acquire those resources. In short, my aim is to develop engaging and purposeful, yet non-threatening, activities that focus on meaning while still drawing attention to form.

In support of this position, Littlewood (1981) cites the need to bridge the gap between linguistic and communicative competence by way of “pre-communicative” activities, which seek to give students fluent control over structural forms. DeKeyser (1998) adds that fluency development requires the meaningful use of language while keeping relevant declarative knowledge, i.e., grammar rules, in working memory. Though Littlewood declares student production of an acceptable piece of language to be the main criterion for success in pre-communicative activities, he points out that differences in instructors’ handling of feedback, i.e., whether the teacher’s comments address matters of form or of meaning, can influence an activity’s perceived focus. Rivers (1983) cautions that this type of language activity lies in the realm of “pseudo-communication” in that it does not guarantee transfer into autonomous interaction. However, she concedes that “some kind of practice in putting together smoothly and confidently what [the students] are learning is also essential” (p. 43).

To facilitate the development of such practice activities, below is a list of strategies, gleaned from various sources and corroborated by years of personal teaching experience:

- Look for ways to make the students care about the activity’s objective (e.g., by connecting it to their personal lives).
- Give the students a stake in the activity (e.g., by letting the students supply the content and/or by turning the activity into a meaningful task).

- Empower the students to influence the way the activity unfolds (e.g., by allowing for student choice).
- Engage the students cognitively (e.g., by requiring them to purposefully process information).
- Give the students the freedom to discover their limits, thus creating a “desire to know” (e.g., by eliminating any *unnecessary* language support). (Lyddon, in press)

The last of these may seem to contradict an approach that advocates attention to form. In truth, however, it can provide an ideal context, for it allows students to make mistakes during meaningful communication and, thus, affords the teacher with an opportunity to draw their attention to structures that are clearly important to them. Furthermore, even when suited to the linguistic level of the students, most activities can be made complex enough to elicit a number of language structures, some of which may be left uncontrolled, as an example in the next section will illustrate.

Although activities exhibiting any degree of language control cannot truly be considered “communicative,” there is still a stark qualitative difference between those being advocated here and ones like the earlier example. Harmer (1991) claims that language learning activities are generally neither communicative nor non-communicative but rather they lie somewhere along a continuum. Clearly, the original example is far on the lower end. If not merely to practice language, why would students want to discuss a list of random names with no real-world relevance? Furthermore, this activity lacks all real purpose as the students are not asked to do anything meaningful with the information they are supposed to exchange.

On a positive note, the activity is linguistically simple enough for most false beginner-level students to handle. Unfortunately, many students consistently fail to produce the target structures accurately and show little sign of improving, even as they practice with their partner. One explanation is that in the absence of meaning or purpose the students become lax and do not pay sufficient attention to the model. Ironically, the only meaningful question, in which the students ask about their partners, comes last. Once the students have finished drilling each other on a long list of faceless names, any interest they might originally have had in the activity has sadly disappeared.

The Road to Communicative Competence

One way of remedying this situation is to re-cast the activity as a task, i.e., a “goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome” (Willis, 1996, p.53). An example would be a game, such as Communicative BINGO (Lyddon, November 2001). The classroom procedure might go as follows:

- 1) Distribute (or have the students make) BINGO cards. To fill in the spaces on their cards, the students circulate around the room, introduce themselves to various people, and write those other people’s names in the squares.
- 2) Have the students put the BINGO cards aside and copy a table like the following on a separate sheet of paper. (Add more rows as necessary.)

Hi, I'm <u>A</u> . (Hi, <u>A</u> . I'm <u>B</u> . It's nice to meet you.) Nice to meet you, too.	Where are you from? (I'm from <u>Aomori</u> . And you?)	Where do you live now? (I live in <u>Miyahara</u> . And you?)	What do you like to do in your free time? (I like <u>listening to music</u> . And you?)

