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AN INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION THEORY:
A DESCRIPTION OF THE TEACHING ACT

Mary Ann Christison

Norbert Weiner's now classic work entitled The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society reveals the thesis that society can only be understood through a study of the messages and the communication facilities which belong to it (Weiner, 1954). The study of these communication facilities is assuming an important role in the society of the world. We are just beginning to realize the significance of Weiner's thesis. It is not surprising that the science of communication now includes many diverse fields of interest such as mathematics, sociology, psychology, linguistics, education and foreign language instruction, to name only a few. As teachers, supervisors, employers and students we are always communicating and discussing lessons, texts, methods of instruction, tests, and various schools of language teaching. We may, however, be characterized as the four people in a Japanese play entitled Rashomon -- we give contradictory and equivocal accounts of the same events (Fanselow, 1977). A new conceptual framework can help us avoid this contradiction. The purpose of this paper is to introduce you to a more precise and rational method for describing communication in the classroom.

The primary reason for contradiction in describing communication in the classroom is that no technical language exists to designate the teaching behavior in second language learning settings. The vocabulary we do have such as pace, drill, reinforcement and audio-lingual are ill-defined and inconsistently used. Without a common unit of analysis, each viewer is bound to see events through his own perceptions and preconceived notions. What we need is a technical language to describe the teaching act and a conceptual framework for classifying, creating and evaluating communication in a range of settings.

The basic idea of classifying the communication people send and receive in both teaching and non-teaching situations eventually developed into the field of Cybernetics and Communication Theory. A closer look at these fields will provide us with a more rationale and precise method of describing communication in the class.

The term cybernetics refers to the philosophy which insists that from the point of view of communication the human organism is not essentially different from a machine. It emphasizes the resemblances between living organisms and

man-constructed machinery and points out that even though the components differ, in theory their operation is the same. They both act as an intermediate stage in relation to the signal. Used in the programming of communication, cybernetics becomes a precise and well-structured language which seems very basic to the description of the teaching act.

The theory of cybernetics is concerned with the problem of defining the information contained in a message so as to be able to recognize the unit whenever it occurs. Using this theory, we can pick out the most general structural relationships or we can deal with an abstract language of structural relationships that exist only as we define them--such as morphemes, phonemes and syllables. Communication, in this sense, is regarded as a physically measurable quantity only.

Thus far, this strictly mathematical approach to the description of language and more pointedly the eventual description of the teaching act, seems at first glance a useful and accurate tool. It is, of course, extremely useful and accurate in the proper context, but there is no manmade or natural communication system which does not have in it the potentialities for error. Cybernetics and Communication Theory treat information as a physically measurable quantity only. Communication Theory is more concerned with the technical problem of transmitting signals accurately rather than the semantic problem. It cannot distinguish between information of great importance and a piece of news of little value for the person who receives it, nor does it admit the possibility of foreign elements--a cough or an illegible handwriting. It can not determine, either, whether or not the message is understood. Communication in this sense does not deal with meaning or with message content. This theory, nevertheless, is important because it is through a rudimentary extension of this theory--the defining of information contained in the message so as to recognize it whenever it occurs, that we find the tools necessary for the description of the teaching act.

We are all aware of the technical language which exists for a second language--such as phonology, morphology, syntax, etc. But, as stated previously, no technical language exists to designate the teaching behavior. Such words as drill, reinforcement, mechanical, audio-lingual, and communicate are used inconsistently. These are all subject to personal interpretations and points of view and tend to become little more than the advocacy of one particular theory. Although Communication Theory in its purely mathematical sense fails to account for semantic variance, it seems that the present technical language used to describe teaching behavior allows for far too much. There needs to

be a technical language for the teaching act equal to the technical language used to teach content.

In TESOL Quarterly, March 1977, John Fanselow published an article entitled, "Beyond Rashomon -- Conceptualizing and Describing the Teaching Act." This article is concerned with providing a more precise description of the teaching act. The following information is an overview and analysis of his research which provides us with a technical language for the teaching act. An additional study was also conducted using Fanselow's proposed technical language. The results of this particular study will also be discussed.

According to Fanselow, there are five characteristics of communication within the language classroom. These have been defined and given the following technical terms: source, pedagogical purpose, medium, use and content. (Figure A)

Figure A

Five Characteristics of Communication
in Settings*

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Who communicates?
(<u>source</u>) | teacher (t)
individual student (st)
informant (i)
textbook (b)
group of students (g)
class (c)
visitor (v) |
| 2. What is the
pedagogical
<u>purpose</u> ** | structure (str)
solicit (sol)
respond (res)
react (rea)
bearing (bea) |
| 3. What <u>mediums</u>
used to communi-
cate content? | are linguistic (l)
non-linguistic (nl)
para-linguistic (pl) |

*John F. Fanselow, TESOL quarterly, Vol.11, No. 1, March 1977.

**The first four pedagogical purposes are from Bellack.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 4. How are the
mediums <u>used</u> ? | attend (a)
characterize (c)
present (p)
relate (r)
re-present (rp) |
| 5. What areas of
<u>content</u> are
<u>communicated</u> ? | language system (ls)
life (li)
procedure (pr)
subject matter (sm) |

A more thorough description of the five characteristics of communication in settings can be found in the TESOL Quarterly mentioned above.

