Teaching ESL: Incorporating a Communicative, Student-Centered Component*

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Current research in applied linguistics claims that most adult learners acquire a second language only to the extent that they are exposed to and actively involved in real, meaningful communication in that language. An ESL class which sets out to provide opportunities for such communication, therefore, requires at least two basic components: an environment which will encourage learners to exercise their own initiative in communicating, and activities which will motivate them to do so.

This article explores these issues by briefly reviewing the research which supports incorporating a strong communicative component in language teaching. It then discusses five features of real communication which have implications for the design of such a component and highlights the need to consider not only curricular content but methodology as well. It stresses the importance of classroom atmosphere for the learning and practicing of communicative skills and discusses some of the potential benefits of student-centered teaching. It then outlines some principles for creating appropriate task-oriented classroom materials which promote real communication and can involve the use of any of the four language skills. This article concludes with a discussion of the role of explicit grammar instruction within the context of communicative, student-centered teaching.

Recent writings in second language acquisition and classroom methodology have raised important questions about language learning and teaching. The observation that many students fail to acquire communicative competence in the target language despite years of language instruction has prompted researchers, theoreticians, and teachers to question the effectiveness of our current approaches: traditional, grammar-based instruction has been widely criticized as being ineffective, and recent notional/functional syllabuses, although proposed as potentially more viable curricular alternatives, although proposed as potentially more viable curricular alterna-

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tives, are not without their critics. Evaluations of both of these approaches to curriculum design have been discussed widely (see Taylor 1982 for a representative summary).

In response to the perceived weaknesses of both structural and notional/functional syllabuses in producing communicatively competent speakers, the current literature stresses the importance of providing language learners with more opportunities to interact directly with the target language—to acquire it by using it rather than to learn it by studying it. It has been suggested that when language classrooms focus on task-oriented activities which give students experience in functioning in extended, realistic discourse in the target language, those students are able to learn not only appropriate language use, but real communicative processes as well.

But a teaching approach which focuses on real communication also requires a classroom atmosphere in which communication can take place comfortably. Our roles as teachers and our students' roles as learners therefore become significant considerations. Our particular students' needs and the dynamics of our particular classes become major factors in deciding what to teach and how to teach it. This article will begin exploring these issues by first offering a brief summary of some recent research.

**Background Research**

One of the most frequently repeated suggestions in the current literature on language learning and teaching is that, for most learners, acquisition of a second language will take place only to the extent that those learners are exposed to and engaged in contextually-rich, genuine, meaningful communication in that language (see Taylor 1982). An examination of the relevant literature reveals two major arguments to support this claim:

1. First, findings from research in second language acquisition indicate that although some adult learners are successful at learning grammar rules which they have been taught and then using those rules productively and communicatively, most learners cannot utilize their intellectual understanding of the grammar of the language in real communication (Johnson 1981a, d'Anglejan 1978, Long et al. 1976). Krashen (1977, 1979) and others have argued that communicative competence, for most learners, can only be achieved by subconsciously acquiring the language through active participation in real communication that is of interest to those learners—such as in conversation—in a process similar to the way children acquire their first language. Although this claim is based only on research findings relating to the learning of explicit grammar rules, it seems reasonable to conclude that it would apply equally to cases involving the learning of any explicit language rules, including those which are functional (see Johnson 1979 for his discussion of "analytic" vs. "synthetic" teaching).

2. The second argument in favor of providing students with real communi-
Communicative experiences in the target language is supported by investigations into communicative curriculum design. It has been argued that the ability to be grammatical and formally correct is important—and it is—but formal correctness is only part of communicative competence (Johnson 1981a, Allwright 1979, Brumfit 1981, Scott 1981). If we expect our students to learn how to use language to fulfill real communicative functions, they must have opportunities to do so in a full range of real situations and social settings. Widdowson (1978) has pointed out that classroom presentations and contrived simulations that focus on language and language forms are inadequate; because such presentations are artificial and often incomplete, they do not provide enough examples of the different kinds of authentic discourse data which students will need in order to learn.

Taken together, these two arguments appear to suggest that for most students language is best acquired when it is not studied in a direct or explicit way; it is acquired most effectively when it is used as a vehicle for doing something else (Saegert et al. 1974, Upshur 1968, Tucker 1977)—when learners are directly involved in accomplishing something via the language and therefore have a personal interest in the outcome of what they are using the language to do.

