

# COMMUNICATIVE NEEDS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING\*

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The theme of language and the learner's communicative needs is a familiar one in language teaching. In recent years applied linguistics has been revitalized by attempts to describe how language reflects its communicative uses, and by demonstrations of how syllabus design and methodology can respond to the need for communicative uses of language in classrooms and teaching materials. This paper attempts to contribute to our general understanding of how language use reflects underlying communicative needs by considering some central aspects of communication. Five assumptions about the nature of verbal communication will be discussed; that communication is proposition based, conventional, appropriate, interactional and structured. These will be discussed in relation to the communicative needs of second or foreign language learners.

## I COMMUNICATION IS PROPOSITION-BASED

Let us begin by examining basic survival language needs; those, for example, of a learner who has an active vocabulary of perhaps two hundred words, a minimal knowledge of the syntax of English, but who is in a situation where English is required for simple basic communicative purposes. The most immediate need of the speaker is to be able to refer to a core of basic "referents" or things in the real world, that is to be able to name things, stages, events, and attributes using the

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words together to make predictions. This is what I mean by the term *proposition*. A proposition is the linking together of words to form predications about things, people and events. For example the words *book* and *red* constitute a proposition when we understand the meaning of *The book is red*.

Propositions are the building blocks of communication, and the first task in learning to communicate in a language is to learn how to create propositions. Language is comprehensible to the degree that hearers are able to reconstruct propositions from a speaker's utterances. When the child says "hungry" to its mother, the mother understands "I am hungry"; from "no hungry" the mother understands the child's message as being "I don't want to eat." (Wells, 1981) From these examples we see that sentences do not have to be complete or grammatical for their propositional meaning to be understood. We often make good sense of a speaker who uses very broken syntax, just as we can understand a message written in telegraphese; *no money send draft*.

Sentences may contain more than one proposition. *The girl picked the red flower* contains the propositions *the girl picked the flower*, *the flower is red*. Sentences may contain the same proposition but differ in what they say about it. The following sentences contain the proposition *John married Mary* but differ in what they say about it;

When did John marry Mary?

Why did John and Mary get married?

Mary and John have been married for ages.

"Survival-level" communication in a foreign language however consists of more than the construction of propositions. Speakers use propositions in utterances in a variety of ways. They may wish to ask a question about a proposition, affirm a proposition, deny or negate a proposition, or express an attitude towards a proposition. Now while the adult native speaker of English can use the resources of adult syntax to code propositions in the appropriate grammatical form, the beginning foreign language learner finds that the demands of communication often exceed his or her knowledge of the grammar of English. The learner's immediate priority is

to construct a way of performing such operations as stating, affirming, denying, or questioning propositions, in the most economical way, using a partial knowledge of the vocabulary and syntax of the target language. Here the learner has similar needs to the child learning its mother tongue. Child language is characterized by its ability to express complex propositional meanings within the limits of a restricted grammatical system. Mother talk—that variety of speech which mothers use when talking to young children—is coded to make propositions more readily identifiable (Goody, 1978). Mothers' questions to children, for example, contain far more Yes-No questions than Wh questions, because propositions are more readily identifiable with Yes-No questions.

How do foreign language learners communicate propositional meanings when they lack the fully elaborated grammatical and discourse system of the target language? To answer this question, let us consider how a learner might try to express the meanings contained in the following sentences;

John ought to have come on time.

I regret I wasn't able to get to your class on time.

I can't afford to buy that dress.

One strategy learners adopt in communicating complex meanings is to "bring propositions to the surface" by expressing propositions directly rather than indirectly and by expressing lexically, aspects of meaning that are coded in the auxiliary system, in complex clauses, and by grammatical devices in the target language (Richards, 1981; Dittmar, 1981). The first sentence for example, contains the proposition *John came late* together with the speaker's attitude towards the proposition. The meaning is roughly *Speaker disapprove that John came late*. This could be communicated by saying;

Why John late? (said with non-approving intonation), or  
John late. that bad.

The second sentence contains the proposition *I am late*

together with the speaker's expression of regret. It might be communicated by saying;

I late, So sorry.

*I can't afford to buy that dress* contains the propositions;

*The dress is expensive. I don't have enough money to buy the dress.*

It could be restated;

The dress expensive. Cannot buy.  
Can't buy the dress. No money.

