PROVIDING AND AVOIDING VARIOUS TYPES OF COMMUNICATION ACTIVITY IN THE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE CLASSROOM[1]

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Since time immemorial foreign languages have been learned and taught with the idea, prominent among several ideas about the value of foreign-language learning, that successful learners would be able to communicate with others in the language mastered, whether orally or in writing, and whether or not any of those communicating were native speakers of the language. For centuries it has also been recognised that communication need not be two-way, and that one-way communication through reading is of great importance in education and in the transmission of culture, however we may use that word, from one century or age to the next, so that the thoughts and feelings of those long dead are available to us if we are competent to read them. Communicative ability in languages is a binding social and cultural factor, both contemporaneously (going outside our mother-tongue ground and making us aware that we belong also to broader social and cultural entities) and historically (bringing home to us that we do not belong to today alone).

None of this is new, and on the whole it has always been taken for granted. I am not of course suggesting that, because it is not new, it should not be discussed, along with other long-popular ideas about foreign-language learning: for instance, that it broadens the mind (as I think it probably does or, rather, can) and that it is a kind of status symbol essential to those who wish to be looked upon as 'educated' (which nowadays it is probably not, or not everywhere).

Unfortunately, although protesting voices can occasionally be heard above the din, there is a widespread assumption in language-teaching circles that the idea of teaching languages so that people can use them to communicate

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originated a few years ago, and that previously this had not been realised and little had been done to develop such communicative skill. I shall not delve into the absurdity of this. The assumption is harmful, I think, to language-learning in so far as it tends to suggest that there is little value in all but fairly recent teaching procedures and teaching materials. It seems at times that earlier work is being dismissed out of hand. This phenomenon is not of course new either, and the history of language-teaching theory can be seen, at least in jaundiced mood, as a lurching zigzag from one putative panacea to another. (I exaggerate, of course.)

What *is* relatively new — and here I have the last few decades in mind and not the whole stretch of L. G. Kelly's "Twenty-Five Centuries", centuries which can stand further investigation — is the increased emphasis on providing language learners with experience of successful communication in the foreign language *while they are learning it*. But even this, although a welcome emphasis (since it strengthens the learners' interest in learning) is far from wholly new, for the view used to be widespread (and no doubt still is) that a specially significant milestone is reached when foreign-language learners find that they can read and understand something of interest, however simple, without anyone's help. That may be one-way communication, but it is communication by language, and from that red-letter day onwards there can and should be frequent experience of such reading communication in the new language while the learner continues learning it. The important thing is that he or she should be able to find plenty of interesting material to read.

It is this direct experience of the communicative value of the foreign language, but extended into the area of speech and so becoming two-way communication, that exemplifies one of the emphases of language-teaching theory during the last decade. It is a reasonable and productive emphasis, partly (as I have said) because it increases the learners' interest, and partly because the very experience of successful communication in the language tends to increase the learners' communicative skill in the same language. Whether it increases the learners' communicative skill in general, and whether there is such a thing, is another matter.

A view still widely held is that a fairly sharp distinction has to be drawn between, on the one hand, classroom 'language-learning' activities which are communicative (i.e. which give the learner experience of communicating in the language) and, on the other hand, those which are non-communicative (giving no such experience) or pseudo-communicative (appearing or claiming to give such experience but not in fact doing so). Not all those who have written about classroom communication in the foreign language have suggested the elimination of non-communicative or pseudo-communicative activities: some have indeed said that they have value and should be included in the teaching plan. Unfortunately, regardless of much published argument (e.g.

as found, for example, in the pages of H.G. Widdowson and others), there is a current fashion of writing off entirely a whole body of drills which are useful in their way, and of dismissing in toto a variety of helpful teaching procedures which it is reasonable to condemn only when they are given too prominent a place in the teaching.

The renewed emphasis, in recent years, on the value of what is called 'communicative experience' when learning a language should be welcome to language teachers in general, as I have said, especially if it quickens interest among the learners; although it is necessary to add that communication may be real and effective but lack nevertheless the vital spark of interest. 'How old are you?' 'I'm twelve': the questioner perhaps didn't know, and knows as a result of the answer, but what if he didn't wish to know? There is a factor here besides communication: one should add 'the interest of the subject-matter', varying with the learners' ages and experience.

The view put forward in this paper is that 'communication' has often, when foreign-language teaching is under discussion, been taken in too narrow a sense.

For example, in teaching children at an elementary stage, the teacher may include question-and-answer activity which involves exchanges such as 'Where's the bag?', 'It's on the table', and so on. The point at the moment is not whether this is interesting or uninteresting to the class or whether it should be included or not in early lessons, but whether or not communication is taking place here. One view, widespread nowadays, is that it is not, and therefore that oral exchanges of this kind should be avoided in the foreign-language lesson. Everybody can see where the object is, the argument runs, and thus there is no need to ask.

Such an argument seems to raise the whole broad question of the extent to which foreign-language lessons, in varying circumstances and at various levels of achievement, should provide a direct imitation of the use of the language in non-instructional circumstances — a crucial question which cannot be explored here. Let us suppose that everybody can indeed see the bag on the table and that these objects are not new to these elementary learners of English: they met with them during their first year of existence. In a very real sense they know what they are, of course, yet in a very real sense they do not, since the question largely means 'What are these things called?' and everybody does *not* know the answer to that. If they are German beginners they know that *die Handtasche ist auf den Tisch*, if they are Czech they know that *kabelka je na stůl*, but they do not necessarily know that *the bag is on the table*, and indeed may not have known until then that it was *a bag* as well as being *eine Handtasche* or *kabelka*.

