Communication Games in the Language Class

John Harvey
Many of us can remember a time, not so long ago, when almost everybody seemed to be happy with what was going on in our foreign-language classrooms. What was going on seemed to fit rather neatly with linguistic theory and with psychological theory—at least with American linguistic theory and American psychological theory—and there seemed to be every prospect that it would work.

Nowadays, much the same sort of thing is going on in our foreign-language classrooms—most of them, most of the time—but hardly anybody seems to be happy with it. For one thing, it no longer seems to be up-to-date theoretically. For another, it doesn't seem to work very well after all.

But what else is there?

Well, there are several new cults: the Silent Way, Counsel-learning, Suggestopedia. I call them 'cults', perhaps unfairly, to try to suggest what I find uncomfortable about them. Each of them seems to have its guru and true believers. Each of them seems to be wrapped around a central mystery. Each of them seems to be presented more in terms of revelation than in terms of argument and evidence. I find something of interest in each of them, but less than I am asked to find, and less than I am looking for. In particular, I find very little about language.

We should keep our minds open. Certainly the claims of the cultists are impressive, and any validation would be exciting. But my hunch is that something else will be needed to fill the bill.

Another alternative, of a very different sort, is individualization. This is an alternative with a vengeance. With all our debate over drill and bait theory, we have almost forgotten that the audiolingual theory was originally just that, a theory that put the spoken language first. Unless we want an alternative to that, to putting the spoken language first, we presumably don't want our students doing their homework in class.

Again, of course, I'm being unfair. We do need to cope with the problems presented by widely different abilities, learning styles, and interests. Somehow. But not by turning the teacher into a file clerk.

That is probably enough on the alternatives I am not going to consider, although the ones I have mentioned and others I have not do deserve serious study. The alternative I am going to consider is not yet institutionalized enough to be called a movement. It is not yet a tidy body of doctrine. It has hardly begun to become available in the form of materials. But I do think it is a definite trend.
More and more, perhaps starting with John Carroll (1952), people have been saying that communication is what is lacking. There has been relatively little effort to define the concept of communication in terms of language and language learning, and not much has been suggested as to how to make communication happen in the classroom. I should mention, parenthetically, that Gerald Dykstra stands out as an exception to both these statements. But the word 'communication' is everywhere, and behind the word, I suggest, is an idea whose time has come. I use the cliche deliberately, since I can't think of a better way of expressing the convergence of several lines of thought into an inevitable idea, into an idea which occurs to any number of people at roughly the same time.

Not that the idea doesn't have a history of its own. Like everything else in language learning, it probably has a pre-history. I just think that the present explosion of interest in communication has been set off by fairly recent developments in linguistics and in related sciences. In particular, despite Chomsky's disclaimers, I think it has been inspired by the rise of transformational grammar, which has brought new respect for the depth, complexity, and creativity of language.

I said earlier, without naming names, that the audiolingual method, and the structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology which were supposed to buttress it, are no longer in good theoretical repute. I am reasonably sure I said it without objection. I went on to express my misgivings about the theoretical supports of the Silent Way, Counseling, and Suggestopedia, and I stated flatly that individualization was throwing the baby out with the bathwater--the baby being the idea of the primacy of speech, and the bathwater being particular mindless classroom activities intended to implement that idea. Now let me sketch the kind of theory that I think can be developed as a basis for a communicative approach to language learning.

Since we are talking about learning language, we need some sort of a model of learning. The model I propose is essentially contained in a single, simple slogan: learning by doing. There is nothing very novel or particularly sophisticated about this idea, but I think it takes on some novelty and some sophistication if we apply it in a deep sense rather than in a surface sense. In other words, I am not talking about what the student appears to be doing, I am talking about what he is really doing. And I'm saying that that is what he is really learning.

If you ask me whether Jennifer is learning to ride her bicycle, and there she is pedaling along tilted ten degrees off to the right supported by her right training wheel, I say that she isn't. She may be learning to pedal, but she is not learning to balance, which is the whole trick. Now, I will admit--I have to admit for my later argument--that there are degrees of approximation. If Jennifer starts to get up off that right training wheel for a few yards at a time, she is closer to riding a bicycle, and therefore closer to learning to ride it. But we still can't leave that right training wheel out of our analysis of the learning situation. Certainly she isn't leaving it out of hers.
We want the language learner to use the language. That's how he's going to learn to use it. But we have to be sure that he's really using it, not just appearing to use it.

