Point-to-Point

A Response to "Communicative Competence and the Japanese Learner"

In *JALT Journal* 13/2, Rod Ellis published an article, "Communicative Competence and the Japanese Learner," in which he has advocated modest proposals for the improvement of English language teaching in schools in Japan. In doing so, he shows some awareness of the constraints on what is feasible; nevertheless, his rationale, both explicit and implicit, does not withstand scrutiny.

His abstract begins with the statement that high schools are now "embracing communicative approaches." This, unfortunately, misrepresents present conditions. Despite Mombusho's efforts to encourage a more communicative methodology, it is quite inappropriate to use the "embracing" metaphor to describe the situation in the schools which is still characterised by an extreme form of grammar translation methodology and a lack of oral activities. One must, therefore, regard as suspect Ellis's initial premise and, consequently, doubt the direct relevance of much of the discussion on the range of competences, for it is only grammatical competence which is the aim of schools. This is not, however, to deny the academic interest of that particular part of the article.

It is surely axiomatic that before proposing modification to an existing system, one must take into account the essential characteristics thereof. To paint a picture of English language teaching rife ("with increasing passion" [p. 104] in Ellis's words) with communicative methodology creates a dangerously false impression. Nearer the truth (and I derive this information from, among other sources, AET's, Japanese teachers, and observation of classes in schools) is a situation characterised by:

1. A programme dominated by a stringent examination system demanding excessive formal grammatical knowledge, often of the arcane variety, expressed largely in written form. (Ellis initially demonstrates his awareness of this but then fails to take it into considera-

tion.)

2. Teachers, students, and parents who seemingly give priority to the principles of this system and regard the conversational activities arising from communicative methodology as not serious work. (This is partly based on a survey of attitudes of over 1,000 students in the Tottori area as part of an inquiry into perceptions related to the AET programme being carried out by two colleagues and myself.)

Given this situation, it makes little sense to offer a solution based on the assumption that schools are now in the fond embrace of communicative methods. Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, let us assume that there is a degree of validity in Ellis's premise and examine his proposals in the light thereof. He proposes that:

1. Minimally, the focus should be placed on teaching formulae and a kit of rules for adapting them to contextual requirements.
2. These may best be taught "through problem-solving activities designed to raise learners' consciousness[1] about linguistic and sociolinguistic features of English."

As to [1], Ellis is not particularly forthcoming as to the substance of his proposal. It is, therefore, difficult to evaluate it. However, as expressed, it does not appear to be radically different from many of the current text books based on an inductive approach. Therein, there is a marked tendency to concentrate on forms which might be regarded as formulaic, particularly in the case of functions, and then later to introduce rules to explicate the patterns of the formulae.[2]

Though neither original nor particularly revolutionary, Ellis's proposal does have the virtue of not setting impossible goals. It may even in the present system have its place in the first and second years of junior high school where there is apparently greater possible flexibility in methodology. However, despite this, implementation would still cause problems as it would not ensure coverage of the syllabus items necessary for future levels when the all-pervasive influence of examination preparation dominates all classroom activity. This raises serious doubts concerning the feasibility of what Ellis advocates. Before being worthy

of serious consideration, there would have to be a demonstration of a means of solving these problems.

In his second proposal, Ellis suggests that his aims in [2] above "can best be achieved through problem-solving activities designed to raise learners' consciousness about linguistic and sociolinguistic features of English." An implied claim entailed herein is that a problem-solving activity which aims to discover some linguistic or sociolinguistic rule is more effective than any other available method in terms of understanding and retention. This would be a strong claim to make.

It is, however, based on an intuitively seductive argument for I suppose we all may feel instinctively that discovering something for oneself is preferable to being told it. Nevertheless what is intuitive about the learning process is neither necessarily true nor appropriate for formal classroom instruction.[3] Relying on one's intuition to decide personal actions is acceptable. However, when it is a question of proposing a wholesale change for a vast school system such as Japan's as is entailed in Ellis's proposal, one would hope that there is some form of empirical support such as, for example, a successful pilot scheme. Unfortunately, no such support is offered. This is understandable as it does not exist.[4] However, this IS an empirical question as Rutherford and Sharwood Smith point out in their introduction to a collection of articles on the teaching of grammar some of which are related to consciousness raising. They take the position that at this time the idea of CR should be posed for the purpose of "the stimulation of rational inquiry and not for the purpose of pushing premature decisions about how to teach languages" (1988, p. 7). Ellis, not heeding such advice, proposes the implementation of a methodology bereft of empirical support.

