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## Communicative Language Teaching and EAL: Principles and Interpretations

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#### Introduction

In the past 50 years many English-speaking countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada and the USA have seen large-scale movements of people across national and language borders. These societies now have linguistically diverse school populations. For instance, in England about 13.5 per cent of the primary (elementary) school population is regarded as learners and users of English as an Additional Language (National Statistics, 2007), and in California 25 per cent of the school population is classified as English Language Learners (similar to ESL/EAL) (EdSource, 2008). Different education systems have responded to this growing trend of linguistic diversity in different ways (see Leung, 2007; Leung and Creese, 2008 for a detailed discussion). There is a variety of approaches to English language teaching for EAL learners. In some systems intensive initial EAL tuition is provided for new arrivals, in other places the main response is to make the mainstream (meaning the ordinary) school curriculum as accessible to EAL learners as possible. The latter approach is premised on the proposition that if EAL learners can participate in ordinary subject teaching-learning activities, then English language learning will follow. In this and the next three chapters of the book we will focus on the ideas and principles associated with classroom communication and participation, with particular reference to additional/second language.

The teaching of English language, both as mother tongue and as an additional language, since the mid-1970s has been in numerous ways associated with the concept of Communicative Language Teaching.<sup>1</sup> The ideas underpinning this concept first emerged in the early 1970s and they represented a major shift from a view of language (and language teaching) that was primarily concerned with vocabulary and grammar. In this chapter I first present a brief account of the theoretical bases of the notion of language as communication in social

contexts. This is followed by a discussion on the influence of these ideas by looking at some examples of language teaching approaches which prioritize the social nature of 'communication' (rather than other formal aspects of language such as grammar). In the final section I suggest that the concept of Communicative Language Teaching has turned out to be a broad church, so to speak. On the one hand, the very powerful core ideas at the heart of this concept can be adopted in a variety of teaching contexts. On the other hand, our collective professional experience has shown that the broad principles of Communicative Language Teaching need to be adapted and extended in local contexts, if teachers are to meet the language learning needs of their students. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 will provide four situated accounts of how Communicative Language Teaching has worked in practice and the pedagogic issues that this approach has engendered.

## Language functions in communication

It has been widely acknowledged that the work of Halliday and his colleagues in the early 1970s represents a significant move to a socially oriented conceptualization of language and language teaching (e.g. Howatt and Widdowson, 2004: Chapter 20). Central to this conceptualization is the idea of 'language function'. Function is understood in terms of the relationship between meaning and linguistic form. What we, as language users, mean to express in speech and writing is realized by the specific linguistic resources (e.g. words and clauses/sentences) we select to represent our meaning. By the same token, what we say or write *is* what we mean. Thus, meaning and linguistic form are mutually constituting. This functional relationship 'reflects the fact that language has evolved in the service of particular human needs ... what is really significant is that this functional principle is carried over and built into the grammar, so that the internal organization of the grammatical system is also functional in character' (Halliday, 1975: 16). A practical example of what this means is to consider a statement such as 'The Prime Minister said an extra £50 million pounds will be spent on school improvement.' The same propositional meaning can be expressed in many other ways, for example: 'The Government promises an additional ...', 'An extra £50 million pounds will be put into school improvement', and so on. Each of these statements conveys the same 'basic' information, but the variations in vocabulary and grammar signal different emphases in meaning, which are an important aspect of message-conveying through language expressions. The speaker/writer of these statements would have different communicative purposes in mind. (This point will be further elaborated in a later section.) This view represents a major departure from the more conventional view of language that regards language as some sort of autonomous linguistic system that (a) has universal norms of correctness and (b) has an existence independently of human language users and their needs. In passing perhaps we should note that this

autonomous view has been very powerful. The persistent calls to teaching students to learn to use grammar rules of the so-called Standard English correctly, irrespective of context and purpose of communication, is a good example of this enduring view.

A fundamental assumption in this Hallidayan functional view of language is that what people choose to mean and say is open-ended. There are infinite options in meaning-making and these options are categorized in terms of three functional components (often referred to as metafunctions in the Hallidayan literature): ideational, interpersonal and textual. The ideational component refers to the aspect of language use where 'the speaker expresses his experience of the phenomena of the external world, and of the internal world of his own consciousness' (1975: 17). When people describe events and feelings, the substantive content of what they are describing can be regarded as ideational meaning. The interpersonal component is concerned with the 'function of language as a means whereby the speaker participates in ... [a] speech situation' (1975: 17). This is the aspect of language use in which social relationships are expressed; speakers can adopt or perform a role in relation to other participants (as friends or as teachers and so on). The textual component represents an 'enabling function ... the function that language has of creating text' (1975: 17). Put differently, it is concerned with the use and organization of linguistic resources, in the broadest sense, to create a spoken or written message (however long or short, complex or simple) to make meaning in context. It should be stressed that these functional components are analytical categories. In real-life language communication, they occur simultaneously in speech or writing in specific social contexts. (For a fuller discussion of systemic functional grammar see for instance Halliday and Matthiessen, 2000; Halliday, 2004.)

