

## SECTION THREE

### **Exercise types**

The focus of attention here is on the types of exercise which might be devised to translate general ideas about communicative language teaching into classroom procedures. Both papers in this section take up the principle expressed in the one preceding that teaching materials should engage the learner's active participation by making overt appeal to what he already knows; and both apply this principle to the business of practical exercise design. Notice that by participation I do not mean the conducting of orchestrated responses from a class under the direction of the teacher, which is a familiar feature of current pedagogic practice, but a real exercise of learner initiative in bringing his own knowledge and experience to bear on the learning process.

These papers, then, are attempts to think certain ideas through to their practical consequences. Unless one makes this kind of attempt, one is easily led astray by the allure of the ideas themselves, made all the more attractive by their apparent novelty. An awareness of this danger underlies the discussion in the first paper of this section. It was written at a time when the concept of communicative or notional syllabuses was beginning to take on the character of a new creed. It seemed to me then, and it seems even more to me now, that such a concept was only a stimulating speculation with which to open a debate (see Paper 19 in Section Eight below). Unfortunately, it has been widely adopted as a conclusion and people are busy not investigating but implementing it. Most of the real problems of applying a communicative approach are, in consequence, left unexplored. The papers here reflect my feeling that one is less likely to be misled into zealotry if one begins not at the selection stage but at the presentation stage of the language teaching process. Apart from anything else, this provides the context where one actually encounters the learner.

## 5 Two types of communication exercise

The title of this conference is testimony to a growing conviction among applied linguists and language teachers that teaching a language should involve not simply the teaching of its grammar but also the teaching of how the grammar is used in the business of actual communication. A new orthodoxy is emerging which defines the 'content' of language teaching in terms of function rather than form and which represents the learner's terminal behaviour as communicative rather than grammatical competence.

Some people (myself included) have suggested that it should be possible to apply the procedures of selection and grading not to grammatical units in the manner of structural syllabuses of the familiar sort but to communicative units of one kind or another (Candlin 1972, Wilkins 1972, 1974), and these writers have demonstrated how 'notional' or 'communicative' syllabuses might be devised. I find these demonstrations convincing and I am very much in sympathy, of course, with the approach they exemplify. But at the same time I think we ought to be careful of assuming too readily that syllabuses of this kind are universally appropriate. Part of the purpose of this paper is to suggest that in some circumstances there might be difficulties involved in applying communicative principles to selection and grading. Another part of its purpose is to suggest that in such circumstances it might be more feasible to apply such principles to presentation procedures at a later stage of language learning. The two types of communication exercise mentioned in my title are offered as examples of these procedures.

Possible difficulties with the communication-orientated syllabuses that have been proposed emerge when one considers how the notional categories they contain would be actually taught in the classroom. I should make it clear that I am not thinking of what Wilkins refers to as 'semantico-grammatical categories'. These are elements from the language system and relate to what Halliday calls the ideational and inter-personal functions of language as they are 'reflected' in the structure of the code itself (Halliday 1967/1968, 1970a). Such intrinsic functions have traditionally been part of the content of language teaching: what the notional syllabus does is to group them in such a way as to

make their meaning potential more evident. In this respect this kind of syllabus does not represent a departure with regard to content—it still deals with grammatical categories—but with regard to methods whereby these categories are arranged. What Wilkins calls 'categories of communicative function', however, are a different matter. These are not semantic but pragmatic elements and relate not to the intrinsic functions of the language system but to the extrinsic functions of language use. To include this kind of category in a syllabus is not to present aspects of language of a familiar kind in an unfamiliar way but to present aspects of language which have generally speaking not been included in syllabuses at all. The kind of difficulties I want to discuss arise because one is asking the teacher not only to adopt new methods but also to change his concept as to what the content of language teaching should be.