This type of "restructuring" is seen in the following examples in which utterances in simplified learner syntax are compared with standard adult grammar.

*L2 utterances*

1. Mary lazy. No work hard.
2. Tomorrow I give money.
3. You no money. I lend you.
4. This way. See the map.
5. One day I go to England.

*Equivalent in standard adult syntax*

1. Mary can work hard if she wants to.
2. You will have your money tomorrow, I promise you.
3. I will lend you some money if you need any.
4. According to the map, this ought to be the way.
5. I would like to go to England some day.

Teachers too often resort to this type of language in communicating with speakers of limited language proficiency. The following examples were produced by teachers who are native speakers of English.

1. A teacher is explaining the meaning of *wash*. "In your house you . . . a tub . . . you (gestures) wash."
2. Here is a teacher explaining how to take telephone mes-

sages. "I want to speak other person. He not here. What good thing for say now?"

3. A teacher explaining an interview procedure produced: "Not other student listen. I no want. Necessary you speak. Maybe I say what is your name. The writing not important."
4. And here is a teacher reminding her students to bring their books to class. "The book . . . we have . . . (hold up book) . . . book is necessary for class. Right . . . necessary for school. You have book."

The examples above illustrate a linguistic system which can be used for communicating basic propositional meanings. Such a system is known as *child language* when it is produced by infants learning their mother tongue, *interlanguage* when it is produced by foreign language learners, *teacher talk* when it is used by teachers, and *foreigner talk* when it is produced by native speakers communicating with foreigners. The linguistic system of syntactic, lexical, and semantic organization behind this type of communication is one which uses a basic "notional-functional" core of vocabulary items, a syntax which depends on simple word order rules (such as the formation of negation by placing the negative word in front of the proposition) and in which the communication of meaning is not dependent on grammatical systems of tense or aspect, auxiliaries, function words or plural morphemes, at the initial stages of communication.

The ability to use such a communicative system is crucial in the first stages of foreign language learning. We should consequently be tolerant of grammatical "errors" from learners who are at this stage of the learning process. Learners should not attempt active communication too soon, however. Before the learner is ready to begin speaking a foreign language, he or she should have a vocabulary of at least 200 words and a feel for the basic word order rules of the target language. The learner needs to develop a feel for the system of basic word order (in English, subject predicate sentence order, adverb and adjectival positions, negation, question formation, etc.). When speaking is taught, the initial goal

should be the production of comprehensible utterances through expressing basic propositional meanings.

## II COMMUNICATION IS CONVENTIONAL

While much of the learner's efforts in speaking a foreign language center on developing the vocabulary and syntax needed to express propositional meanings, it is native speaker syntax and usage that is ultimately the learner's goal. As language acquisition proceeds, the learner revises his or her ideas about how propositions are expressed in English. The learner's syntax complexifies as knowledge of negation, the auxiliary system, questions, words order, embedding, conjoining, etc. expand. In short, the learner begins to develop grammatical competence.

Both linguists and applied linguists in recent years have emphasized the creative properties of human grammatical systems. Language users were said to possess as part of their grammatical competence, the ability to produce an infinite number of sentences, most of which are novel utterances. The learner's task was said to be the internalization of the rules needed to generate any and all of the possible grammatical sentences of English. The primary focus of language teaching was to create opportunities for these grammatical abilities to develop in language learners.

The fact is, however, that only a fraction of the sentences which could be generated by our grammatical competence are actually ever used in communication. Communication largely consists of the use of sentences in conventional ways. There are strict constraints imposed on the creative-constructive capacities of speakers, and these serve to limit how speakers are entitled to code propositional meanings. In telling the time for example, we can say, *It's two forty*, or *it's twenty to three*, but not *it's three minus twenty*, *it's ten after two thirty*, or *it's eight fives after 20*. If I want you to post a letter for me I may say, *Please post this letter for me*, or *Would you mind posting this letter for me*, but I am unlikely to say, *I request you to post this letter*, or *It is my desire that this letter be posted by you*. Although these

sentences have been constructed according to the rules of English grammar, they are not conventional ways of using English. Though they are grammatically correct "sentences" they have no status as "utterances" within discourse, since they would never be used by native speakers of English.