- 3) Put the students in rows.
- 4) Have the students interview each person in the row opposite them and fill in the missing information.
- 5) Put the students in groups so that each group has one student from each row. Now the students are ready to play BINGO.
- 6) Have the students determine the turn order for their group (e.g., do paper-rock-scissors to decide who will be first and then continue clockwise).
- 7) The player whose turn it is chooses one name on his or her BINGO card and asks a question about that person (e.g., "Where is _____ from?"). (N.B.: A player may not choose a person he or she has just interviewed.)
- 8) The player with the relevant answer responds, and everyone in the group marks the appropriate square by recording the information in their grid.
- 9) The first player to mark all the squares in any given row, whether horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, is the winner.

Note that the new activity unfolds in three distinct phases. The first of these brings in an objective that was absent in the previous activity, that of introducing oneself. With the goal of setting up their BINGO cards as they meet their classmates, the students thus have a dual purpose for their interactions.

The next phase also fulfills two roles. On one hand, it pushes the students to gather and share additional information necessary to finish setting up the game, in which they have already invested time. On the other hand, by having the students ask and answer personal questions, it also provides them with an opportunity to become better acquainted with some of their classmates. The additional question about free-time activities is designed to increase the chances that students find personal meaning in their interactions, perhaps even learning something that they have in common with one of their classmates and forming a social bond.

Some critics might argue against supplying students with entirely formed utterances that they might simply read off the page. However, most students only actually do so for the first few iterations, after which time it becomes easier to recall the relevant expressions from short-term memory than to scan for them in the text. In effect, these sentence patterns provide the students with the minimum support they need to complete at least that part of the activity with structural accuracy. Furthermore, they serve to boost students' confidence, thus enabling them to tolerate a higher degree of ambiguity in other places. For example, in answer to the question about free-time activities, the students might lack the language to satisfyingly express themselves. Consequently, they may actively seek instructor intervention in a so-called "teachable moment" and/or resort to other communication strategies already in their repertoire.

In the final phase, the structural focus becomes more noticeable as the students begin practicing third person singular forms, where the referent is now one step removed. However, the information the students are sharing is still meaningful to them as it relates back to someone on at least one person's card and serves the ultimate purpose of advancing the game. Also note that this order reverses that of the original activity and, thus, allows the students to remain personally involved in the context of their communication for as long as possible.

Conclusion

Real communication entails more than a mechanical transfer of information from one person to another. It also requires that information be meaningful and that its transfer have a purpose. However, some common EFL materials purporting to use a "communicative" approach ignore these two important points. As such, they often reduce to largely form-focused exercises and, thus, prove inadequate for helping students build their communicative competence. At the same time, form is still a necessary condition for real communication and, thus, mustn't be neglected. What students need are opportunities to express themselves through tasks that will introduce form in meaningful contexts and thereby allow them to develop fluency using low-level structures without becoming bored. It is these kind of "pre-communicative" activities that will enable them to finally bridge the gap between linguistic and communicative competence. Only then will they be able to handle the challenges of truly communicative tasks and, thus, arrive at real communication.

References

- DeKeyser, R.M. (1998). Cognitive perspectives on learning and practicing L2 grammar. In C. Doughty & J. Williams (Eds.), *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp.42-63). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Finocchiaro, M., & Brumfit, C. (1983). *The functional notional approach: From theory to practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grice, H.P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harmer, J. (1991). *The practice of English language teaching* (New ed.). London: Longman.
- Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative language teaching: An introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyddon, P. (in press). Making language activities more communicative. *Proceedings of the 5th National and International Conference of the Association of Teachers of English of the Czech Republic*.
- Lyddon, P. (2001, November). *A game for any occasion*. Poster session presented at the 27th Annual International Conference of the Japan Association for Language Teaching, Kitakyushu, Japan.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J.C., & Rodgers, T.S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rivers, W.M. (1983). *Communicating naturally in a second language: Theory and practice in language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Shannon, C.E., & Weaver, W. (1963). *The mathematical theory of communication*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R.L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Willis, J. (1996). A flexible framework for task-based learning.
In J. Willis & D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenge and change in language teaching* (pp.52-62). Oxford, UK: Heinemann.