Warshawsky’s finding (1978:472) that “grammatical structure appears to develop in the learner’s speech in response to communicational need” provides further evidence for this claim. Her research supports the hypothesis that when the transmission of essential information is at stake and there is a compelling communicative need, learners will be motivated to continue to try to communicate. These attempts to communicate can, in turn, facilitate acquisition as students work to meet that need (see Taylor 1982 for a fuller discussion).

Most of us have undoubtedly observed situations that support this hypothesis. How often have those of us who work in domestic pre-university ESL programs, for example, wondered why students did not improve appreciably despite months of language study, and then later marveled at how much their proficiency had increased—but only after they had left our classes and had actually had to struggle with academic courses taught in English? One conclusion which can be drawn is that students are not as likely to involve themselves as fully in our classroom activities, which are often contrived and uncompelling, as they are when they have a real stake in the outcome of their endeavors. This example illustrates, and there are research findings and observations (for example, Gardner and Lambert 1972, Lukmani 1972, Schumann 1978, Stevick 1976, 1980, and Taylor 1973) to suggest, that although many adult second language learners may stop learning when they feel that their proficiency is adequate for their purposes (Selinker 1972), “when there is a pressing need, and the motivation is high, . . . the acquisition process seems to continue” (Taylor and Wolfson 1978:32).

In sum, then, it appears that second language acquisition depends upon
the extent to which learners are exposed to and involved in genuine communication in the target language. Although some students do appear to be able to transfer their intellectual understanding of the structure of the target language (either of the syntax or of notions and functions) into real communicative situations, most cannot do so successfully. But even if they could, neither a grammatical focus nor a notional/functional focus without a real communicative component would be sufficient; neither approach alone provides students with enough examples of how language is used in real communication and with adequate opportunities for them to actually use it.

In the classroom our goal as language teachers is, therefore, to maximize opportunities for language acquisition to take place. While language teaching need not always be entirely communicative (Yorio 1982; also see section, “The role of explicit grammar,” in this article), the research which we have considered highlights the need to include a strong communicative component in our teaching and suggests that classroom instruction incorporate the following features:

1. opportunities for students to be exposed to real communication
2. opportunities for students to engage in using real communication
3. activities which are meaningful to students and which will motivate them to become committed to sustaining that communication to accomplish a specific goal, such as solving a problem or completing a task.

Desiging a Communicative Component

In devising ways to make these features operational in the language classroom, we must first consider what is involved in designing a strong communicative component. It has been proposed (Johnson 1981a) that an effective communicative approach must include at least two independent factors.

The first is the selection of appropriate linguistic information to be taught. Johnson (1979) and Morrow (1981) have both suggested that information about the language should be chosen to be taught not simply because it exists, but rather on the basis of what contribution it can be presumed to make to the acquisition of skills or to the performance of specific tasks which are both communicatively useful and relevant to the students' own particular language needs.

But a fuller specification of what to teach, whether it be grammar or linguistic categories of meaning and use (notions and functions), is not enough. The second major factor to consider in implementing a communicative approach is the methodology that will be used to impart that information. Syllabuses, either grammatical or functional, are, in the end, only lists of forms to be taught. The way in which they are taught can make the difference between an approach which is communicative and one that is not (Brumfit 1981, Morrow 1981, Johnson 1981a). A coherent, principled
methodology that will help students to acquire the linguistic skills and abilities which we want them to learn, and then use them productively and communicatively, is required. As Johnson (1981a:10) notes,

we may begin our teaching operation with a semantic syllabus carefully and scientifically drawn up to cover the student's communicative needs, yet utterly fail to teach him how to communicate. If, in other words, we are to meet our communicative aims, we must give attention to questions of methodology as well as syllabus design.

Recent explorations into communication-based language teaching has begun to identify some of the features of real communication which can have direct applicability to the development of a communicative methodology. Let us briefly consider five:

1. Morrow (1981) has pointed out that in order to engage in real communication participants must be able to deal with stretches of spontaneous language above the sentence level. Since the ability to manipulate the formal features of language in isolation does not necessarily imply the larger ability to be communicatively competent, a communicative teaching approach will need to provide students with the opportunity to engage in extended discourse in a real context.

2. Johnson (1979) and Morrow (1981) have proposed that one of the major purposes of communication is to bridge an information gap. If the speaker and hearer are both in possession of the same information prior to beginning their communication, communication cannot, technically, be said to take place. Therefore, a communicative methodology will need to create situations in which students share information not previously known by all participants in the communication.