## Communicative competence

Another major influence on the development of Communicative Language Teaching was the work of Hymes (1972, 1977) on communicative competence within the tradition of ethnography of communication. His 1972 paper 'On Communicative Competence' (first presented in 1966 as a conference paper) explicitly addressed language education issues. It was in part a critique of Chomsky's (1965) highly abstracted notion of grammatical competence which can be associated with an autonomous view of language discussed in the last section. It was intended as a clarion call to language educators to pay attention to the fact that what counts as competence in language communication can vary within a speech community, let alone cross different speech communities; there is '*differential competence within a heterogeneous speech community, both undoubtedly shaped by acculturation*' (Hymes, 1972: 274, original italics).

For Hymes (1972: 277), children learning to communicate through language have to develop a language knowledge (vocabulary and grammar) as well as

rules of appropriate use. They need to learn when and how to speak, what to talk about with whom, and so on. In other words, there are social rules of use 'without which the rules of grammar would be useless' (Hymes, 1972: 278). This inclusion of the 'social' makes it necessary to raise questions of context of communication and aspects of sociocultural practice when teaching language. To determine what counts as communicative competence, four real-life language questions must be asked:

- Whether (and to what degree) something is formally **possible**;
- Whether (and to what degree) something is **feasible** in virtue of the means of implementation available;
- Whether (and to what degree) something is **appropriate** (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
- Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually **performed**, and what its doing entails. (Hymes, 1972: 281, original emphasis)

This way of conceptualizing the notion of communicative competence offered language educators a dynamic and socially grounded perspective on language and language use. Canale and Swain produced a series of seminal papers in the early 1980s that rendered the Hymesian ideas in more language education terms with particular reference to additional language (Canale, 1983, 1984, Canale and Swain, 1980a, 1980b). In their account communicative competence comprises four areas or 'component' competences of knowledge and skills:

- (1) *Grammatical competence*: this is concerned with the use of 'knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology' (Canale and Swain, 1980a: 29). This type of knowledge and skill allows the language learner to make use of language resources to understand and create propositional meaning.
- (2) *Sociolinguistic competence*: this is concerned with rules of use, including the probability of 'whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done' (Hymes, 1972: 281), that is, whether something is 'sayable' in a given context, from the point of view of participant members of a particular community.

[It] addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction ... Appropriateness of utterances refers to ... appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of meaning concerns the extent to which particular communicative functions (e.g. commanding, complaining and inviting), attitudes (including politeness and formality) and ideas are judged to be proper in a given situation. (Canale, 1983: 7)

(3) *Discourse competence*: this is concerned with organizational features of spoken and written texts (of any kind). There are two elements in this competence: cohesion (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), and coherence (Widdowson, 1978). Different types of texts, such as oral and written narratives, diaries, and scientific reports, tend to combine grammatical forms with selected meanings in particular ways.

Unity of a text is achieved through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. Cohesion deals with how utterances are linked structurally and facilitates interpretation of a text. For example, the use of cohesion devices such as pronoun, synonyms ... Coherence refers to the relationship among the different meanings in a text, where these meanings may be literal meanings, communicative functions and attitudes. (Canale, 1983: 9)

(4) *Strategic competence*: this is concerned with additional language learners' capacity to communicate by using verbal and non-verbal strategies (a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to a lack of language knowledge or momentary memory limitation (or other psycho-cognitive issues); and (b) to enhance communication (e.g. use of slow speech for rhetorical effect). (Canale, 1983: 11)

This formulation of communicative competence expanded the conceptual base of additional/second/foreign language curriculum and pedagogy that existed up until the late 1970s in countries such as the USA and the UK. It is no exaggeration to say that the Canale and Swain analytic account of communicative competence very quickly became the theoretical and curriculum basis of the emerging Communicative Language Teaching approach in the early 1980s, particularly in the worldwide enterprise of teaching English to speakers of other languages. Over the years the label Communicative Language Teaching has been interpreted and reworked in various ways. But as a conceptualization of language, as a general curriculum principle, and as a teaching approach, it has remained a central concern in the work of language teachers, curriculum planners, textbook writers, and, last but not least, researchers in language education (for instance Bachman, 1990; Brown, 2000; Brumfit, 1984; Burns, 2005; Council of Europe, 2001; QCA, 2007;<sup>2</sup> Widdowson, 1975, 1978, among many others).