Let us consider what the teaching of communicative acts might involve. The first thing we have to recognize is that the names we give to these acts—promise, greeting, apology, praise, criticism, complaint, and so on—are labels we use to identify forms of social behaviour. Our ability to use such labels derives from our knowledge of the way our society is organized, of the way rights and obligations are associated with certain roles, and so on. In other words, communicative functions are culture-specific in the same way as linguistic forms are language-specific. Just as what we call present tense or perfective aspect will not necessarily correspond directly with grammatical categories in another language, so what we call a complaint or a promise will not necessarily correspond directly with 'categories of communicative function' in another culture. Asking for a drink in Subanon is not at all the same thing as asking for a drink in Britain (Frake 1964). The teaching of communicative functions, then, necessarily involves the teaching of cultural values. This may not pose much of a problem when there is close affinity between the cultures concerned, but difficulties are likely to arise when the values associated with the communicative functions of the language being learnt are remote from those of the learner's own culture. Wilkins' syllabus is designed specifically for Western European learners and the notional categories it includes are represented as communicative universals. It is important to recognize, however, that they are only universals in relation to the shared cultural values of Western Europe. How far, then, is a syllabus of this type exportable outside Europe?

I think we have to accept the possibility that it might not be, at least not in its present form and if it is intended, as I assume it is, for initial rather than remedial teaching (a remedial syllabus has to meet different conditions of adequacy, some of which will be implied in what follows). Let us suppose that we wished to teach a particular communicative act in an Asian or African classroom. There are a number of ways in which we

might set about doing this. We might, for example, simulate a real-life situation in which two or more people were engaged in a conversation which included the performance of the communicative act in question. The difficulty of this procedure is that the learners have somehow to separate out from the situation as a whole just those features which serve as the necessary conditions whereby the act is effectively performed. This is a general difficulty with the situations devised to create a context for language in the classroom: language items are associated with the situation as a whole and not with those factors in the situation which are relevant in the realization of the communicative value of these items. Classroom situations may be effective for teaching the semantic signification of sentences and their constituents but they generally fail to teach the pragmatic value of utterances.

Somehow or other, then, the learner has to be made aware of what conditions have to be met for the utterance of a sentence to have a particular communicative effect. Simply presenting the sentence in a situation will not do since the learner has still to know which features of the situation are relevant and which are not. Furthermore, no matter how the teacher exemplifies the act he must represent the person performing it as having a certain role which makes him an appropriate performer of the act. But of course a role in the learner's own culture which appears to be comparable may not be associated with the kinds of rights, obligations, and so on which are required for this role to meet the necessary conditions for the act in question to be performed. The teacher could of course actually explain the set of conditions associated with each of the communicative categories he introduced and perhaps make overt cross-cultural comparisons, but to do this he naturally has to know what these conditions are.

At this point we make contact with a further difficulty. The adoption of a notional or communicative syllabus requires the teacher to be familiar with rules of use as well as rules of grammar. But how does he acquire this familiarity? His own education will have acquainted him with grammatical rules, and these make explicit and, as it were, exteriorize his own intuitive knowledge of the system of English and thereby provide in some degree for his ability to teach this system. There are, however, no such explicitly stated rules of use to which he can make reference in a similar way. It seems to be that the provision of such rules is an applied linguistic task which logically precedes the design of communicative syllabuses. What is urgently needed is a taxonomic description of communicative acts characterized in terms of the conditions that must be met for them to be effectively performed, and grouped into sets according to which conditions they have in common (cf. Candlin 1973). The kind of formulae presented in Searle (1969), Labov (1970), and Fillmore (1971) suggest ways in which such a description might be developed.

What I have in mind is a kind of pedagogic rhetoric which will serve as a guide to rules of use in the same way as a pedagogic grammar serves as a guide to grammatical rules, an exteriorization of knowledge which the teacher can use as a link between his own learning of the language and his teaching of it to others. I think that it is possible that rhetorics of this kind done for different languages would reveal certain 'social universals' in the conditions on different communicative acts. If this were so, they would provide a basis for comparison across cultures, and this would obviously give an indication as to how the content of a communicative syllabus might be selected and graded for learners in communities very different from our own.