3. Morrow (1981) has observed that real communication always allows speakers choices to decide not only what they will say but also how they will say it. In similar fashion, since there is always uncertainty about what a speaker will say, the hearer remains in doubt and must maintain a state of readiness (Johnson 1979, Morrow 1981). A communicative methodology, therefore, will need to provide learners with opportunities to engage in unrehearsed communication and thereby experience doubt and uncertainty, and learn to make appropriate content and linguistic choices accordingly.

4. Morrow (1981) has noted that most participants in real communication keep a goal in mind while they are speaking. That goal is usually the successful completion of some kind of real task. What speakers decide to say to each other and how they evaluate what is said to them are both determined by that goal. That is, what one speaker says to a second speaker is shaped not only by what the second speaker has just said, but also by what the first speaker wants to get out of the conversation (also see Johnson 1979). A communicative methodology, therefore, will need
to provide learners with opportunities to negotiate conversations on topics which are goal-oriented and in which the learners have a vested interest.

5. Johnson (1979) has suggested that real communication requires that both the speaker and hearer attend to many factors quickly and at the same time. A communicative methodology, therefore, will need to provide students with opportunities to engage in extended discourse on real topics, using real language and, most importantly, in real time.

Johnson (1981a:11) elaborates on some of these features of communication when he writes that

apart from being grammatical, the utterance must also be appropriate on many levels at the same time; it must conform to the speaker's aim, to the role relationship between the interactants, to the setting, topic, linguistic context, etc. The speaker must also produce his utterance within severe constraints; he does not know in advance what will be said to him (and hence what his utterance will be in response to) yet, if the conversation is not to flag, he must respond extremely quickly. The rapid formulation of utterances which are simultaneously "right" on several levels is central to the (spoken) communicative skill.

This view of some of the processes involved in real communication prompts a reconsideration of many of our current teaching practices and highlights the need for students to be communicatively active in class. In fact, Johnson (1979) proposed that

these processes . . . can only really be practiced in a language teaching which is "task-orientated" (199) . . . [one which focuses] on tasks to be mediated through language, and where success or failure is seen to be judged in terms of whether or not these tasks are performed (200).

Such a teaching approach requires "an environment where doing things is possible" (Morrow 1981:64). Concerns for curriculum and syllabus design, methodology, and, ultimately, the classroom atmosphere in which that teaching approach takes place all become relevant.

The Classroom

In adopting a communicative approach, therefore, it does not appear possible to separate issues of curriculum and methodology from issues of classroom interaction and environment. Real communication is a shared activity which requires the active involvement of its participants, who must all exercise what we can call "communicating initiative" in guiding that communication. If it is our intention to provide opportunities for students to communicate realistically in class, we have a responsibility to create an atmosphere in which communication is possible, one in which students can feel free to take communicating initiative and are motivated to do so. Making classes "student-centered" (see Bodman 1979) can contribute to creating such an atmosphere.
But creating a supportive, student-centered environment, while important, is not enough. True communication to which students are committed will only take place if we also have engaging content that will involve the participants and in which those participants have a stake.

We can find such content by basing our instruction on task-oriented activities in the target language which focus on issues that are relevant and meaningful to students. When these activities are undertaken in an atmosphere conducive to active participation, they can be intrinsically motivating and can engage learners directly. In this environment students can feel comfortable exercising the communicating initiative necessary to complete the tasks. When they have a personal stake in what they are communicating and in the outcome of that communication, teaching can then be most profitably addressed to those learners' immediate language needs (be they grammatical or functional) as they emerge in the course of their communicative attempts (see Taylor 1982).

D'Anglejan's summary (1978:231) of Corder's observations on the teaching/learning process is significant here. She writes that the teacher and the learner must function as

equal partners in a cooperative enterprise. The learner must seek out the linguistic data and process it when he needs it and can assimilate it. It must be the learner and not the teacher who sets the pace. The role of the teacher is that of responding to the developing communicative needs of the learner by making the appropriate linguistic data available "on request." If the focus of the second language classroom is to be on developing the learner's ability to get the message across, then the teacher's feedback must be related to the communicative appropriateness and not the linguistic form of the students' utterances.

In this way, "communicative functions arise naturally from the activity itself" (Maley 1980:11), and students are able to determine for themselves how successful they have been at getting their meaning across. An evaluation by the teacher becomes unnecessary.

Much of what has been said here is not new. Over the last few years there has been a strong movement away from highly-structured, teacher-centered, grammar-based teaching in favor of task-oriented, communicatively-based, learner-centered teaching, often including the use of certain so-called "humanistic" approaches. Some of these newer approaches, however, have been misunderstood and have caused considerable anxiety and confusion among both ESL teachers and their students (Stevick 1980, Clarke 1980).