In other words, foreign-language learning is to some extent learning to talk in an additional way about what we already know. But communication

is going on here, and when somebody asks 'Where's the bag, Ingrid?', Ingrid may not at first know at all where it is or what is being referred to. All this used to be fairly obvious, I suggest, until the fact was obscured by the narrow and arbitrary definition of communicative activity which has become fashionable in recent years.

However, the communication that may be evident in exchanges such as 'Where's the bag?', 'It's on the table' is not of course the same type of communication as may take place in an exchange such as 'Where's the bag?', 'It's in the cupboard' — in which those who answer are guessing and nobody knows where *die Handtasche* or *kabelka*, or *the bag*, or anything else it may be called, in fact is. But then they already know that it is also *a bag*; otherwise the game would be virtually impossible to play, since nobody would know what they were guessing about and interest would be minimal. (And one thing that can be said in favour of guessing games is that they bring into play, at least for many learners, a type of communication that is interesting.)

Let us look at a further example of classroom language-teaching activity commonly alleged to be non-communicative, namely, oral discussion of a wall picture, and let us assume that the picture is both clear and full of interesting action. Somebody appears to be entering a house unlawfully. So discussion might include such exchanges as 'What is this man here doing?' 'He's entering the house'; 'How? Through the door?' 'No, through the window'; 'Has anyone seen him?' 'Yes, the man who's shouting and waving his arms'; and so on. Everybody can see what is happening in the picture, and so the 'communicative' extremist of today would comment 'Why ask at all, since the answer is known? No real communication is taking place.' Yet surely this is not so. The picture is interesting and the pupils want to call one another's attention to things in it. They might even do this, very naturally, in their mother tongue: 'Look, he's trying to get in through the window. Look at that old man waving his arms.' If they did, what would they be communicating to one another? I suggest: the fact that they are interested, the temperature and focus of their interest, details that one had noticed before another, and so on. If the comment and interchange is in a language they are learning, what may additionally be communicated (both to one another and to a teacher) is the degree of their ability to comment in that language, the extent of their wish to do so and also of their pleasure in being able to do or of their disappointment in not being able to do so well; and of course, also, something of their attitudes towards the people and the happenings represented in the picture — all this may come through better if their command of the language is fairly good.

Almost any language-class is a social unit. It meets regularly and the learners get to know one another in the class situation, even if nowhere else. Most of the time the learners interact in several ways, regardless of the teaching

methods used. For one thing, they are constantly communicating to one another the degree of skill with which they can make the linguistic distinctions necessary for communication in the broader sense, and unless they are very young indeed they know they are doing this. For another thing, they are constantly communicating to one another the degree and perhaps the kind of interest they take in this or that part of the classroom proceedings, and of course revealing to one another how much or how little they want to succeed, and how much or how little they are influenced by success and failure. Inevitably, from day to day, the teacher communicates such attitudes too.

Thus there are these complexly interwoven strands of communication, which cannot be dismissed as unworthy of attention simply because, so to speak, they are always there and do not have to be provided.

The communication referred to so far in this paper is not the communication which takes place when the language is used to convey to someone a fact or an opinion of which they were previously unaware. That type of communication is of course important too, and it is good that in recent years the value of giving learners plenty of experience of bridging the 'information gap' and the 'opinion gap' by means of the language they are learning, and during the language-course itself, should have been realised. But it is one thing to admit this, and to make interesting provision for it, and quite another to suggest that these are the only genuine types of communication.

'Information gap' and 'opinion gap' activities in language lessons can indeed be overdone, like any other types of learning activity. They are overdone when no time is left for those useful drills and exercises in which some unit of the language is abstracted from the flow of speech or print and, as it were, looked at closely, as one might examine a detail in an organism or a machine. They are overdone when, for instance, inadequate time is left for such popular and communicative activities as talking about an interesting picture everybody can see. Further instances could be given. Other kinds of communication, such as those I have previously referred to, cannot (or at least should not) be left to look after themselves just because they are always present in some degree in any language-lesson. If learners do in fact communicate to one another in various ways how interested they are, this is something that influences the behaviour of the social unit which is a language-class, and which affects the progress and outcome of the language-learning: thus it seems essential to observe and investigate it and to ensure that maximum interest for the learners is provided. If learners communicate to one another their feelings of pride at success, this also must have a similar influence, and it seems essential to observe this phenomenon too and systematically to provide frequent opportunities for success to be experienced.

These are some of the types of communication which occur in the language classroom, and it is necessary to avoid providing excessive experience of

any one of them. It is difficult to decide what makes a good balance, but at least one can say that at any level of achievement all these types, and doubtless they are not all, should be to some extent planned for in classroom language-lessons. Among important factors to be taken account of in deciding upon this balance of provision and avoidance, apart from the learners' ages and interests, are the status and function of the language in the community and (particularly with advanced learners) the learners' expectations of the use they will make of it in the immediate or more distant future.

Communication by means of language, whether inside or outside the language classroom, is a many-sided and subtle matter. We should abjure use of the pejorative term 'pseudo-communication' for any of its varieties, and recognise the complexity that lies behind the term 'communication', sometimes glibly used.

In conclusion, I would claim that most of what I have said was at one time seen to be obvious. Its obviousness has been obscured by an unduly restricted and arbitrary definition of what communication is. It hardly needs to be said that much deeper observation and study of the different varieties of communication in the classroom can only benefit the art of language teaching.