On the surface level, one student utterance of a given sentence may be roughly equivalent to any other. But we have a pretty good idea of how different they may be on a deep level. One student utterance of the sentence might be repetition after the teacher. Another might be recall from a memorized dialogue. Another might be manipulation on cue. We can't count these as real use of the language. Then another might be free creation and urgent expression. That's a different matter.

It is true that these differences are differences in what is taking place inside a black box. But that does not mean that they are beyond knowing. If you can hang a man on circumstantial evidence—and I think you can—then you can hang a learning model on it. So the learning model sets up a requirement for a performance model on it. So the learning model inside the black box, given the inputs and the outputs. With a better idea of what real language use involves, we'll be in a better position to make it happen.

We need some sort of model of the performance of the speaker and some sort of model of the performance of the hearer—or perhaps, since specialization is seldom carried that far, some sort of model of the performance of the speaker/hearer. If we consult the linguist and the psychologist, we will come away with something less than a scientific model of performance. But we will not come away empty handed.

The linguist is likely to insist on components to deal with semantics, syntax, phonology, and lexicon, or some such breakdown. The psychologist is likely to insist on general cognitive components to deal with knowledge, logic, and imagination, at least, and on affective components certainly including drives and inhibitions. Notice that this does not pretend to be an exhaustive listing or a definitive categorization. But it does give an idea of the number and variety of components that will be needed for a working model.

Our consultants will undoubtedly warn, further, that each of these components will be internally complex, and that each of them will be related to each of the others in complex ways. Take the syntactic component of the performance model, for example. We could hardly expect it to be significantly simpler than the syntactic components of current competence models. Again, think back over the debate as to what, if anything, is wrong with one of the highest-frequency sentences in the English language, 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.' We can take the intensity of that debate as a measure of the intimacy of the relations between syntax and semantics, and between these linguistic components and the general cognitive components dealing with knowledge, logic, and imagination. And this is not even to mention the positive and negative affect aroused by that sentence.

Obviously, this performance model is almost as sketchy as my learning model. At the time, it is overambitious in the present state of the art,
and probably will be in any foreseeable state of the art. I am only saying that we must take into account every factor that we know, intuitively, to be important. I don't think that the models of learning and performance explicit or implicit in current language-teaching methods do. I think that they fail to do justice to much of what we know or have reason to suspect about the mind and about language.

One thing we know to be important, or have very good reason to suspect is important, was left out of my performance model. I mentioned earlier that every speaker is a hearer, and vice versa, or that everybody is a speaker/hearer. But I have not mentioned the obvious fact that every speaker requires a hearer, and vice versa, or that every speaker/hearer requires another. In other words, the performance model needs to be expanded into a communication model. There are obvious counter-examples to any claim that language is purely a communicative device, but none of them would seem to weigh heavily against regarding language as first and foremost a communicative device.

The speaker's performance cannot be understood without considering his mental representation of the hearer. I offer two thought experiments to illustrate this. First, imagine yourself writing, 'to whom it may concern', a letter explaining why you have decided not to attend the party the Joneses are throwing next Saturday. Don't you find yourself wondering whom it might concern after all? What if it's somebody who has never heard of the Joneses? What if it's the Joneses? Next, imagine yourself conveying substantially the same explanation to your spouse. Would you need to be so explicit or so tactful? Would you even need to be articulate?

But it doesn't stop here. The hearer's performance cannot be understood without considering his mental representation of the speaker. Imagine yourself opening a letter. Don't you look at the letterhead or the signature first?

Actually, it doesn't stop here, either. The speaker's representation of the hearer has to include an estimate of the hearer's representation of the speaker. And vice versa. And so on.

Communication is nothing if not a cybernetic process. We have seen that speaker and hearer are looped together in terms of what has been called 'feed-forward', that is, in terms of their intentions and expectations. They are also looped together, of course, in terms of feedback. Both speaker and hearer need feedback on the extent to which the message sent was equivalent to the message received. If this feedback doesn't come immediately from what the other party says or does, it should come at some time from some source. Something has to result from what has been said and from how it has been understood, if communication is not to break down.

