Communicative language learning: where does grammar fit in?

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A renewed interest in grammar as an integral part of a language curriculum has recently become evident, as witnessed by such facts as the production of new grammar books and related exercises, conferences and teacher-training seminars, and a growing concern for descriptions of how language works in recently published textbooks.

The topic itself [1], like many other areas of language teaching, has undergone considerable shifts in emphasis through the years: conscious knowledge and application of grammar rules, once the keywords of "grammar/translation" teaching, were later often rejected both by "audiolingual/audiovisual" textbooks and, more recently and in varying degrees, also by "situational" materials. What was questioned was obviously not the existence of an underlying pattern of "rules" in a language, but rather the value of exposing the student to sets of explicit grammar explanations.

Although conscious reflection on language structures has never really disappeared from most textbooks published in Italy during the last twenty years, the "communicative" approaches developed in the early seventies were sometimes (and often wrongly) assumed to do away with grammar, in their effort to enhance straightforward communication unhampered by the burden of rules and exceptions to rules.

In more recent years, a balanced view of language, seen *both* as a means of performing a variety of social and psychological activities *and* as a structured system of sounds and signs, has been accompanied by a growing awareness of the importance of *both* fluency in communication *and* accuracy in mastering the system [2]. However, since the impact of grammar on "communicative" approaches has not often been adequately investigated, nor have the contents and methodology of a new approach to grammar teaching been clearly defined, the risks of falling back on old practices,

[1] The term "grammar" is used here in the general sense of "a description of the principles of organization of a language". Later in this paper, however, we will be concerned with a specification of this term.

[2] Cf. Brumfit (1984).

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and thus of never integrating grammar into a coherent language curriculum, must not be underestimated.

Within the range of problems posed by a reassessment of the status and significance of grammar in language learning, this paper will concentrate on the following specific points:

— is grammar necessary and/or useful in the language learning process?

— where does grammar fit in as part of a communicative language learning experience?

— how far should reflection on language range (i.e. which kinds of linguistic "facts" should be brought to the student's attention)?

— does "teaching for communication" affect the criteria for describing a language?

We shall first discuss what role, if any, grammar can be expected to play in language learning, with special reference to the procedures which are commonly adopted to facilitate such learning in "communicative" approaches. We will then examine what changes in the traditional notion of "grammar" may be made necessary by the adoption of a "communicative" approach. Finally, we shall make a few considerations on the problem of choosing or defining ways for describing language within the context of "communicative" approaches.

Is grammar necessary and/or useful in language learning?

The question of whether students' exposure to explicit, systematic grammar explanations is in fact necessary and/or useful in the language learning process leads us to the very core of a long-standing controversy about learning: at one end, learning is viewed as the result of repeated exposure to language, through which correct habits are gradually assimilated, without necessarily implying any conscious knowledge of the underlying "rules" of language use.

At the other end, learning has been seen as a dynamic effort through which the human mind, which is endowed by nature with specific abilities, grasps the "rules" which govern linguistic behaviour and creatively applies them to produce new, acceptable output.

Perhaps the best known example of this dichotomy is the behaviourist/cognitive controversy, which opposes a view of language as a set of behavioural habits governed by the stimulus/response principle to a view of language as the product of cognitive processes, emphasizing the value of rule- governed language acts.

More recently, a trace of this dichotomy seems to have reappeared in the controversial and much-debated distinction, introduced by Krashen and others [2], between *acquisition* — the subconscious process through which language would be assimilated — and *learning* — the result of formal study and the conscious mastering of the language system. Perhaps rather hurriedly, *acquisition* has often been considered as the exclusive keynote of L1 assimilation by children, while *learning* has been seen as the major component of L2 study by adults.

What has often been neglected is the fact that, although this dichotomy can bring us back to differing, even opposite, views of language learning, its extreme viewpoints represent the two ends of a scale *which must also allow for intermediate positions,* simply due to the fact that no single theory of language learning is, at the present state of our knowledge, capable of giving an exhaustive account of how learning really takes place.