But all this is in the future. Meanwhile English teachers have no guidance as to how a notional syllabus is to be interpreted in terms of classroom teaching, and where guidance is necessary I think it would be a mistake to attempt to impose such a syllabus upon them. Let me say again that I am referring to that part of notional syllabuses which has to do with categories of communicative function. The reform of syllabuses with reference to Wilkins semantico-grammatical categories would seem to be perfectly feasible because it does not involve a fundamental alteration in concept of content. I do not wish to appear reactionary but I believe that we should be wary of recommending radical change. English teaching has suffered badly in the past by the imposition of pedagogic dogma: all too often an approach to teaching applicable to one set of circumstances has been given the status of a universal creed. The usual consequence of this has been that teachers have been led to renounce their faith in their own methods in order to embrace principles which they cannot practise.

I have tried to suggest certain difficulties which cast doubt on the wisdom of adopting it as a universal principle that syllabuses for initial language learning should be devised by selecting and grading their content by reference only to communicative criteria. I hope that it is understood that in saying this I am not questioning the importance of notional syllabuses for the teaching of European languages in Europe, nor the need for a communicative approach to the teaching of language in general. But I think that we have to accept that in many countries and for some considerable time to come English teaching will continue to be based on the familiar structural syllabus, though perhaps modified, wherever local circumstances permit, along the lines suggested by the semantico-grammatical component of Wilkins' syllabus. If we accept this, however, we must look for some other way of making the learner aware of the communicative functioning of the language. I now come to the second part of my paper.

Given that in many countries English teaching in schools will continue to focus on the language system, and given that such teaching leads

learners to acquire some knowledge of sentences, the problem is how to develop in the learner an awareness of how sentences can be used in acts of communication. What we need to do is to alter his concept of English from one which represents the language as a set of patterns to be manipulated for their own sake to one which represents it as a means of conveying information, ideas, attitudes, and so on and whose functions are comparable to those of the learner's own language. To use Halliday's term, we want to provide him with a new 'model' of English (Halliday 1969). I think we can do this by devising exercises which draw upon two kinds of knowledge and which then relate them, it being in the relationship between them that the communicative value of linguistic forms is realized. The first kind of knowledge is what the learner knows of the formal properties of English, incomplete and imperfect though this may be. The second kind of knowledge is that which he has acquired in other areas of his education: knowledge, for example, of geography, history, general science. In his learning of these other subjects he has quite naturally experienced language as a means of communication: indeed learning *how* information is conveyed in these different subjects is just as much a part of the subjects as learning *what* information is conveyed. So although his English lessons may not have taught the learner the communicative functions of English, his lessons in other subjects will necessarily have taught him the communicative functions of the language which is used as a medium for teaching them. In other words, at the end of, say, three or four years of secondary schooling, he already knows a fair amount about the functions of language in use. What he does not know is how *English* is used to fulfil these functions. The proposal I am making, then, is that after three or four years of secondary schooling (though this stage and period of time will obviously vary in different circumstances) we should present exercises which establish a relationship between these two kinds of knowledge which the learner has acquired in isolation from each other and so realize the potential of English sentence patterns as a medium of communication. In making this proposal I am simply following what I take to be a fundamental pedagogic principle: that wherever possible new learning should be an exploitation of what the learner already knows.

What kind of exercises? I want to approach this question by considering two general aspects of communication which the learner's own experience of language use will have exposed him to. The first of these is quite simply that communication is multi-functional. There is no need for me to dwell on this aspect of communication since we are all familiar with recent attempts to formalize it in terms of speech functions, illocutionary acts, and so on to which reference has already been made in this conference. It is of course this multi-functional character of communication which the notional syllabuses I have been discussing are

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designed to teach and which, I have argued, learners will have been made aware of in their 'subject' lessons. They will have recognized in their learning of science, for example, that language does not simply express propositions, but is used to define and classify, to give instructions, to make generalizations, to set up hypotheses, and to deduce rules from particular instances. Learning these functions will have been part of the learning of science.