Let us now examine some of these issues more closely by addressing two significant concerns: 1) the role of classroom atmosphere in communicatively-based, student-centered language classes, and 2) the selection and use of communicative teaching materials.

Classroom Atmosphere. Student-centered teaching does not require that the teacher abdicate authority in the classroom. To do so would create
chaos. Teachers are invested with a responsibility which only they have the right to assume. According to Allwright (1979), that responsibility includes providing samples of the target language, providing guidance concerning the nature of the target language (which includes rules, cues, and feedback on success or failure), and providing classroom management. These issues are not in question. What is significant in student-centered teaching, however, is the manner in which teachers assume this responsibility and how much of it they share (see Bodman 1979, Stevick 1980).

For many of us, there appears to be an assumed incompatibility between learner-centered teaching and the teacher's authority to direct the class. Stevick (1980) addresses this point directly by making a distinction between what he calls teacher "control" and student "initiative." Control, Stevick suggests, consists of two elements: the structuring of classroom activities and the providing of constructive feedback on performance. He proposes that at the beginning stages of any course both aspects of control should reside entirely with the teacher in order to create a secure, stable environment for the students; in time, these responsibilities can be shared with the students but only as long as those students feel secure in knowing that this shift in responsibility is part of the teacher's overall plan, and there is no serious disruption of the effectiveness of the activity. Stevick warns that it can be dangerous to turn these responsibilities over to the students prematurely.

Stevick contrasts control with initiative, which, he says (1980:19), "refers to decisions about who says what, to whom, and when... and consist[s] of choices among a narrow or a very broad range of possibilities which are provided by whoever is exercising 'control.' " He argues that control and initiative must be kept distinct and can be adjusted independently of each other; in the name of "taking control," teachers must be careful not to monopolize initiative. As he explains (1980:20),

in exercising "control," then, the teacher is giving some kind of order, or structure, to the learning space of the student. In encouraging him to take "initiative," she is allowing him to work, and to grow, within that space. The trick, for the teacher, is not only to preserve this distinction; it is also to provide just the right amount of learning space. If there is too little, the learner will be stifled. If there is too much, the student will feel that the teacher has abandoned him" (for further discussion of these and related issues, see Stevick 1980, Chapter 2).

This kind of teaching approach places some serious responsibilities on teachers and requires that they adopt a point of view toward their teaching which can be significantly different from that which they may be most accustomed to. The teacher's attitude and the resultant relationship created between the teacher and the students is the single most important variable in successfully executing student-centered teaching. Within this framework, the teacher does not function as a drill leader or an authority figure, no matter how benevolent, but rather as a "facilitator" (Rardin 1977) who responds to the students' emerging language needs.
One current teaching approach which has attempted to incorporate these ideas in an explicit way is Counseling-Learning/Community Language Learning (C-L/CLL), founded by Charles Curran (1961, 1972, 1976). In brief, C-L/CLL represents a philosophy of education which draws heavily on the field of counseling psychology, and especially "client-centered therapy" (Rogers 1965). When Curran, who was himself a psychologist and not a language teacher, began to notice that many language students exhibited the same kinds of anxieties and fears as clients in psychotherapy, he began to experiment with applying counseling techniques to language teaching. Curran felt that competition, fear of failure or rejection, and a host of other personal conflicts and hostilities which students bring to the language learning situation could create serious blocks to intellectual learning and needed to be dealt with productively if successful, non-defensive language learning and language use were to take place (Rardin 1976).

Curran (1976) envisioned a low-pressure language class in which students could feel secure and could cooperate, rather than compete, in a community learning environment. In this environment the teacher and the students supported and accepted each other and worked together as a group. The teacher, in this setting, did not function as an authority or strong presence, but rather as an understanding, supportive, non-judgmental counselor who had the knowledge that the students were there to learn and who was able to see the learners and their fears and needs from their perspective. The teacher's responsibility was to relate to the learners as "whole persons" and to structure opportunities for those learners to draw knowledge from him/her, as they felt ready to do so.

In formulating the C-L/CLL approach, Curran (1976) stressed the importance of this kind of supportive atmosphere to encourage students to exercise what we have called communicating initiative. But a primary focus of Curran's work was to highlight what we can call "learning initiative."