As soon as we put the subjective performances of speaker and hearer together into a communication model, we realize that there is an objective relationship between them, namely what in fact the speaker communicates to the hearer. This is a function not only of what the speaker says but also of what the hearer already knows. We have arrived, of course, at the basic concept of information theory, in which the amount of information is
measured by the unpredictability of the message — technically by the number of yes/no questions which the hearer would need to select the message from the array of likely messages.

Notice that this measure of communication means that we can't judge the performance of the speaker just on the basis of what he says. We have to ask ourselves whether he has really told anybody anything — that is, whether he has told anybody anything they didn't already know. Nor can we judge the performance of the hearer just on the basis of how he responds. We have to ask ourselves whether he could have responded that way anyway. To anticipate, the implications of this for the language classroom are immense. Most of what normally passes for real use of the language fails to meet the test.

Let's trace the path of one communication event through this model, not even trying to touch all the bases.

The speaker starts out with some knowledge of the total situation, including an estimate of what the hearer knows about it. The speaker also has something he wants, something he can only get if the hearer is better informed. He therefore formulates a message — for simplicity, let's think of it as prelinguistic, what he wants to say rather than how he is going to say it —, shaping this message to fit what he thinks the hearer knows and what he thinks the hearer needs to be told. He then processes the message linguistically — looking up lexical items, applying semantic, syntactic, and phonological rules — to encode it into a signal. For our present purposes we may equate the signal with the surface structure.

The hearer processes the signal linguistically to decode it into a possible message. He checks it against his knowledge of the situation, including his estimate of what the speaker knows, and knows about him. If it doesn't make sense, he may recycle it. If it does, he takes what is new to him in the message and adds it to his knowledge. This may in turn affect what he wants — as the speaker intended.

But we have not yet completed the path of the communication event. Some clue has to loop back from the hearer to the speaker that the message he sent was the message received, and some clue has to loop back from the speaker to the hearer that the message he received was the message sent.

My essential claim is that students will learn a spoken language in the classroom just to the extent that what they do in the classroom approximates this communication model.

To help in examining this claim, let me extract three key features from the communication model, features I have gotten into the habit of calling reference, intention, and uncertainty. I think these three features, taken together, most clearly point up what the communicative approach requires and what it offers.

First, the reference feature. The reference recognizes that communication, to be communication, must first of all be about something.
A word, a phrase, or a sentence has reference if it points to something in particular. There must be a referential framework, a definable state of affairs consisting of everything taken to be the case, a total situation specified by the total information available. Among other things, it must be reasonably clear who is talking to whom, when, and where.

If the learner says, for example, 'The book is on the table.' we should ask ourselves whether he has in mind any particular book, any particular table, and any particular configuration of book and table. He might not. He might just be producing a well-formed string. If that is the case, it may well be because no universe of discourse including any particular book on any particular table has been established.

The objection that there is always some book on some table in the classroom, by the way, doesn't hold. For one thing, I could come up with an elephant in a Volkswagen. And the question would be, what elephant in what Volkswagen? Or rather, do we have any way of knowing?

Referentiality makes it possible for what is said to be judged true or false, sensible or nonsensical, appropriate or out of place. It insists that what is said be open to confirmation or disconfirmation. It lays the basis for feedback.

When we communicate in our own language, our referential framework is simply the world as we know it, or any part of it. But the world is too wide for the language learner--by definition. If he could talk about anything he might have in mind, he wouldn't be a learner, or at least he would be a very advanced learner. On the other hand the classroom is too narrow, except for the merest beginner. There just isn't enough there to talk about for very long, or enough the learner needs to learn to talk about. Somehow, then, we have to arrange to bring samples of the world into the classroom, representations of parts of reality which are limited enough not to overchallenge the learner's abilities but rich enough to exploit those abilities.

Most current instruction is based on a script of some sort, a dialogue or narrative which is learned thoroughly and then forms the basis for a certain amount of discussion. This script does provide a referential framework, almost always a carefully limited one, although seldom a sufficiently rich one. Strangely enough, however, it is precisely in those parts of current instruction which aim at communication where the situation is inadequately characterized. In free conversation, for example, more often than not the learner finds himself in a referential limbo.