This fact considerably complicates the task of foreign language learning. Once learners have progressed to the stage where they are beginning to generate novel utterances, they find that a considerable percentage of their utterances fail to conform to patterns of conventional usage, although they are undoubtedly English sentences. Constraints which require speakers to use only those utterances which are conventional affect both the lexical and grammatical structure of discourse. Constraints on lexical usage manifest themselves in idiosyncracies and irregularities of usage which effect particularly verb, noun, preposition, and article usage, and are usually rationalized as "exceptions" or collocational restrictions in teachers' explanations.

Thus teachers must explain that *a pair of trousers*, refers to one item, but *a pair of shirts* to two, that we can speak of *a toothache* or *a headache* but not *a fingerache*; that someone may be *in church*, but not *in library*. Conventionalized language is seen in many other dimensions of discourse. For example:

- (a) *Conversational openers*. *How are you?* may be used to open a conversation in English, but not *Are you well?* or *Are you in good health?*
- (b) *Routine formulae*. Some conventional forms are expressions whose use is limited to particular settings, such as *Check please* said when a bill is requested in a restaurant.
- (c) *Ceremonial formulae*. These are conventional phrases used in ritualized interactions, such as *after you*, said as a way of asking someone to go before you when entering a room, and *how nice to see you*, said on encountering a friend after an absence of some time (Yorio, 1980).
- (d) *Memorized clauses* (Pawley and Syder, in press). The concept of conventionalized language usage may be applied to a broader class of utterances. These are clauses

which do not appear to be uniquely generated, or created anew each time they are required in discourse, but which are produced and stored as complete units. Pawley and Syder cite the following examples:

Did you have a good trip?

Is everything ok?

Pardon me?

Please sit down.

Call me later.

I see what you mean.

They argue that speakers of a language regularly use thousands of utterances like these. Unlike "novel" utterances, (those which speakers put together from individual lexical items), these are pre-programmed and run off almost automatically in speech production. Researchers in second language acquisition have likewise observed that language learners often use conventional formulae and memorized clauses as crutches which make communication easier. There is often a high frequency of such forms in their speech in the early stages of conversational competence (Schmidt, 1981).

The observation that language is conventional has important implications for language teaching. Firstly, it suggests that there is reason to be skeptical of the suggestion that language cannot be taught, but only "acquired." Many of the conventionalized aspects of language usage are amenable to teaching through various pedagogic formats. Secondly, applied linguistic effort is needed to gather fuller data on such forms, through discourse analysis, and frequency counts, with a view to obtaining information of use to teachers, textbook writers and syllabus designers.

### III COMMUNICATION IS APPROPRIATE

Mastery of a foreign language requires more than the use of utterances which express propositional meanings and are conventional forms of expression. The form of utterances must also take into account the relationship between speaker and hearer and the constraints imposed by the setting and



circumstances in which the act of communication is taking place. *What's your name?* is a conventional utterance for example, but it is not an appropriate way of asking the identity of a telephone caller, for which purpose *May I know who is calling?* is considered a more appropriate way of requesting.

Communicative competence includes knowledge of different types of communicative strategies or communicative styles according to the situation, the task, and the roles of the participants. For example if a speaker wanted to get a match from another person in order to light a cigarette, he or she might make use of one of the following utterances, according to the speaker's judgment of its appropriateness:

1. Make a statement about his need: "I need a match."
2. Use an imperative: "Give me a match."
3. Use an embedded imperative: "Could you give me a match?"
4. Use a permission directive: "May I have a match?"
5. Use a question directive: "Do you have a match?"
6. Make a hint: "The matches are all gone I see." (Ervin-Tripp, 1976)

Young children learning their mother tongue soon become skilled at using communicative strategies which they judge to be appropriate to different types of situations. Thus a child who wants something done for her may bargain, beg, name call or threaten violence in talking to other children, reason, beg, or make promises in requesting to parents, or repeat the request several times or beg in talking to grandparents.