From Curran's perspective, students would be truly receptive to learning only if they assumed some of the responsibility for directing that learning and played a role in determining both the content and manner of their instruction. He envisioned a nurturing learning environment taught by a teacher who provided structure and direction without placing demands on the students. The teacher's function was to be sincerely responsive to student needs and input and encouraging of student initiative. This responsibility included taking into consideration what the students wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it as long as the general goals and objectives which the teacher had established for the course were being met (Bodman 1979). A brief description of a technique which practitioners of C-L/CLL call the "human computer" can serve as a good illustration of one way that C-L/CLL accomplishes this goal.

The "human computer" is used in C-L/CLL classes to practice both pronunciation and what C-L/CLL teachers call "creative sentence building."
As a teaching technique, it is consistent with Stevick's (1980) distinction between control and initiative; that is, it enables the teacher to maintain full control of the activity while at the same time it allows students to play a role in directing their own learning by offering them the possibility of taking as much initiative as they wish. The key element is that students are permitted options within the teacher's structure. As in all C-L/CLL techniques, the atmosphere is secure and supportive.

The "human computer" is a simple procedure. When it is used to practice "creative sentence building," for example, students take turns orally constructing their own original sentences. They are entirely free either to draw on grammar and vocabulary that they already know and feel confident of, or to explore and test out structures that they are unsure of. There are no teacher-imposed expectations on how complicated or adventurous those sentences need to be, and the students can feel secure in knowing that they can take as much or as little risk as they feel comfortable with. The teacher, standing at the back of the room facing in the same direction as the students, offers feedback after each sentence by repeating the full sentence (in corrected form, if necessary) back to the students, without comment, to give the students themselves the opportunity and the responsibility to recognize and correct whatever mistakes they may have made. The teacher does not judge or make evaluative remarks, and the students are free to try their sentences as many times as they wish, or, if they prefer, they can experiment with different sentences. Individual students take their turns in an orderly fashion, without being called on by the teacher, and are free to participate, or not participate, as they see fit.

This kind of non-threatening teaching technique can serve as a clear example of one way that student motivation and initiative can be maximized at the same time that the teacher is able to maintain full control of the activity. Because the atmosphere is supportive, students are able to take risks and actively participate, at their own pace, without feeling pressured to keep up with an imposed learning agenda. As they become increasingly involved in the activity, their self-investment can be an even greater motivating force than any teacher's demands (see Curran 1976).

**Communicative Teaching Materials.** Earlier in this article we outlined several features of real communication which could have applicability both to our teaching and to communicative curriculum design. In examining these characteristics from the point of view of the classroom, we noted (Johnson 1979) that these kinds of communicative skills could be most effectively practiced only in a classroom environment in which it was possible to engage in task-oriented activities mediated through language, but not focusing on it. We highlighted the importance of creating a structured, yet supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere in order to allow the students to feel free to take the risks inherent in these kinds of activities and stressed that performance should be evaluated not in terms of language, but rather in terms of success or failure in completing the task.
Creating opportunities for students to exercise their own communicating and learning initiative and play a role in directing their own learning, while at the same time maintaining teacher control, does not necessarily require adopting any kind of special curriculum or following any of the so-called “humanistic” methodologies. “Humanism,” if it can be defined at all, is more of a philosophy or an attitude than a method or a technique (Clarke 1980). Even C-L/CLL, although it does have some specific techniques which have become associated with it, does not prescribe what should happen in class; it is only an approach, not an explicit syllabus (Taylor 1979). Within this general learner-centered approach, instructors are free to structure their classes as they see fit; the teacher always has that right. This approach can be applied to the teaching of any of the language skills, using any curriculum, and the proponents of C-L/CLL have repeatedly stressed that there is considerable variation in the way different teachers use C-L/CLL (Rardin, personal communication).

For teachers who are able to create some of their own teaching materials or adapt existing ones, there are numerous ways to structure their classes to provide opportunities for students to be actively engaged in real communication and to thereby learn communicative skills in the classroom. For example, such activities might include involving students in goal- or task-oriented group projects which interest or affect them (see Allwright 1979, Geddes 1981, Johnson 1981b, White 1981, Wright 1981), in logical problem-solving activities which are conceptually worth solving (see Huckin 1980, Maley 1980, 1981, Long 1975, Widdowson 1981), in information-gathering activities (see d’Anglejan 1978), or in task-oriented communication with invited native-speaker “guests” (see Gunterman 1980) (e.g., public opinion surveys or interviews). These activities can be undertaken not only in class, but out of class as well and can be designed to incorporate practice in any of the language skills. The students and the teacher can get ideas for topics and activities from a variety of sources, such as books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, students’ interests, experiences, feelings, or reactions.