In spite of this, once again let us ignore a fundamental objection to Ellis's proposals and examine the problems of implementation. Given space limitations, I will discuss just two objections. (Cf. Sheen, 1990, for a lengthier discussion of this issue.) In the first place, one of the professed advantages of the approach is the using of the target language in the problem-solving. Now, I may be over-pessimistic, but I simply

cannot conceive of students in most English classes in Japanese schools being capable of conducting a discussion of grammatical and sociolinguistic problems of the type suggested by Ellis in English. They would surely have to do so in Japanese, thus negating one of the avowed advantages of the approach.

My second objection is related to the ability required in problem solving. This is very much intelligence-related. Consequently, in a class of forty mixed ability students, only a small subset will be able to solve the problem. Most will perform a passive role and will ultimately have to be instructed in the rule, thus negating another advantage of the approach, that of the active involvement in a discovery procedure. Of course, one might argue that even this non-participatory role might be of some benefit. However, this would have to be demonstrated with empirical support for it appears to be an extremely tenuous argument.

I have objected in this response to an applied linguist of deserved reputation and influence proposing overall modifications to the school teaching of English which are based on an initial faulty premise and for the effectiveness of which there is no empirical support. In conclusion, I would like to broaden this to appeal to applied linguists as a whole. I would suggest that as applied linguists, we should limit the discussion of our ideas for major changes in methodology to an audience of fellow applied linguists until such time as there is empirical support and ample practical justification for the implementation of those ideas. This, to repeat Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (ibid), will go some way to preventing the making of "premature decision about how to teach languages."

Notes

[1]It was Sharwood-Smith(1981) who first introduced this idea, terming it "consciousness raising." However, White, Spada, Lightbown, and Ranta (1991, p. 417) report that in a 1991 article in Second Language Research, he proposes that in future it should more appropriately be termed "input enhancement."

[2]Ellis gives in his appendix a sample text taken from the work of other authors which presumably contains examples of his proposed formulae. If this is the case, it is somewhat puzzling for two reasons:

a) It is odd that he gives examples not created by himself. I would have thought that given the overall changes he was proposing he would have had examples which he had already piloted on a sample population.

b) The examples are really quite complex. They, therefore, cannot possibly be an exponent of the simple formulae and a "kit of rules" he proposes. It is, therefore, somewhat difficult to discern their appropriacy as an example of an item in a course of minimal aims. However, as Ellis fails to give examples of his simple formulae, it is possible that this text does not contain examples thereof. If this is so, one wonders why the text is cited at all.

[3]Stevick 1980, p. 289) states in this regard, "There remains, I am afraid, a residue—not universal but widespread—a residue of resisitance and resentment against being given opportunities instead of rules and vocabulary lists . . . for which one foresees a practical need." This is compatible with the findings of Willing (1988) in his research on Australian immigrants. I suspect that Japanese students fall into this category, thus adding an additional burden on CR by means of problem solving.

[4]It is somewhat surprising that Ellis makes no mention of other research related to PS for, although there are are no studies which demonstrate the superiority of a PS methodology over others, Winitz and Read (1975) report extensive research into the efficacy of PS. Unfortunately, although they make strong claims for it (ibid, p. 24), they provide no substantial comparative data to support their position. In fairness to Ellis here, it should be pointed out that these two authors conceive of PS somewhat differently to him. They view it more in terms of the hypothesis testing of the L1 learner.

As one might expect, PS has been the subject of substantial research in the field of psychology (Ernst & Newell, 1969; Miyake, 1986). However, as Ellis makes no reference to research within his own field, it is hardy remarkable that studies beyond it remain undisturbed.

References

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