Recently, in a Chinese class in Washington, I heard the teacher ask a student 'Has your wife come here with you?' It was a question the student could understand--just-- and one he knew how to answer in the affirmative or the negative. But there was no context whatsoever. If the reference was to the real world, and assuming he had a wife, the student could take 'here' to refer to the classroom or to the school or to Washington, each perhaps calling for a different answer, and he had no idea how to give an elaborate answer such as 'She came to Washington with me, but she hasn't come to school with me today.' If something else was supposed to count as
real, what was it? Was he perhaps being cast in the role of Mr. King in the text, whose wife has indeed accompanied him, to China? Or was he being invited to cook up an answer? Well, in that case, the affirmative would be much easier.

Whatever was going on in this reference-free exchange, it was certainly not communication.

Next, the intention feature. The intention feature recognizes that communication, to be communication, must be purposeful, must be to some end.

There is an obvious affective sense in which unmotivated speech falls short of communication, but there is also a crucial cognitive sense. Just as important as feedback in the communication model -- and therefore in the learning model -- is 'feed-forward'. The speaker's intentions, and the hearer's expectations, give sharpness and weight to the feedback. There is increasing evidence to suggest that, unless a hypothesis is being tested, the data will seldom surrender or volunteer any meaning.

It would be ideal to be able to harness the learner's real-life intentions, but unfortunately these have little standing in the classroom. There are levels of intention on which this is not true, of course. The learner's intention to learn the language is clearly relevant. His intention to leave when the bell rings is clearly exploitable, perhaps by insisting on a leave-taking ritual. But most of the time, as things stand, the learner can't say anything he has any reason to say, and has no reason to say anything he can say.

Somehow, then, we must arrange for the learner to have moment-to-moment reasons to use the language he has. By far the simplest way is to give him one big reason and let the small ones follow naturally from it as things develop.

Finally, the uncertainty feature. The uncertainty feature recognizes that communication, to be communication, must overcome unpredictability.

If communication is the resolution of uncertainty, there has to be uncertainty to resolve. But if all the information has been made public by the time communication is supposed to begin, if nothing has been withheld, nothing really remains to be said. Behavior superficially resembling communication may ensue, but its redundancy will be nearly absolute. This is the case with most classroom discussion of the classroom. Everybody knows that Mrs. King accompanies her husband to China, and that the book is on the table. Nobody can inform anybody of either fact. In a way, we're back to spouse talking to spouse. Speaker and hearer share so much information that there is no point in being articulate. All the machinery of an articulate utterance would be spinning its wheels rather than functioning to convey meaning.

But, of course, how that machinery functions to convey meaning is precisely what we want the learner to learn, and he will only learn it by
seeing it in operation and by operating it. Unless he can observe how form and content crucially depend on one another, unless he gets to try fitting one to the other, he will never work out the complex relationship between a sentence and its meaning—which is the language.

Or, to put it another way, the evidence of the relationship between a sentence and its meaning is no more available in the absence of the meaning than it would be in the absence of the sentence.

The communicative approach offers a simple remedy. It arranges for different people to know different things. The total information about the situation is divided up, perhaps with some overlap, but with everybody screened off from some part of it. At the same time, of course, a requirement is built in for wider distribution of the information. Everybody has a need to know what others know, and has a need for others to know what he knows. It goes without saying that the only licensed channel for the transfer of information is the target language.

My colleague John Francis and I have been working for some time—in connection with the development of a Peace Corps Korean course, a private school program in French and Spanish, a French immersion program, and a government-sponsored Chinese course—to devise classroom activities along these lines. What we have come up with we call communication games. I understand that Adrian Palmer and Margot Kimball of the University of Utah used the same term in a paper they presented to the TESOL Conference in Miami. I haven’t seen their paper, but I wouldn’t be at all surprised to find considerable convergence in substance as well as in terminology. And I wonder if they don’t share some of our misgivings about the term, despite its inevitability.

The word 'games' has the drawback of suggesting a lack of seriousness, except perhaps in competitiveness. But our communication games are not intended as diversions from the hard work of language learning, or as rewards for it, but rather as the hard work itself. In fact, if there is one thing about them that is not serious, it is the occasional element of competition. Usually, everybody 'wins'.