## Theory into practice

The central ideas in the two bodies of work discussed above have inspired and influenced numerous curriculum designs and material development projects. A brief description of some examples is provided here.<sup>3</sup> As part of the preparation for the introduction of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, the curriculum authorities commissioned the Language in the National Curriculum

project (LINC, 1989–92) in the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup> (For further details, see Carter, 1997; Carter and McRae, 1996; Carter and Nash, 1990.) The brief for this initiative was to produce teacher education material that would support the teaching of English in school within the statutory National Curriculum in England and Wales in the early 1990s. LINC (1989–92: 3) took the view that

pupils' language development can be more effectively supported if teachers know more about the systematic organisation and function of language ... The purpose of the LINC material is to give teachers greater analytic knowledge about language across all areas ... forms and structures of language; relationships between speakers and listener between writer and reader ...

This material, covering both spoken and written language, draws on the Hallidayan functional perspective. For instance, in one teaching activity on the theme of 'variations in written language' for senior secondary students, teachers are asked to develop a text-type game involving the following steps:

*Material preparation:* The teacher cuts up three groups of labels of writing purposes (e.g. Complain, Inform, Describe), audience (e.g. Teacher, Police Officer, Unknown Person), and text types (e.g. Report, Recipe, Personal Letter) and puts them in three piles.

*In-class activities:* The teacher shuffles the three piles of cards and puts them face down on a table, then turns up the top card in each pile one by one. The random ordering of the cards may now turn up in unpredictable and unexpected combinations, such as Complain-Recipe-Unknown Person (whereas Complain-Report-Police Officer may be more customarily expected). The unexpected combinations of purpose audience and text types can be used as discussion points. The teacher can also use the various combinations of text and audience to lead a discussion on questions such as: Should spoken or written language be used and under what circumstances? What written or spoken language conventions should be adopted? This teaching activity is clearly informed by a functional view of language use that relates language form to purpose and context in a systematic way. (For further details, see LINC, 1989–92: 156.)

This functional perspective was also adopted in the development of the genre theory approach to teaching school literacy that emerged in approximately the same period (the mid-to-late 1980s) in Australia.<sup>5</sup> 'Genre' has been understood in several senses in the related fields of language studies, linguistics and literature. The sense in which the term 'genre' is used in this particular body of work is related to the functional view of language discussed earlier. The functional relationship between meaning and language expressions at the clause or sentence level is now extended to the whole text level. On this view, there are socially and culturally powerful texts that deploy language resources (vocabulary, grammar and rhetorical organization) in recognized ways. These context- and purpose-oriented ways of using language, particularly written language, are

held to be sedimented into recognizable patterns. The term 'literacy' used in this particular body of work does not exclude talk, but the main focus is primarily on the use of written language for social and institutional purposes. Cope and Kalantzis (1993: 67), for instance, argue that:

writing and speaking have distinctively different linguistic structures; and different ways of using language have different social effect. Literacy, and the types of transformation of oral language that come with literacy, open linguistic doors into certain realms of social action and social power. It follows that literacy teaching, if it is to provide students with equitable social access, needs to link the different social purposes of language in different contexts to predict patterns of discourse.

These predictable patterns of discourse are found in socially powerful texts at different levels of society and in different social institutions. These texts tend to conform to '[g]enres [which] are conventional structures which have evolved as pragmatic schemes for making certain types of meaning and to achieve distinctive social goals, in specific settings, by particular linguistic means' (1993: 67). For the purposes of language teaching this perspective would call for close attention to how school texts are constructed. Veel (1997), for example, suggests that school science texts tend to follow a knowledge trajectory that starts with the genres related to doing science (for instance, procedures for doing experiments), which is followed by explaining science (causal explanations), organizing scientific information (descriptive and taxonomic reports), and challenging science (exposition of argument for or against an issue). A similar shift from the concrete to the abstract in school history – from history as story to history as argument – has also been identified by Coffin (1997). Each of these science or history activities is associated with a particular genre(s). By examining how language resources are deployed in the formation of a text in particular subject areas, teachers can help make writing (and reading) more transparent.