Moreover, the consideration of one mode of language learning — say, acquisition — to the exclusion of the other, is supported neither by our experience as language speakers nor by our experience as language teachers. As a matter of fact, although much language use by both children and adults is done without conscious reflection on relevant "rules" — and even less with systematic recourse to a "metalanguage" to describe such rules —, we often *talk about* language, and have our own linguistic means to do so; if nothing else, to ask for classification, reformulate our ideas, give judgments about the correctness of what we hear and say: in a word, to "negotiate" our way of getting messages across, we also make use of some sort of, perhaps informal, "metalinguistic" behaviour.

[2] Cf. Krashen (1981) and Krashen (1982). For a comprehensive criticism of Krashen's theories, cfr. Gregg (1984).

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As language teachers and users of language courses, we have hardly ever rejected the idea of giving our students *both* systematic training in language structures, through various kinds of "manipulation" drills *and* exposure to language through renewed contacts with "living examples" of the oral and written word; we have often left our students some amount of freedom to test their hypotheses about how language works, thus favouring an "inductive" approach, but have at the same time offered them the opportunity to take advantage of clearly stated "rules".

Although these may be considered as mere empirical observations, if we trust experience we will be willing to admit that, neither in our day-to-day language use nor in the foreign language classroom, is there a real break of continuity between *acquisition* of language through continuous, though sometimes limited, exposure, and *learning* by systematic, formal study. In teaching ideas, the balance between the two may shift in time, as indeed it has, according to the prevailing cultural atmosphere and realted methodological tendencies, but I think that this should be taken not so much as an indicator of methodological confusion, but rather as an effort to cope, to the best of our abilities, with problems which admit of no easy or straightforward solutions.

Where does grammar fit in as part of a communicative language learning experience?

Early "communicative" approaches to language learning have emphasized the value of *exposure to language* and, at least apparently, minimized the value of talking *about* the language.

In more recent years, "communicative" approaches have progressively been refined, so that now we often make use of techniques and materials which set out to promote *fluency* though the use of games, simulation, role-playing and the information gap principle, by giving students a choice of *what* to say and *how* to say it, and by focussing on the *content*, rather than the *form*, of interaction.

Side by side with such "fluency" activities, another range of materials and techniques seek to promote *accuracy*, by having students concentrate on selected items of language, thereby reducing their freedom of choice and focussing on the *form*, rather than the *content*, of their performance.

A peculiar feature of more recent "communicative" methodologies has been, in fact, the extension of the principle of meaningful practice to "accuracy" activities, once the domain of purely mechanical "drills", to the extent that the distinction between "accuracy" and "fluency" activities seems, at least in some materials, blurred. At the same time, the need for "bridge" activities, progressively leading the student from strictly controlled to freer language use, was advocated early [4] and has become frequent practice in many coursebooks.

[4] Cf. Byrne (1976).

Thus we see that the tendency has been to maximize students' exposure to the language and to promote linguistic intake by practice rather than by formal study. However, this has not necessarily implied the primacy of "acquisition" over "learning" in the classroom. Whatever the implications behind techniques and materials might be, "accuracy" activities do make reference to some kind of description of language when presenting students with sets of items for practice: drills and patterns do not exist in isolation, but only within the context of a coherent "grammar" of the language. The fact that no metalanguage is used, and that the student is often neither asked nor given an explicit "rule", is only evidence of an *implicit*, rather than *explicit*, approach to grammar teaching. However, some kind of awareness of the meaning of the pattern under consideration must be presupposed for the student to be able to interiorize the relevant rule.

Even for "fluency" activities one might argue that some metalinguistic awareness is brought into play, although perhaps not so systematically. What these considerations lead us to is the recognition of the fact that, although we may believe that exposure to language and natural communication in a meaningful environment remain the main factors responsible for the development of communicative skills, the foreign language class cannot provide the learner with the same social, psychological and biological conditions that a child experiences when "acquiring" his mother tongue. Our foreign language classes should certainly first and foremost be pedagogically organized so as to maximize exposure to language, but, because of the very fact of being organized settings working under institutional constraints, they can hardly avoid some

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some kind of "metalinguistic focus", i.e. an ever-present, though implicit, concern with language *forms,* language being both the *target* and the *means* of learning [5].