My first type of communication exercise would aim at making explicit the multi-functional nature of language use and at exemplifying this with reference to English. Its purpose would be to show how English can be used to fulfil the different functions previously associated with the language through which the other subjects in the curriculum have been learnt. In science, for example, the learners will be familiar with sets of *instructions* as to how an experiment is to be carried out, with *general accounts* of how experiments are conducted and of what results are obtained, and of *reports* of particular experiments and their findings. We might then devise an exercise in what has been called elsewhere *rhetorical transformation* (Allen and Widdowson 1974b) whereby learners are required to transform a set of propositions into an appropriate communicative act, or transform one communicative act into another. Let us continue to suppose that the subject which we are making use of is general science. We might provide the learner with a set of simple sentences whose propositional content has to do with the process of electrolysis, with which we will assume they are already familiar. One such set of simple sentences might look something like this:

We weigh two copper plates.

We place the switch in the 'on' position.

The current flows through the circuit for about half an hour.

We place the copper plates in copper sulphate solution.

We connect up the copper plates to a battery and a switch.

etc.

The learner is then required to transform this set of sentences into, say, a set of instructions for carrying out the experiment in question. This involves rearranging the sentences, perhaps conjoining and embedding some of them, and making certain structural changes. One could also, at a later stage, deliberately omit sentences referring to necessary stages in an experiment and get the learner to provide the missing information from his own knowledge. Notice that an exercise of this type would combine the purposes of reading comprehension and guided composition by directly associating language use with an area of familiar knowledge. A set of instructions derived from the simple sentences cited above might look something like this:

Weigh two copper plates and place them in copper sulphate solution. Connect up the plates with a battery and a switch. Place the switch in the 'on' position. Allow the current to flow through the circuit for about half an hour and then remove the plates.  
etc.

Further rhetorical transformation operations can be carried out to change these instructions into, say, a general account, or into a report keeping the propositional content constant. Examples of these two communicative acts would be something like the following:

Two copper plates are weighed and placed in a copper sulphate solution. They are then connected up to a battery and a switch. The switch is placed in the 'on' position and the current is allowed to flow through the circuit for about half an hour. The plates are then removed from the solution.  
etc.

Two copper plates were weighed and placed in copper sulphate solution. They were then connected up to a battery and a switch, and the switch placed in the 'on' position. After the current had been allowed to flow through the circuit for about half an hour, the plates were removed.  
etc.

I have given different ways of organizing the propositional content of these acts to show how this kind of exercise can be further exploited to develop the learner's awareness of the devices available in English for giving differential 'rhetorical prominence' to the different elements of information being presented. These devices are of obvious relevance in the description of processes, where the order in which information is presented is frequently different from the sequential order of the actual events.

It is easy to see that this type of exercise can be used to cover a wide range of functional uses. There are two further advantages I would wish, tentatively, to claim for it. Firstly, it automatically provides practice in the manipulation of linguistic structures and in this respect is remedial. But notice that the formal operations are not being undertaken for their own sake but as part of the process of meaningful use. Secondly, communicative acts are not represented as isolated units isomorphic with sentences, but as units of discourse extending over a combination of sentence-like elements. One of the possible limitations of the notional syllabus is that grading constraints require that it associates communicative functions

with sentences as self-contained units of meaning. This leaves the problem of how we are to teach the way functions are actually realized in use—not by independent utterances but by utterances in combination. In other words, we still have to make the transition from system to use, from the learning of units separated out for teaching purposes to the learning of how they are used in actual discourse. I would suggest that the exercises in rhetorical transformation that have been proposed do help to make this transition by focusing on the way functions operate over a set of utterances which constitute a discourse precisely because of the functions they fulfil.

