

Workshop 13

USING THE TARGET LANGUAGE

COMMUNICATIVE PRINCIPLES

Sometimes it seems to learners that they are learning the language just in order to be able to do the exercises in the textbook. By showing how the language learned can be used for communication between people in the classroom, teachers can demonstrate that the prime reason for learning a language is to help us to understand and communicate with other people. This seems self-evident, and yet you can still find teachers and trainers who will advocate using the language for cross-curricular purposes yet who will see no link between that approach and the logic of teacher and learners using the target language to communicate with one another in the language classroom!

TASK 1

Discuss - or think about - the following statements describing communicative language. Do you agree with them? Are there any you would add?

The purpose of language learning is to communicate Learning 'set dialogues' relates in no way to real life. Learners who aspire to communicate with others should be shown how to use the language they have learned to describe their own experience (albeit, for some, in simple terms); to express their own thoughts, needs and opinions; to respond to what others say to them; to ask as well as to answer questions.

Vocabulary learned should be useful Learners should be asked to learn only vocabulary, phrases and structures that are enabling; that is, learners should be able to **do** something with the language they have learned.

Language learned should be transferable The language items students learn should be transferable to situations other than the ones in which they are initially taught. The random element provided by games and game-like situations encourages this ability to develop naturally.

Responding 'communicatively' may not involve words Although all spoken language activities should require a response from the learner, that response need not always be an utterance in the foreign language; sometimes it will be a physical response, to an instruction in the foreign language, for example, or reaction to what has been said by someone else

– laughing at a joke, for example, or expressing surprise or disbelief. Teach interjections and expressive gestures as well.

As far as possible, language used by learners should be 'for real' Once learners are familiar with the new language and confident about using it, creative work can start: transferring what has been learned into new situations in which the learner can begin to choose what to say (as, for example, in role play) and to utter phrases which are motivated not just by their need to practise the language, but their desire to express themselves, to say what they want or need to say, in the target language.

TASK 2

In these two examples, which situation demonstrates 'practice language' and which demonstrates a communicative purpose: A or B?

Example 1

A The teacher holds up a flashcard and says, "What is this?"

B In the course of a game, one student asks another to guess what card s/he is holding, by asking the same question: "What is this?"

Example 2

A The teacher holds up a clock face, positions the hands and asks, in the foreign language, "What time is it?"

B In the middle of a foreign language learning session, a learner asks the teacher, in the foreign language, "What time is it?"

COMMENTARY

1A *The question is not a genuine request for information. It really means: "I want to know if you have learned this point. Prove it by telling me what this is." The learner, of course, understands that the question is really a test, and responds accordingly.*

1B *The purpose is different; if the guess is right, the respondent takes the card and wins a point. If the guess is wrong, someone else will provide the right answer. The purpose is for a point to be scored in the course of a game. There is no sense of failure and the learner's confidence is not assailed. S/He will hope to get it right next time and score a point.*

2A *It's a diagnostic test question, to see if learners have 'got it'.*

2B *The question is real: the learner wants to know if it's time yet to go for the scheduled music lesson (for example), or is wondering if it's time for the bell to go for the end of the lesson!*

TASK 3

Thinking of your own teaching, create some more examples showing how, by changing the situation slightly, an activity can be made more genuinely communicative.