[5] Cf. Besse and Porquier (1984, 80-92).

If some sort of *learning* always takes place in the classroom though combined in various ways with *acquisition,* its degree of explicitness, formality and systematicity can vary considerably, and is, in the last analysis, left to the teacher and/or coursebook writer to define. All options are open here, as shown by the variety of materials available today, ranging from the ones which combine the latest in "communicative" techniques with traditional grammar summaries.

They key point at this stage seems to me the need to become progressively more aware of the features of specific teaching situations and try to ascertain which factors, if any, can condition the working of the acquisition and learning potentials in our students.

Thus we might ask ourselves *when,* and *to whom* the formal study of grammar, or conscious reflection on "rules", can be particularly fruitful. Both research evidence [6] and our empirical experience as teachers seem to suggest that:

[6] Cf. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982, 58-71).

a) a conscious effort to monitor, i.e. to produce or correct language by reference to patterns of usage which have been the object of formal study, is frequent, and may indeed be necessary, if the focus of the verbal performance is on *formal linguistic tasks* (e.g. correcting a composition), while more *"communicative" tasks* (e.g. interacting in a conversation) apparently call for the learner's production of that part of the language system that he/she has up to that moment assimilated;

b) the successfulness of such "monitoring" strategies seems to be limited to simple grammar rules, i.e. to grammar "facts" that can easily be generalized: complex syntactical patterns are often difficult to produce and/or correct by mere reference to a "rule";

c) formal study of grammar rules, as can easily be inferred, presupposes that the learner has reached a level of cognitive development that enables him/her to consciously manipulate language structures (what Piaget [7] calls the *formal operations* stage: the ability to handle realtionships between abstract ideas). This is why reflection on language starts being possible, effective, and indeed motivating, with preadolescents and adolescents, and becomes fully available to (young) adults;

[7] Cf. Inhelder and Piaget (1958).

d) the learner's personality also appears to play a crucial role. Children and, in general, relaxed, self-confident learners, tend to rely less on "grammar", and more on language production "by feel", while adults, and, in general, anxious learners who are afraid of making mistakes, tend to frequently check their performance through conscious recall of "rules". The "good" learners are obviously the ones who use *both* strategies, releasing their "flow" of communication, but also making use of their monitoring skills to check, *if* and *when* necessary, their verbal performance;

e) study habits seem to be conditioning factors as well: strong emphasis on formal instruction, for instance, invites learners to rely very much on conscious reasoning rather than on language production "by feel". This factor, together with *c)* and *d)* above, goes some way towards accounting for the importance generally attached by adults to grammar explanations.

Perhaps the main implication of what we have been saying so far is a more realistic view of grammar, of its function in the learning process and, therefore, of our expectations both as learners and as teachers of languages. Conscious reflection on grammar "facts" has a role to play in language learning: encouraging conscious reflection on linguistic items means providing the learners with the opportunity to activate important factors in their language learning process, which, in turn, means equipping them with a further opportunity to make use of their language environment to the best possible advantage. Individual differences in personality, learning strategies, degrees of linguistic awareness and ability to appreciate and use the working mechanisms of a language, all call for individualized teaching approaches which can exploit the full range of such learning potentials, thus including conscious reflection on language.

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How far should "reflection on language" range?

The adoption of communication skills as the primary aim of language teaching has had considerable implications for the role and status of grammar. Furthermore, advances in general and applied linguistics, the impact of communication sciences and the resulting changes in language curricula require a re-consideration of the notion of "grammar" itself [8]. In other words, we must ask ourselves which kinds of linguistic "facts" should be brought to the students' attention by a teaching approach whose acknowledged priority is *communication*.