The first of these characteristics, "source", is concerned with simply "Who" communicates. In the language teaching situation these could be defined and abbreviated as follows: teacher (t), textbook (tb), informant (i), students (s), group of students (g), and class (c) (Figure A). In a teaching situation, of course, these would vary to include the participants in the communication act. The patterns would change to fit the situation.

The next characteristic mentioned is "pedagogical purpose." There are four pedagogical purposes: structuring, soliciting, responding and reacting (Bellack, 1966). Structuring refers to communications that set the stage for subsequent behavior and exercises or self-directed activities--such as reading silently or cleaning up the classroom without being told to do so. Communications that set tasks or ask questions are soliciting. Soliciting may be done by the student or by the teacher. Performances of set tasks and answers are responding moves and communications that modify these moves are called reacting. Included here are also communications that are reflexive or not requested. In addition to the four purposes defined by Ballack, Fanselow adds an additional purpose he defines as bearing. Bearing refers to unconscious communication, as the jiggling of one's keys, etc.

The third characteristic is "medium". There are basically three mediums used in communication. These are defined as linguistic, non-linguistic and para-linguistic. Communications expressed through words or written representations of such communications are referred to as linguistic mediums. Communications that are made with instruments or with the body functioning as an instrument are called non-linguistic. Communications such as gestures, movement, and touch are expressions of the body without the vocal cords (e.g., body language) and are called para-linguistic mediums.

The fourth characteristic is entitled "use" and is concerned with how the mediums are used. There are five ways in which the mediums are used. These are defined as follows: attending, characterizing, presenting, relating and re-presenting. Attending is when the medium is not used to communicate content--listening, silent reading, tasting, feeling objects, etc. Characterizing is communicating about content or things. This is distinguished from presenting which is communicating actual content itself. The fourth use of the medium is defined as relating. When we relate communications about content such as making generalizations, making rules, generating new patterns or making inferences, we are using the medium defined as relating. The final use of the medium is called re-presenting. Substituting, transforming, paraphrasing, and combining are all forms of re-presenting: they all communicate content another has just communicated.

The last characteristic of communication Fanselow discusses is concerned with what areas of "content" are communicated. Four basic areas of content are discussed. In the language classroom, any information about the target language which is set apart, tested and practiced is labeled as language. Any formulas such as greetings, reflections, personal feelings, personal information and general knowledge would be examples of communications which are part of real life experiences. These are coded as life. The calling of role in the classroom, disciplining students, giving directions to manipulate language and language teaching procedure and explaining the reasons for particular exercises are all examples of the third category of content labeled procedure. Information other than that which is categorized as language, life and procedure is coded as subject matter. Communicating skills such as knitting, skiing, and playing bridge or survival skills such as how to cash a check or read a rent agreement are examples of content classified as subject matter. In summary, this comprises the last of the five characteristics of communications in the teaching act--source, pedagogical purpose, mediums, uses and content.

Using the above information from Fanselow's research, I conducted a small project in ten different language classrooms. My evaluations were not nearly so detailed as those of Fanselow's (It takes practice to achieve competency using this form), but I felt my study was, nevertheless, valuable.

To begin with, I made a small chart indicating the five characteristics described by Fanselow (Figure B)

Figure B

Five Characteristics of Communication in Settings*					
1 SOURCE	2 PURPOSE	3 MEDIUMS	4 USE	5 CONTENT	TOTALS

Then I spent some time practicing with the abbreviations I had employed. My first observation proved very successful. Partially, I believe, because my presence was not supervisory in any sense. The teacher and students appeared relaxed. Secondly, the evaluation was more objective. It was not necessary to say, "You need to get your students more involved." If lack of student participation was a problem, column 1 (Figure B), "who communicates" would be heavily coded with "t", indicating teacher, with relatively few "st's", indicating student participation. Teacher dominated activities would also be evident in column 2, "pedagogical purpose," "Structuring" would be heavily coded if the teacher did a lot of explaining of the tasks or activities. In addition, a teacher who initiated most of the classroom activity would dominate the characteristic of communication known as "soliciting." The two characteristics, "structuring and soliciting", were heavily coded as teacher dominated in 8 out of the 10 classrooms observed.

The heavy reliance on the teacher as "communicator" and "user" of the target language should tell us something about the ever present focus on teacher oriented classrooms. Considering the reported success of the various "cults" in our profession which focus on student initiated communication such as Gattegno's Silent Way and Curan's Counseling Learning (C-L) and Community Language Learning (CLL), can we afford to ignore their obvious focus? I say we cannot. We need to continue to develop a more sensitive awareness to the student's actual needs, an awareness which will help us avoid monopolizing the learner space and help us start building communication bridges between teacher and learner and the learners themselves. An instrument such as the one

*John F. Fanselow, TESOL Quarterly, Vol 11, No. 1, March 1977.

described here can help us bring this type of classroom communication into the proper focus.

The progress we make in language teaching, as in any profession, comes from those who have studied their discipline and are able to describe it. Like professionals in other areas, we can also see, the creative and innovative "confident that the teaching act is no longer a mystery that defies precise and rational description" (Fanselow, 1977, p. 32).

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