The choice of an appropriate strategy for performing a communicative task or speech act is dependent on such factors as the age, sex, familiarity and role of speaker and hearer, which will determine whether a speaker adopts conversational strategies which mark *affiliation*, or *dominance*. In the former case, "got a match" may be considered an appropriate way of requesting a match, and in the latter, "I wonder if I could bother you for a match." (Brown and Levinson, 1978) Foreign language learners typically have less choice available to them for performing speech acts

appropriately. They may use what they think of as a polite or formal style, for all situations, in which case they may be judged as being over-formal, or they may create novel ways of coding particular speech acts, such as the use of *please + imperative* as a way of performing requests, regardless of who the speaker is talking to: For example "Please, you carry this suitcase" said by a non-native speaker to a friend, where "How about carrying this suitcase for me" would be a more appropriate form, or "Please bring me more coffee," said to a waitress, where a more appropriate form would be "Could I have another cup of coffee, please?" (Schmidt, 1981)

Canadian researchers investigated the problem non-native speakers have when they are put in a situation where they feel they lack the means of speaking appropriately, such as when a person who has been taught to use a formal type of French, needs a style of speaking suitable for communication in informal situations. It was hypothesized that speakers would show considerable discomfort in using a casual style of speech and that they would handle this discomfort by downgrading the personality of the interlocutor and by judging that the interlocutor had formed a bad impression of them. It was argued that subjects would have some awareness that they were not speaking in a suitably friendly and casual manner, and would conclude that they really did not like the person they were speaking to anyway. The results of the study supported this prediction. "These findings have certain implications for second language learners who have only mastered basic vocabulary and syntax in their new language but have not developed skills in the domain of linguistic variability. Such people may find social interaction with native-speakers in their new language to be a relatively negative experience and may become discouraged from pursuing language practice with native speakers" (Segalowitz and Gatlinton, 1977, 86). Language learning texts have only recently begun to focus on the strategies learners need to use to code various types of speech acts appropriately. The emphasis is not simply on teaching functions and their exponents, but on coding functions or speech acts appropriately in different types of communicative situations. Textbooks

thus need to give practice in using particular speech acts with interlocutors of different ages, rank and social status and practice in varying the form of speech acts according to these social variables.

#### IV COMMUNICATION IS INTERACTIONAL

The use of utterances which are appropriate manifestations of speaker-hearer roles reflects the fact that conversation is often just as much a form of social encounter as it is a way of communicating meanings or ideas. This may be described as the interactional function of conversation. It is the use of language to keep the channels of communication open between conversationists and to establish a suitable atmosphere of rapport. Goffman has argued that "in any action, each actor provides a field of action for the other actors, and the reciprocity thus established allows the participants to exercise their interpersonal skills in formulating the situation, presenting and enacting a self or identity, and using strategies to accomplish other interactional ends" (Cited by Watson, 1974, p. 58). We see the evidence of this at many levels within conversation. In the initial stages of conversation with a stranger for example, conversationists introduce uncontroversial topics into the conversation, such as small talk about the weather, the transport system, etc. These topics are carefully chosen so that there is a strong likelihood of mutual agreement between speaker and hearer. "The raising of safe topics allows the speaker the right to stress his agreement with the hearer, and therefore to satisfy the hearer's desire to be right or to be corroborated in his opinions . . . . The weather is a safe topic for virtually everyone, as is the beauty of gardens, the incompetence of bureaucracies, etc." (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 117) These are examples of what has been called "phatic communion." "Much of what passes for communication is rather the equivalent of a handclasp, or an embrace; its purpose is sociability" (Bolinger, 1975, p. 524).

The mechanisms of phatic communion include (a) the speaker's repertoire of verbal and visual gestures which signal

interest in what our conversational partner is saying, such as the use of *mmm, uh uh, yeah, really*, etc., (b) the speaker's stock of "canned topics" and formulaic utterances which are produced at relevant points in discourse, such as the small talk which is required to make brief encounters with acquaintances comfortable and positive, (c) knowledge of when to talk and when not to talk, that is, appropriate use of turn-taking conventions.

Adequate management of these dimensions of conversation is essential to create a sense of naturalness in conversational encounters. Non-native speakers who lack the ability to use small talk and to manipulate the interactional aspects of communication may find many encounters awkward and may avoid talk where talk is appropriate. A foreign couple with a good command of English but lacking the ability to provide an ongoing output of conversational small talk were judged as cold, stand-offish and reserved by their American relatives (personal observation).