As a matter of fact, the last few years have witnessed a progressive widening of the scope and content of language curricula, by which language courses (and related textbooks) seem to have developed a growing concern for many or all of the following areas in the analysis of language:

a) phonology and *writing*, seen as basic technical competence;

b) morphology and syntax, although at various levels of complexity. This we may call the "sentence" level of analysis, in that its focus is on forms and relationships *within the sentence;*

c) discourse analysis, and *textual grammar.* This *above the sentence* level focusses on relationships between paragraphs in a text, and indeed on the principles of organization ("coherence" and "cohesion") [9] of the text as a whole. This approach elicits the rules of *codification* (i.e. production) and *decodification* (i.e. recognition) of texts;

d) the study of *lexis,* focussing on words and even smaller units of meaning (e.g. affixes);

e) the impact of *pragmatics* in developing ways of making use of verbal and non-verbal information in order to achieve a communicative aim within the context of a specified situation;

f) semantic, which may be considered as a *cross-theme*, in that it interacts with all the above areas in varied and complex ways.

Although this list is not meant to be exhaustive, it does give an idea of the extremely diversified kinds of competence that a communication-orientated curriculum sets out to develop in language learners. However, our main concern here is not in establishing which relative importance should be attached to each of the above areas when teaching for communication, but rather in deciding *whether all of them should be made the object of conscious, systematic reflection and/or formal study on the learner's part;* in other words, whether the notion of "grammar" should be widened to include other areas beyond the traditional study of the *formal* properties of language *structures* (morphology and syntax).

I think there is no straightforward answer to this question. Attention to the features of the individual teaching situation must obviously come first and foremost: the "audience" we are teaching (pre-adolescents / adolescents / (young) adults); the level of instruction (primary / secondary / tertiary education); the educational and linguistic targets we are aiming at, are all examples of factors which will have a direct influence on our decisions. However, since an explicit choice of criteria may be useful, at least as an example of possible guidelines in defining the problem, one might envisage that, at secondary school level, and working with adolescents and/or young adults in a general foreign language curriculum [10], language teaching could:

a) provide explicit, systematic reflection in the areas of *morphology* and *syntax* (at a level suitable for the learners' stage of cognitive development), together with a basic approach to the study of *lexis*. This could be made the object of more *formal* reflection since such linguistic "facts" can more easily be described and codified in systematic ways;

b) develop a growing awareness of how *texts* are coded and can be decoded as well as of the *pragmatic* features of communication. This would mainly take the form of more *informal* (but nevertheless precise and coherent) reflection as the *need* — and indeed the *motivation* — for it arises in the ongoing day-to-day development of language skills.

As can be seen it is not easy — and neither would it probably be convenient — to specify in exact detail the *degree* of *formality* and *systematicity* to which particular linguistic "facts" should be dealt with in the classroom [11]. More important is, I think, the identification of broad areas of possible reflection which, because of their own nature, lend themselves more than others to formal, systematic treat-

[8] The term "grammar" has often been given different meanings in different linguistic theories. In its broadest sense, it may imply a full description of language, therefore including *phonology* (the study of phonemes and their combinations), *morphology* (the study of the internal structure of words, including inflection), *syntax* (the study of how morphemes and phrases combine to form sentences), *lexicology* (the study of lexis) and *semantic* (the study of the meaning of morphemes and their combinations). There is no unique definition of these categories and most theories, in fact, do not include *all* of them in their notion of "grammar". For a detailed discussion, see the relevant entries in Dubois et al. (1973).

[9] Cf. Widdowson (1978, 22-56).

[10] Language study *for specific purposes* (e.g. for science and technology, for business and economics, for academic use, etc.), as well as advanced literary studies, may require different sets of criteria.

[11] For a detailed discussion of the possible domains of "reflection on language", as opposed to a more narrowly defined "grammatical reflection", see Amble (1982).

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ment. However, the choice of a description of language suitable for our purposes, is not, as we shall see in the next section, without further important implications in this respect.