The setting up of an information gap in the classroom is one particularly valuable tool to use to create a real communicative situation. Activities which require the bridging of information gaps provide students with opportunities to learn how to deal with extended discourse above the sentence level, to cope with receiving information which is new and unexpected, to exercise both linguistic and informational choices in forming their responses, and to do so at a natural pace.

Two pedagogical techniques which have been developed to create information gaps in the classroom are the “jigsaw” (Geddes and Sturtridge 1979) and “task dependency” (Johnson 1981b) principles. The jigsaw principle is used primarily in group activities which are of a task-oriented or problem-solving nature. When activities are structured according to this principle, key information required to complete the task is given only to
some of the students, but withheld from others. Because a pooling of
information is then required to successfully complete the task, this kind of
information gap creates a real need for students to communicate with each
other.

The task dependency principle is often used in conjunction with the jigsaw
principle. When activities are structured according to the task dependency
principle, students must first successfully complete certain sub-tasks before
they are able to complete the major task which they have been assigned. For
example (adapted from Geddes 1981), if students in a class are planning to
take an automobile trip of some kind, the major task of selecting the best
route for them to take might be set up to require that they first complete
several sub-tasks, such as extracting the pertinent information they will need
from a number of real informational sources. These sources might include
taped discussions of road conditions in a specific region, road maps,
recorded weather reports, weather maps, and recorded traffic reports. The
jigsaw principle could also be employed here by structuring the activity so
that different students engage in different sub-tasks. All students would then
need to pool their information before they would be able to jointly complete
the major task of selecting the best route.

An activity of this kind provides opportunities for students to practice a
variety of communicative skills. The major task of selecting the best route
creates real reasons for students to undertake the sub-tasks and offers an
opportunity for them to practice evaluating a body of information against a
real goal, extracting the relevant, rejecting the irrelevant. The jigsaw
principle creates an information gap that enables the students to practice
serving as both giver and receiver of new information. Bridging this
information gap makes individual students accountable to the whole group
and allows them to experience the unexpectedness which is characteristic of
spontaneous communication. Throughout this communication they remain
in a state of uncertainty regarding what they will hear, and they therefore
experience the freedom to choose what they consider to be the most
appropriate response. Negotiating the final solution to the major task of
selecting the best route gives them practice in engaging in extended
discourse in real time.

Students can be given considerable latitude in how they engage in these
types of activities. The teacher’s role is to assume the responsibility for
setting up the conditions for communication to take place (Scott 1981) by
structuring and outlining the activity. Rather than taking an active role,
however, teachers are advised to maintain a “low profile,” perhaps asking
only “attention-directing” questions (Allwright 1979), allowing the students
to pursue the task largely on their own. In C-L/CLL, for example, the
teacher often divides the class into small groups, allowing each group to
work on the task in its own way. Alternatively, different groups can each be
given the responsibility to decide which aspect of a larger class project they
wish to pursue. Or, the teacher may decide to set up several alternative activities, incorporating student suggestions, and allow students to choose which activity they would like to participate in; small groups are created accordingly. Each small group has the responsibility to carry out its own activity, calling upon the teacher, as needed.

It does not matter, ultimately, how successful students actually are in accomplishing the tasks that they undertake. The real language experience is what is most important, and this kind of approach can be particularly successful because students are directly involved. They are interested in what they are doing because they have a say in selecting their own tasks and activities and in deciding how they will carry them out. They develop confidence in their ability to cope with the language for some useful purpose (Allwright 1979). They are self-invested and their motivation is likely to be greater. In these kinds of activities students get real, meaningful practice in authentic communication with their minds directly on communication, rather than on language. As they plan and execute their projects, or discuss their tasks, they are engaging in purposeful communication that focuses on content and real issues. While it may not always be possible to devise activities that are real in an absolute sense, it has been suggested that activities of this kind, even when they are simulated, can "foster 'natural,' 'creative,' 'authentic' language behavior on the part of learners once the framework of rules and conventions has been firmly established" (Maley 1981:137).

The Role of Explicit Grammar

In the light of these comments, it is now appropriate to question where explicit grammar teaching fits into this general framework. If, as has been suggested, students need to be actively engaged in real communication with the focus of their attention on content rather than on grammar, should grammar be taught at all? And if so, how, when, and in what sequence?