My first type of exercise, then, attempts to develop in the learner a sense of the multi-functional nature of linguistic communication as this is realized through English by bringing into association the learner's knowledge of English structures and his knowledge of other subjects in the school curriculum which incorporates, however implicitly, a knowledge of how language functions in use. The second type of exercise also draws on these two kinds of knowledge but this time it focuses on a different aspect of communication: the fact that it fulfils not only a range of functions of which the expressing of propositions is only one, but also takes a range of forms, of which the verbal is only one.

It has been pointed out often enough that in spoken interaction meanings are conveyed not only by verbal means but also through such paralinguistic phenomena as gesture, posture, facial expression, and so on (Laver and Hutcheson 1972). What has perhaps been less often pointed out is that paralinguistic features occur in written discourse too. An instruction leaflet, for example, will characteristically include diagrams, a tourist brochure will include maps, and in both cases the non-verbal devices may, like gesture, either supplement the verbal message or replace it. The kind of written communication which the learners I have in mind have had experience of will include a wide range of non-verbal devices: maps, charts, tables, graphs, line-drawings, and conventional diagrams. A glance at any elementary science textbook for example, will reveal that a large part of the information contained in it is conveyed through non-verbal means, and in the learning of science the student will be learning the conventions associated with this mode of communicating. He will be learning the relationship between verbal and non-verbal means of presenting information, of how to interpret a graph, or a diagram, or a flow-chart with and without direct reference to verbal messages, and of how to use these devices to present information originating from a verbal source. In other words, his learning of science, geography, mathematics, and so on will naturally have involved practice in what might be called *information transfer* (Allen and Widdowson 1974a, Widdowson 1973).

The second type of exercise that I want to propose attempts to exploit this knowledge of the multi-formal operation of communication by having the learners use English as the verbal means which is associated with non-verbal means of conveying information in the total communication process. It requires the learner to transfer information from one mode into another. For example, one might provide a short passage describing an instrument or a machine of some kind and instead of asking comprehension questions of the traditional type get the learner to complete or label a diagram by reference to the information contained in the passage. Similarly one might ask him to express a set of facts in the form of a table, or a graph.

Transferring information from a verbal to a non-verbal mode is an exercise in comprehension. Transferring from a non-verbal to a verbal is an exercise in composition. This suggests that information transfer can serve as a transition between receptive and productive abilities in handling written language. Once the learner is practised in the completing or drawing of diagrams, tables, graphs, and so on based on verbally expressed information, these non-verbal devices may be used as prompts for verbal accounts. Thus, for example, one might present a verbal description of a chemical experiment and require the learner to label a diagram, or draw a diagram of his own which expressed the same information. A diagram showing a similar experiment might then be presented and the learner required to produce a verbal description, which would to some degree match that of the original descriptive passage. Simple information transfer exercises of this kind could of course be graded for difficulty by increasing the complexity of the verbal and non-verbal accounts, by withdrawing prompts, and so on. (For examples see Allen and Widdowson 1974a, Glendinning 1975.)

In the first part of this paper I pointed to certain possible difficulties about applying communicative criteria to selection and grading as a universal principle of syllabus design and suggested that in some circumstances the approach to language study it assumes might be more effectively applied at a later stage in the learning process. In the second part I proposed two types of exercise as examples of such an application. These, it was argued, deal with two fundamental aspects of communication, which learners at a certain stage of their schooling might be expected to be familiar with through their experience of language in association with other subjects in the curriculum. These exercises in rhetorical transformation and information transfer attempt to link up the learner's knowledge of the multiple functions and forms of communication with his knowledge of English structures. They focus not on communicative acts as independent functional units formally made manifest as sentences, but on stretches of discourse where

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function ranges over a number of sentence-like elements. Furthermore, they attempt to develop comprehension and composition not as separate activities but, more naturally, as two aspects of the same communicative process.

### **Notes**

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