

## COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING: THE ROLE OF REFERENCE GRAMMARS

Luciano Mariani

1. Teachers are usually well aware of the fact that teaching language for communication has considerably widened the range of *skills* which students are supposed to be developing during the course: within and beyond the four traditional language skills (oral and written comprehension and production), students are now often trained to recognize and use features of oral and written *discourse*, as well as strategies for effective *negotiation* of meaning and for making use of the language system for the *purposes* and *intentions* they may wish to fulfil in different *situational* contexts.

What is perhaps not always openly recognized is that, by the very fact of introducing a complex and varied range of *communicative skills*, we are at the same time widening the scope and range of *linguistic facts* to which students are constantly exposed. Communicative strategies rely as much on *socio-cultural patterns* of behaviour and interaction as on the *linguistic means* that make those patterns both possible and effective. Thus successful realization of communicative intentions (e.g. a) suggesting a course of action, or b) reinforcing an argument in a discussion) implies the recognition and production of *language items* which can express the relevant range of required *language functions* (1):

- a) You *could* (always) send a telegram  
*Couldn't* you send a telegram?  
 You *might* try sending a telegram.
- b) This government has kept its promises: We have reduced laws but *that's not all* - we have improved the social services.

Similarly, the successful encoding and decoding of messages in oral discourse requires familiarity with a range of *cohesive features* which «hold together» utterances produced either by a single speaker (a) or by different speakers (b):

- a) I'm sure Paul is coming to the party. He told me so.
- b) A: I think he will be late, as usual.  
 B: I hope not.

Thus, whether we as teachers deliberately choose to give *explicit* explanations of such

(1) All examples are taken from Mariani, L., et al., *Grammatica Inglese della Comunicazione*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1984.

linguistic facts, or prefer to leave them *implicit*, in the way language is presented to and practised by the students, there is little doubt that any training in *communicative* competence carries with it a richer and more complex *linguistic* input than was perhaps the case in previous teaching approaches.

There also seems to be little doubt that both teachers and students, sooner or later, at some stage in their teaching/learning process, do need some kind of systematic review of that linguistic input. Although the investigation of language facts is rightly seen as an outstanding *formative* activity — both in its product and its process — in the foreign language classroom, the need for *comprehensive* treatment of language facts also arises from the feeling, which is often experienced, by both teachers and students, that learning a language under institutional constraints calls for periodic syntheses of what is often a rich and varied, but sometimes heterogeneous and even caotic, linguistic input.

2. *Grammar* has traditionally been the safe answer to this demand for coherent, systematic description of language. But can grammar in its traditional sense supply the teacher and the student with adequate help in analysing and describing the *uses* of language activated by a communicative approach? Above all, can grammar meet the need for a clear account of the relationships between the *formal* regularities of the language system and the *semantic* and *pragmatic* uses of that system, i.e. the ways in which we use language *forms* to convey *meanings* and fulfil communicative *intentions*? The answer is probably both *no* and *yes*.

*No*, if we limit the domain of grammar to the traditional areas of phonology, morphology and syntax, i.e. to a mere description of the *formal* properties of language. *Yes*, if we take a broader look at language, and try to consider and describe it not only as a systematic network of *forms*, but also in terms of the *notions* (i.e. *concepts* related to a variety of topics, situations and logical relationships) which forms express, and in terms of the *communicative objectives* that are fulfilled through language in establishing and maintaining oral and written discourse.

This three-dimensional consideration of language, which allows us to keep its *formal*, *semantic* and *pragmatic* uses in constant focus, can offer ways of providing students with a clearer account of how language *both* holds together as a system *and* works, semantically and pragmatically, as a tool for human expression and communication. The long-debated question whether we should give priority to a *formal*, rather than a *notional/functional*, analysis of language, can then perhaps be resolved by presenting students, at different times and within the range of their cognitive and linguistic abilities, with successive multi-dimensional descriptions of linguistics items. *Indefinite pronouns*, for example, can be presented as a closed set of discrete items, emphasizing their different *forms* (e.g. *some* vs *any*; *no* vs *none*; *much* vs *many*; etc.) — we shall then be primarily, although not exclusively, concerned with their *formal* properties. We can also put a stronger stress on the *notions* that can be expressed through the use of indefinite pronouns (e.g. *degrees of quantity*: negative, limited, indefinite, considerable or total quantity) — we shall then be concerned primarily with their *semantic* value. Finally, we can highlight their functional role in *discourse*, how they

help to keep *text* together, thus ensuring the *cohesion* of utterances:

Bananas were cheap at the market today, so I bought some

Several students took the test, but none passed it.