Although long-standing traditions have supported an explicit, sequential grammar component in language teaching, recent research in second language acquisition has questioned its value. Consider the following four observations:

1. Most learners are unable to successfully transfer their mechanical control of grammatical patterns to real communicative situations (d'Anglejan 1978, Long et al. 1976).
2. The acquisition of syntax appears to be a natural developmental process in learners and may have its own timetable (Krashen 1979).
3. The order of acquisition of grammar rules may be determined more by communicative need than by the teaching order (Kessler et al. 1979, Taylor 1981).
4. There is considerable variation among learners in the manner in which they acquire grammatical forms: some can profit from rules, some
cannot; some can use forms quickly—almost immediately after they are presented, others need more time; many students need to see how the form is used in a number of different contexts—approached from a number of different directions—before they can use it, some do not (Krashen 1977, Bodman 1979, Taylor 1982).

Taken together, these observations suggest that since it is unlikely that all of our students will be at the same learning stage at the same time, a sequenced presentation of grammar may not meet their needs. Just because an item is next on the syllabus does not imply that the students are ready to receive that information. So, while we may feel the need to “cover” a certain amount of material in class, what is actually acquired may well be beyond our control.

There are few linguistically-compelling reasons to support sequencing grammar teaching in any particular way. While it is clear that some of the more complex linguistic structures require a prior control of some of the simpler structures, the order in which those structures is learned need not be fixed. Why, for example, is it necessary for students to learn the simple present tense before the past? Or the progressive before the imperative? Or questions before modal auxiliaries? If we take a communicative point of view, in fact, it would be fair to say that students who are studying in the target culture need all of the structures simultaneously if they are going to be able to meet the real communicative needs which they face every day. When, in their daily encounters, they find that they are required to ask for information, or give directions, or talk about something that happened to them yesterday, it will not help them to know that the necessary linguistic forms are on the syllabus, but will not be taught for another month. Students will simply make do with whatever linguistic resources are at their disposal to get their point across (Selinker 1972, Taylor 1974), and what has been suggested throughout this article is that this kind of real communicative need provides a more reasonable starting-off point for language instruction than a pre-determined teaching order.

When an explanation of a new linguistic form is offered at a time when it can be perceived to fulfill a real or present communicative need, learners are able to focus on active, communicatively-based, self-invested learning. The psychological impact of recognizing the immediate communicative utility of a new form is greater than that which exists when language forms are presented in an arbitrary order and then practiced through contrived activities designed to create the illusion of reality. Not only does this approach demonstrate to students quite clearly that what they are learning can enable them to successfully communicate in a realistic way on issues that matter to them, it also provides real language input for processing and rules for those students who can use them. This is a very different situation from one in which we make the decisions about when to teach new structures to our students, since it is entirely likely that those new linguistic forms will only
be stored away as just more information about the language, their functional value as yet undemonstrated (Taylor 1982).

It is important to recognize that this article is not proposing that there is no need for explicit grammar instruction. It is simply being suggested that we reconsider the long-standing assumption that that instruction needs to follow a prescribed sequence. Widdowson (1981) has pointed out, for example, that the major weakness of grammar-based instruction is not that the focus of attention is on structure, but rather that, in teaching, structures are often not represented as a resource to communicate meaning. Taught within a communicative, needs-based context, however, explicit grammar instruction can meet four significant needs:

1. Since it has been shown that some students are able to profit from direct instruction in grammar (Krashen 1977), that instruction should be offered as a supplement to, but not instead of, real communicative experiences for those students who can profit from it. “Mastery,” however, should not be required—nor should participation.
2. Since our classes, no matter how communicatively-based, may not provide enough real language input for students to be able to acquire forms on their own (Krashen 1980), grammar can be offered as an optional supplement for those students who can make use of explanations, clarification, and rules.
3. Because the language used in presenting, explaining, and discussing grammar is real, communicative language, students can profit from this additional exposure to language even if they cannot profit directly from the grammatical information being discussed (Krashen 1980).
4. Students typically expect, want, and demand instruction in explicit grammar. To ignore what they consider to be important or necessary, regardless of our point of view, is to invite resistance, either overt or covert, to our teaching (Stevick 1980). It seems more reasonable to try to expand and broaden their expectations than to try to change them. This may well involve our spending a limited amount of time on activities which we might otherwise prefer to avoid.

C-L/CLL deals with explicit grammar instruction in much the way it has been discussed here. While there is a strong grammatical component incorporated within the approach, grammar rules are typically taught in the order in which they are needed by the students. The teacher rarely engages in long, elaborate explanations, but rather concentrates on the specific need as it arises. The teacher offers the grammar as an aid to students and does not require mastery or force students to participate.