Does "teaching for communication" affect the criteria for describing a language?

Descriptions of language have been available for centuries and although there has never been a straightforward correspondence between a particular description and a relevant "method" of language teaching, developments in the way linguists have described language *have* had a direct influence on the way the same language has been taught (if not learnt) [12]. "Communicative" approaches to language teaching, for example, have often been associated from the start with "notional/functional" description of language [13]. I believe that, far from establishing the equation *teaching for communication = notional grammar* [14], there is much to be said in favour of taking into account semantic considerations when discussing criteria for describing language in a communication-oriented language curriculum:

a) since teaching for communication is concerned primarily — although not exclusively — with getting *meanings* across in social interactions, a description of language based on *semantic*, and not only on *formal*, criteria is likely to promote a better consistency in the overall language curriculum; in other words, a description of language which takes semantic categories — like "concepts" or "language functions" — into consideration may offer coherent relationships between the development of language as a means of communication and the reflection on language as a system;

b) semantic considerations would allow the learner to clearly see the network of relationships between *language forms* and *meanings conveyed by forms* (e.g. one form can express a variety of meanings, and, conversely, one particular meaning can be expressed through a variety of forms);

c) because priority is given to *meanings* rather than *forms*, when considering ways of expressing a particular language function, it would be easier and, above all, natural and logically coherent, to introduce sociolinguistic and pragmatic considerations to account for variations in linguistic realizations: explaining the difference in usage of *can/could/would/would mind* as alternative ways of requesting others to do something, for instance, would naturally lead the learner (and the teacher) to take into account factors such as *context, situation, degrees of formality, roles, statuses,* in a word, all the features of communicative interaction. I believe this is one important way — albeit not the only one — to bridge the gap between a strictly "formal" view of grammar and the impact of communication sciences in language teaching [15].

[12] Cf. Roulet (1972).

[13] Descriptions of language which emphasize its *semantic* rather than *formal* properties can be traced back to Jakobson (1971), Jespersen (1924) and even Saussure (1916). Halliday (1973), Wilkins (1976) and the work carried out by the team of experts of the Council of Europe Modern Languages Project, bear a direct relationship to the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

[14] Although the body of knowledge associated with semantic description of language has not yet been structured in such a way as to allow a definite reference to *a* notional grammar, *reference* grammars of English using semantic categories do exist: cf. Leech and Svartvik (1975), and, for Italian students, Mariani et al. (1984).

[15] These considerations are not meant to imply that a language *syllabus* should necessarily be organized by taking "concepts" and/or "functions" as its exlusive components. The full options of structural and/or semantic choices are still open; moreover, the question of *syllabus design* cannot be isolated from the context of the overall methodology (thus including techniques and materials) in a language curriculum. Cf. Murison- Bowie (1983).

Conclusions

The issues discussed in this paper do not certainly exhaust the range of problems which teachers must face when setting out to define and implement an approach to grammar which can best be geared to the needs of a language learner. However, I have tried to show that the recent renewed interest in grammar as part of a language teaching curriculum, instead of being taken merely as a sign of a return to the past, can offer a good chance of reconsidering the role and value of the formal study of language within the whole language learning process.

Thus we have seen that learning by conscious study and acquisition by exposure to language are not mutually exclusive, so that it would be misleading to consider them as separate processes. However, our concern as teachers is to clarify the conditions under which learning takes place in the classroom, and become more aware of the potential value, but also of the possible limitations, of both formal study and exposure to language.

We have, then, tried to investigate what can be considered as the object of reflection on language in a communicative approach: if *morphology, syntax* and *lexis* are traditionally more amenable to systematic description, *other dimensions of the communicative use of language*, e.g. procedures to code and decode texts and the pragmatics of language use, need to be taken, perhaps more informally, into consideration.

Finally, the problem of choosing suitable criteria to describe a language has led us to outline some advantages of integrating *semantic* considerations in our effort to provide the student with a description of language consistent with communication-orientated teaching and learning.

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