A: I've got some tickets. Do you want some?

B: No, thanks. I've got lots.

It is important to stress that, by emphasizing the *formal*, *semantic* or *pragmatic* dimensions of language, we are not considering *different realities*, but rather *different aspects of the same reality*: students should be made aware of this, if we want to develop in them a feeling for the *regularity*, but also for the *complexity* and *richness*, of the language system.

2. A *reference grammar* is a privileged setting for introducing this multi-dimensional view of language to students. Because it is free from any particular linguistic progression and is not linked to an individual syllabus or textbook, a reference grammar can provide the necessary framework for comprehensive, systematic treatment of linguistic items. By choosing a notional/functional organization, for instance, it can bring together, within one broad semantic area, all the formal structures (or «esponents») through which that area is expressed. A «notional» chapter on *possession*, for example, will cover not only the more obvious morphological items such as possessive adjectives and pronouns and the possessive genitive «'s», but also items which may be thought of as belonging to a *lexical*, rather than a strictly «grammatical» field, such as the verbs *have*, *own*, *belong*, and particular «word order» constructions such as *car doors*, *spring flowers* and *production manager*, where nouns are used rather like adjectives.

Similarly, a «functional» chapter on *suggesting and advising* will bring together such diverse structures as *what/how about + -ing*, *let's*, *modal verbs* such as *shall*, *should/ought to*, *could/might*, various *interrogative forms* (*Why don't you/why not change you job?*), *conditional sentences* (*If I were you, I'd stay at home*), and «lexical» items such as the verbs *propose*, *suggest*, *recommend* (*I suggest that you should type the letter*).

Once this type of notional/functional organization has been adopted in a reference grammar, it is imperative that, through a comprehensive system of *cross-references*, students should be made aware of the relationships between *structures*, on one side, and *notions/functions* on the other, so that the full potentiality of a structure to express different functions (cf. the verb *can*) or, conversely, of a function to be expressed through different structures (cf. «suggesting» above) can be made constantly clear.

Similarly, it is vital that, again through consistent *cross-references*, students should realize the network of *formal regularities* underlying the different notional and

functional uses. Thus every instance of use of a modal verb should refer the student to a separate section where the formal properties of this class of verbs are thoroughly dealt with. This is not meant to imply that students should *necessarily* be reminded of the formal regularities of language on every single occasion; it simply points to the need of offering students ample opportunities, *if* and *when* they think it fit, to link the «communicative» uses of language to the more «formal» aspects of the language system.

Finally, the importance of a very comprehensive *index* in a reference grammar should not be underestimated. Students should be specifically trained to develop strategies for meaningful use of this part of the book, because an index probably provides the most useful and practical way of retrieving a specific item of information, and is thus one of the key «entry points» to a sometimes complex body of knowledge. If the index provides a full list of *structures*, entered both as grammatical *categories* (different kinds of pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, etc.) and as single *items*, as well as a full list of *notions* and *functions/communicative intentions*, then the student is given the full option of tackling a topic, or a dimension of language, from *any* starting point. When faced with an example of language such as

*Shall we go to the cinema?*

the student will then be able to refer to the entry *modal verbs*, if s/he is interested in a general overview of a grammatical category; to the entry *shall*, if s/he wants to check, not only the *formal* properties of this specific modal verb, but also its different *uses* in realizing different notions and functions (obligation, prohibition, suggestions, offering to do something, future reference, etc.); and also to the entry *suggesting* (a course of action), if s/he wants to focus on this specific use of *shall* and perhaps on other, alternative ways of *making suggestions*, both in the context provided by the utterance under examination and in different context and/or situations.

#### *Conclusion*

We are all well aware that the development of communicative competence requires much more than formal mastery of the language system: learning to communicate implies, among other things, the ability to *use* the elements of that system to convey meanings and fulfill communicative intentions. One of the main pedagogical issues raised by communicative language teaching is precisely how to relate *form*, *meaning* and *function* within a coherent methodology, and how to help students see these relationships and make the most of them during their learning process. A *reference grammar* can be a useful tool, in the hands of both teachers and students, to meet the challenges posed by teaching/learning languages for communication.