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**Ronald Sheen, Tottori University**

### **Rod Ellis Replies**

In writing "Communicative Competence and the Japanese Learner," I hoped to stimulate discussion of the role of communicative language teaching in high schools and colleges in Japan. I welcomed Sheen's response, therefore, in the expectancy that it would stimulate debate.

In a comprehensive survey of modern rhetoric, Tootell (1992) proposes a number of principles to guide the writer of a "critical response" of the kind Sheen provides. I will make use of these principles as a way of shaping my own reply.

**Principle 1: Make sure that you represent the author's views accurately; avoid the "straw man" error.**

Sheen claims that I have failed to take account of the "essential characteristics" of English classrooms in high schools in Japan (he makes no mention of colleges), which he says are characterised by "a stringent examination system demanding formal grammatical knowledge" and "teachers, students and parents . . . give priority to the principles of this system." In fact, though, I explicitly acknowledge this problem. On page 119 I refer to "the importance currently attached to grammar in public examinations and the widespread use of Japanese as the language of classroom communication." Sheen also states that I make the "implied claim . . . that a problem-solving activity is more effective than any other available method," but Sheen does not show in what way this "claim" is "implied." In fact, in this particular article I seek only to advance arguments in favour of problem-solving activities and carefully avoid comparing them with other activity types. It would appear that Sheen has fallen into the "straw man" error.

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### **Principle 2: Deal with the principal arguments advanced by the writer; avoid the “sideshow” error.**

One of the main purposes of my article is to demonstrate that in order to give serious consideration to how to teach communicative competence it is necessary to make a clear distinction between “knowledge” and “control” on the one hand, and between “linguistic” and “functional” knowledge on the other. The discussion of these distinctions is the core of the article—it covers seventeen out of twenty-five pages of text—and provides the theoretical basis for the “modest” (Sheen’s word) pedagogic proposals which I subsequently advance. Sheen fails even to mention the theoretical framework I develop, let alone discuss it. It would appear, therefore, that he is guilty of the “sideshow” error.

### **Principle 3: Present clear and full argumentation of any central thesis; avoid the error of an unsubstantiated assertion.**

One of Sheen’s major objections to my proposal regarding the use of problem-solving activities for developing learners’ sociolinguistic knowledge is that I do not provide any “empirical support.” He goes on to state that applied linguists “should limit discussion of . . . ideas for major changes in methodology to an audience of fellow applied linguists until such time as there is empirical support.” Here, clearly, is a very strong and controversial assertion. If it had been adhered to, for instance, it would have precluded the publication and implementation of Widdowson’s ideas for language teaching, as Widdowson (a noted applied linguist) has been singularly lacking in the provision of any “empirical support” for them. I scanned Sheen’s response carefully for any justification of this extraordinary claim, but could find none. It would seem that he is guilty of the “unsubstantiated assertion” error.

### **Principle 4: Offer a constructive alternative to the ideas you are seeking to refute; avoid appearing in a totally negative light.**

My “modest proposal” was that (a) an attempt should be made to

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teach sociolinguistic knowledge (but not sociolinguistic control), and (b) this might be achieved by the use of problem-solving activities. Sheen does not consider (a) and rejects (b). But what are Sheen's own views? Should we teach sociolinguistic knowledge? And, if so, how can it best be done? Unfortunately, we are only told what Sheen does not like in my proposal; there is no constructive alternative.

### **Principle 5: Make you points in a neutral and objective manner; avoid being polemical.**

Sheen has a taste for the polemical. He talks about my "intuitively seductive argument" (a metaphor that I am not at all happy about!). He talks about me "not heeding advice" from Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith, and my proposal being "bereft of empirical support." Emotive stuff. He also offers some flattery to placate me, however: I am an "applied linguist of deserved reputation and influence."

I have tried to demonstrate how Sheen fails to adhere to Tootell's rhetorical principles for the writing of critical responses. My purpose, however, is not so much to criticize Sheen's rhetorical skills as to point out to the reader the difficulty of trying to engage in serious debate on the basis of his response.

What I would have liked to have seen is some discussion of my proposal for a "minimal goal of language education in Japan" (i.e., teaching "knowledge" but not "control"). This is controversial, as many teachers probably feel that some attempt should be made to teach "control." It is a proposal that needs debate. It is a pity that Sheen does not provide it.

### Reference

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