Schleppegrell et al. (2004) offer an example of how this functional perspective can work to help unpack subject content meaning. Additional/second language students often find the particular ways in which English language wording is used in different academic subjects difficult. This domain or subject specific use of language is often referred to as 'register'. Schleppegrell and her colleagues look at ways of helping teachers make subject texts accessible for English as an additional language students. In this case the subject is history in middle school in the United States. Using a Hallidayan approach that regards meaning and language expressions in a mutually constituting relationship (see earlier discussion on 'function'), they examine how lexical and grammatical resources are used in school history texts and how explicit discussion on the language of history texts can help students to unpack complex meanings. For instance, one needs to be able to identify events and happenings in history texts (ideational meaning); happenings and events tend to be encoded in action verbs of processes. But history texts comprise more than 'factual' statements on events; they also contain statements of judgement and persuasion

(interpersonal meaning). Therefore it is argued that helping students to understand that there are different types of verbs and that they serve different functions is a useful pedagogic move.

The verbs used in writing about history can be classified as action verbs such as *fight*, *defend*, *build*, *vote* and so forth; saying and thinking-feeling verbs such as *said*, *expressed*, *supposed*, *like*, *resent*, and so forth; and relating verbs such as *is*, *have*, *is called*, and so forth. This categorization helps students understand when authors are writing about events (action verbs), when they are giving opinions or telling what others have said (thinking-feeling and saying verbs), and when they are giving background information (relating verbs). (Schleppegrell et al., 2004: 77)

Furthermore, actors and agents (referred to as participants in functional grammatical analysis) are important in history, but they can be difficult to identify sometimes. At a sentence level, for instance, in a statement such as 'Liverpool's slave trade accounted for 15 per cent of Britain's entire overseas trade by the end of the eighteenth century', it is not clear who the actors were. In fact it is difficult to see what actions and events might be involved in 'overseas trade'. The use of abstract nouns or noun phrases as participants may be conceptually apt as a means of conveying complex historical events and processes, but the language text expressing this kind of meaning can be difficult to decipher. Functional grammatical analysis, with its focus on the relationship between content meaning and language expression, can help to draw attention to abstract and complex expressions that need unpacking.

## Communication and language learning

One key pedagogic point to emerge from the ideas discussed in the previous sections is that language learning is more than just learning the English language as vocabulary and grammar as discrete bodies of knowledge. Learning to understand and use language in ways that are appropriate in context (in accordance with the language practices of a particular community in question) is equally important. Given that language teachers and learners are not researchers and that they cannot know every possible communicative situation which their students may encounter, an interesting question here is what constitutes Communicative Language Teaching in the classroom. For example, Brown (2001: 43) offers a set of characteristics that includes the following:<sup>6</sup>

- attending to 'the components (grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic) of communicative competence';
- using activities and tasks that would 'engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes';
- '[s]tudents are therefore encouraged to construct meaning through genuine linguistic interaction with others'.

These characteristics suggest that, instead of finding out what people actually do when they use language to communicate with one another in specific contexts, Communicative Language Teaching has turned its focus to creating language-using activities in the classroom to facilitate practice in communication (for a fuller discussion, see Leung, 2005).

The term Communicative Language Teaching is not often explicitly invoked in EAL programmes and teacher education materials.<sup>7</sup> This is, however, not to say that the general principles underpinning Communicative Language Teaching have not made any impact. In fact, many of the early well-known EAL teaching approaches, such as Cognitive Academic Language Learning (CALLA) (Chamot and O'Malley, 1987) and the Topics Approach (Evans, 1986; Evans and Cleland, no date), place a good deal of emphasis on the idea that students should (a) be directly engaged in doing curriculum tasks and communicating with others (through spoken or written modes) at the same time; and (b) be given the opportunity to learn and rehearse the necessary and relevant language related to the tasks.

### **English as an Additional Language in the mainstream curriculum**

The mainstream (ordinary) curriculum is the place where a good deal of EAL teaching and learning is meant to take place, particularly for those students who are beyond the early stages of learning English (see Leung, 2007, Leung and Creese, 2008 for a detailed discussion) in many English-speaking education systems. Given that the mainstream curriculum is primarily concerned with other areas of subject learning (including the subject of English which, among others things, has literature as content), how far can we describe it as an EAL teaching-learning environment? Again, although the term Communicative Language Learning has not been routinely and explicitly used in mainstream curriculum and teacher guidance documents, nevertheless the notion of communication, as characterized in the last section, lies at the heart of the thinking that the mainstream classroom can be made into a productive environment for EAL development. For instance, an early National Curriculum Council (England) (NCC, 1991: 2) directive to teachers advised them that they should adopt a range of teaching techniques that would allow EAL students to participate and to communicate in classroom learning activities which included these:

- Matrices, true/false exercises, data presentations and other display work can help to ensure that achievement is not entirely dependent on proficiency in English.
- Exercises with some repetitive element ... provide a pattern that supports language development.
- The use of familiar objects provides first-hand experience and does not require sophisticated language skills.