What is significant is that the students motivate themselves to learn the rules. Because of the strong emphasis in C-L/CLL on group work and on students’ assuming responsibility for their own learning, the pressure to learn comes directly from the students. Students become motivated to learn
because they do not want to let their group down, or because they feel a pressing need to acquire what has been taught. The teacher is therefore relieved of having to impose that pressure.

The extent to which students are able to assume this responsibility comes out most clearly in small group work. In groups, students are occasionally given flexibility, within the general structure established by the teacher, to select for themselves what they want to practice and how they want to practice it, whether it be grammar, or vocabulary, or idioms. Different groups select different points and practice them in different ways. The better learners help the slower learners. The language forms which have been most recently presented or discussed are left on the blackboard or on large sheets of newsprint posted on the wall in full view of the class. The teacher is always there to answer any questions that the students may have, but only if called on. It is apparent, in observing these groups, that a lot of learning is going on. Students are practicing, puzzling out points, experimenting, testing hypotheses, and drawing conclusions. They are relying on each other and learning from each other. And, most importantly, they are communicating. As Krashen points out (1976:165), even during times when students may choose to discuss grammar, or vocabulary, or idioms, "to the extent that the target language is used realistically, to that extent will acquisition occur."

There will be times, of course, when the teacher may want to take the lead—to offer forms, to introduce a new pattern, to explain a structure, to provide vocabulary, or to identify an error. This is not inconsistent with the approach which has been presented here if it is done subtly, sparingly, and in the spirit of learner-centeredness. That is, when trust between the students and the teacher is established, teachers can assume this kind of role as long as students understand that what is being offered is optional, and that the teacher is not requiring "mastery." For students who, for whatever reason, would not be able to acquire the form being taught in such a direct way, demands for immediate learning can be threatening and demoralizing. It can take a long time for teachers to acquire this kind of judgment (Stevick 1980, Bodman 1979).

Conclusion

What has been suggested throughout this article is that we take the students' communicative attempts in the target language as the starting-off point for our instruction, rather than the rules or the structure of the language. The basic approach, as outlined here, requires a commitment on the part of the teacher to reverse many of the teaching practices which have become traditional in language teaching methodology over the years. It involves looking at students, not as students, per se, but as whole people with needs, and fears, and goals, and commitments and then capitalizing on those students' ability to invest themselves in accomplishing their goals and objectives. It stresses the close interrelationship which exists between the
issues of classroom interaction and curriculum, content and atmosphere, and focuses on the need for students to feel secure, unthreatened, and non-defensive. It highlights the need for instructors to avoid adopting a teacher-centered, authoritarian posture.

When such an atmosphere is achieved, students can then feel free to exercise their own initiative in communicating and in directing their own learning. This approach recognizes that the need to accomplish something can be a compelling factor in language learning and can foster “self-investment”—a whole-person commitment to accomplishing a goal. When a class provides opportunities for students to participate in guiding their own learning, selecting their own activities, and deciding what they want to practice, those students have a stake in the outcome of their endeavors, their interest and motivation are likely to be higher, and they become more receptive to instruction if that instruction will help them meet that goal—whether it is to understand a syntactic pattern, or to solve a problem, or to complete a task. This approach highlights the importance that initiative plays in promoting real communication. This communication provides opportunities for students to be exposed to language and to use it. The need to accomplish something through that language keeps the communication going.

When students are committed to accomplishing something which depends upon their further mastery of the target language, instruction can then be provided to meet those emerging language needs. This kind of situation can create the sort of classroom atmosphere in which teaching can be most profitably received. This approach stresses the need to teach what is needed when it is needed—to give learners the flexibility to learn in their own way, at their own pace, rather than to follow a pre-determined syllabus. It emphasizes the need to provide learners with the space they need to receive the instruction without feeling compelled to master it immediately. It points out the need to maintain a non-authoritarian presence throughout this process so that students can continue to feel secure and non-defensive—to enable them to learn not because the teacher demands it of them, but because they need to in order to accomplish their own goals.

And finally, this approach stresses that sharing the responsibility for structuring learning with the students does not require that teachers abdicate their fundamental authority to guide and structure their classes. It highlights the need for teachers to be sensitive to what is happening in the classroom and to respond to the dynamics of the class. This approach may not work equally well for all teachers and all students. Nevertheless, for those who are able to use it, classes which incorporate these ideas can be exciting, exhilarating, and satisfying. This approach has been called “student-centered,” but the responsibility for accomplishing it resides with us.
REFERENCES