Communication as interaction is thus directed largely to the face needs of speaker and hearer, which require that we feel valued and approved of. If our conversational teaching materials emphasize primarily transactional skills, such as how to ask directions, how to order a meal, etc., learners may not have the chance to acquire the interactional skills which are also an important component of communicative competence.

## V COMMUNICATION IS STRUCTURED

The last aspect of communication I wish to consider is the ongoing organization of discourse. This can be considered from two perspectives, a "macro" perspective which looks at differences in rhetorical organization which reflect different discourse "genres" or tasks, and a "micro" perspective which considers how speech reflects some of the processes by which discourse is constructed out of individual utterances.

### A. *Task structure.*

Communication consists of different genres of discourse, such as conversations, discussions, debates, descriptions,

narratives, and instructions. These different rhetorical tasks require the speaker to organize utterances in ways which are appropriate to that task. When we tell a story, for example, we follow certain conventions as to how stories proceed and develop. Stories consist of a setting, followed by episodes. The setting consists of states in which time, place, and characters are identified. Episodes consist of chains of events and conclude with reactions to events. Most stories can be described as having a structure of this type and it is this structure which gives coherence to stories or narratives. Just as a sentence is grammatical to the extent that it follows the norms of English word order and structure, so a story is coherent to the extent that it follows the norms of semantic organization which are used in English.

Other types of rhetorical acts derive coherence from norms of structural organization. When we describe something, for example, coherence in our description is determined by how appropriately we deal with such elements as the level of the description, the content, the order in which items are described, and the relations between items mentioned in the description (Clark and Clark, 1977). In describing a landscape, for example, the writer must decide on the appropriate level of the description, and decide whether to focus on the general impressions of the scene or focus on every detail, as for example in a police report. The writer must also make decisions concerning content, which will determine which elements of the scene to include or exclude. Then the elements must be arranged in an appropriate order and the relations between the things mentioned must be decided. Some objects may be highlighted in the description for example, and other items related to them. The result will be a description that is coherent, that is, which is organized according to appropriate norms for that type of discourse. Similar decisions must be made when we describe people, rooms, states or events. If we adopt solutions that are conventional, we create rhetorical acts which are coherent.

Other types of rhetorical acts develop in ways which are also organized and structured. Conversations, for example, begin with greetings and progress through various ordered

moves in which speaker and hearer roles are ascertained, topics introduced, rights to talk assumed, new topics introduced, and at an appropriate time, the conversation terminated in a suitable manner. The development of communicative competence in a foreign language is crucially dependent on the speaker's ability to create discourse that is coherent. Schmidt (1981), in his study of the development of communicative competence in a Japanese adult, studied how the subject developed in his ability to perform coherent narratives and descriptions. At an early stage in his language development, the subject's attempts to narrate events suffered through the inclusion of excessive details presented in a random order, which made comprehension difficult.

#### *B. Process structure*

When we talk, much of our verbal output is made up of words and phrases which indicate how what we are going to say relates to what has been said. For example, our reaction to an idea or opinion may be to expand it, to add something to it, to disagree with it, to substantiate it, to give a reason for it or to explain it. The following are examples of phrases or lexical items which may serve these or related functions:

When it comes to that, and another thing, all the same, consequently, in my case, all the same, to give you an idea, yes but, well maybe, actually, anyway, as a matter of fact, to begin with.

These have been termed conversational gambits (Keller, 1981), and are signal directions and relations within discourse. Evidence suggests that these contribute significantly to the effect of fluency in conversation. Course materials are now available which focus just on these aspects of conversational competence. They can be used inappropriately however, if used too often or in the wrong places, as in the following example:

To my mind I'll have another cup of coffee.

## CONCLUSIONS

Theories of how we teach a foreign language reflect our view of what the nature of language is. While it is no innovation to define language as a system of communication, the way the dynamics of the communicative process influence the form of verbal communication is often less fully appreciated. ESL materials have too often focused only on the finished *products* of communication, rather than on the *processes* by which people communicate. A deeper understanding of the effects of communicative needs on non-native speaker discourse should make us more understanding of our students' difficulties in using English, and more tolerant of their partial successes.

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