The pedagogic value of participation embedded in this 1991 directive has been repeated in many other teacher guidance and advice documents. For instance, in a recent guidance document school inspectors are told that

All EAL learners have a right to access the National Curriculum and the Early Years Foundation Stage. This is best achieved within a whole school context. Pupils learn more quickly when socialising and interacting with their peers who speak English fluently and can provide good language and learning role models. (OFSTED, 2008: 17)

In the National Curriculum programme of study for secondary school students in England one of the key concepts for the subject English (QCA, 2007: 69) is 'competence' which is defined as follows:

- (a) Being clear, coherent and accurate in spoken and written communication.
- (b) Reading and understanding a range of texts, and responding appropriately.
- (c) Demonstrating a secure understanding of the conventions of written language, including grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- (d) Being adaptable in a widening range of familiar and unfamiliar contexts within the classroom and beyond.
- (e) Making informed choices about effective ways to communicate formally and informally.

Terms and phrases such as 'communication', 'responding appropriately', 'making informed choices about effective ways to communicate formally and informally' and so on quite clearly echo the concerns of Halliday, Hymes, Canale and Swain, and others discussed earlier. So, on the face of it, the mainstream classroom is, arguably, potentially a very conducive environment for EAL development. It is communicatively active, full of interactions and activities, and the use of language is (meant to be) purposeful. The next four chapters will draw on professional experience to examine the affordances and pitfalls of the Communicative Language Teaching approach from an EAL perspective. Frank Monaghan and Manny Vazquez explore some of the language learning issues that have arisen in the English schooling education context. Alan Williams examines some of the issues faced by teachers and curriculum planners when working with particular groups of school students with 'low literacy' backgrounds in ESL programmes in an Australian context. Angela Creese, working in an English context, looks at a range of pedagogic issues related to some underexplored, indeed hidden, tensions in terms of curriculum focus and priorities when subject teachers and EAL teachers are meant to be collaborating. In different ways these authors are concerned with questions such as:

- How far does 'everyday' classroom communication meet students' additional language learning needs?
- Does 'communication' in general provide the requisite language learning opportunities for subject specific academic language?

- Does classroom communication provide the necessary cultural/transcultural learning that is required for different groups of EAL learners with different backgrounds?

### Points for reflection

- 1 Hymes's notion of communicative competence suggests that proficient use of language should be grammatically accurate and socially appropriate. How might this notion be put into practice in EAL teaching, particularly in the context of a subject classroom (for example, science)?
- 2 In Halliday's view any instance of language use serves three meta-functions (ideational, interpersonal and textual). How might these be taken into account when teaching EAL?

### Suggestions for further reading

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- Genesee, F. (ed.) (1994) *Educating Second Language Children*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McKay, S. L. and Bokhorst-Heng, W. D. (2008) *International English in its Sociolinguistic Contexts: Towards a Socially Sensitive EIL Pedagogy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

### Notes

- 1 It is understood that the school subject English in English-speaking countries and English-medium international schools normally comprises the study of English language (often referred to as Use of English) and literature in English. This discussion focuses on the aspects of English that are linked to language use, not literature.
- 2 Some traces of this concept can be found in the 2008 version of the English National Curriculum (QCA, 2007: 47), a curriculum designed with the mainstream school population in mind.
- 3 For reasons of space and scope, only examples of use of English in school curriculum-related projects will be discussed here. There are countless examples of Communicative Language Teaching in fields such as English as a Foreign Language.
- 4 The work produced by the LINC project was not officially published because policy-makers at the time did not consider the material fit for purpose. 'When this in-service programme was reviewed at the end of 1991, it was decided by the government of the day that it was insufficiently formal and decontextualised

- in character and failed to pay sufficient attention to the rules of standard English. As a result and against a background of considerable public dispute, the government decided against publication but allowed the materials to be distributed in *samizdat* form for purposes of continuing training' (Carter, <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/ec/linc.htm>, accessed 15 January 2009).
- 5 There are other genre approaches that have different theoretical foundations, see Bazerman (2004), Hyon (1996), Swales (1990), among others.
  - 6 Brown's account is oriented towards teachers of English as a Foreign Language. The characterizations made are, however, equally valid for the purpose of this discussion.
  - 7 In contrast, in the field of English as a Foreign Language, the term Communicative Language Teaching is widely used to promote course books, language classes and language tests.

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