These communication games are game-like in the sense that they simulate purposeful human interaction, and in the further sense that they are purposeful human interaction, on a different level. Like games, they are based on made-up situations, with roles to play, rules to follow, and goals to pursue within those situations.

Once taken seriously, communication games often turn out to be diverting and rewarding after all. But it is important to realize, I think, that this windfall profit derives not so much from the simulation of reality as from the reality of communication itself. They are games, but they are communication games. Success in them hinges on the successful exchange of information. It is not at all a bad feeling to be putting the language to work. It is an even better feeling when, the more you use it, the better you can use it. These feelings are nature's way of telling you that you are functioning properly as a language-using, language-learning animal.
Let's take a look at a simple communication game played in the sixth unit of the Chinese course I mentioned. (Incidentally, there are 58 communication games in 39 units, and something like one-third of all class time is devoted to them.) This game is designed to contrast the new expression 'to work at (some place)' with the old expressions 'to be at (some place)' and 'to live at (some place)'. This is not a matter of simple lexical substitution, as it appears in English, but rather a matter of three different constructions which cast the same morpheme in the different roles of verb, verbal suffix, and preposition. So it needs work.

Since we aren't actually playing the game -- I wish we could -- we can cheat and look at the teacher's answer sheet, which represents the total situation. This consists of four copies of a street map showing three named office buildings on one side of the street and three named hotels on the other side. Each of these copies of the map is marked to show where one person works (any of the three office buildings), where he lives (any of the three hotels), and where he happens to be now (any of the six buildings). Since this is a game of what we call the 'Science' type, in which the players try to make out significant regularities in the data and base predictions on them, the situation has been rigged: each of the four people is shown as staying at the hotel across the street from his office building, and each of them is at his hotel now.

Now let's look at the worksheets the players are given. There are four different worksheets, one for each group of the four players in a group. Each worksheet is generally like the answer sheet, with four street maps to represent the facts about the four people, except that only on one of the street maps -- a different one on each player's work sheet -- is marked those facts.

Each player, then, knows about one person and needs to know about the other three if he is to work out the significant regularity in the situation, and the only way he can find out about the other three people is to talk with the other three players. This choreographic pattern, by the way, in which each player pairs off with every other player in turn, we call 'milling'. Notice that it has the effect that each learner is talking half the time, and being talked to directly the other half.

In a game of the 'Science' type, each player gathers information using question-word questions, coding it on his worksheet as he goes, until he is able to form a hypothesis about the significant regularity. Then he tests his hypothesis by making predictions with yes/no questions or, better, with slightly more yes than no questions. A hit counts as a hit, a miss as a miss.

I chose a simple example, at the risk of having it appear trivial, although anyone who has been involved in the first fifty or so hours of a language course may recognize that this Science game is considerably more demanding than most classwork at that level. It may be worthwhile, now, to suggest what a communication game of the 'Science' type but at a much more advanced level might look like.

Imagine that each player is given a dossier defining his role in terms of socioeconomic background and political opinions, and that he
is then to proceed as in my simpler example, this time specifically as a social scientist whose research objective is to uncover correlations such as 'well-off people with children eighteen and under tend to favor higher local expenditures for schools, unless they happen to be conservatives.' For fun, we might allow him to uncover such idiosyncratic exceptions as one poor and childless citizen who also favors higher expenditures for schools, on the grounds that he wishes he had had a chance to go to school himself.

In general, we have found the Science paradigm to be extremely productive across all levels and for most kinds of material. Other game types are most restricted in range, all the way down to a one-shot type like 3-D Tic-Tac-Toe, which so far, at least, has only been used to practice giving directions inside a building. Game types differ in many other ways than in range of application. We have identified more than a dozen independent variables which interact to produce a variety we have hardly begun to explore.

If you think back over the two versions of 'Science' I have described, I think you will agree that the reference feature, the intention feature, and the uncertainty feature of the communication approach are all there. The situation is defined by the full set of worksheets. The overall goal, to find the pattern—and, implicitly, to help others find the pattern—, motivates the production and comprehension of each question and each answer. The division of information is accomplished by the provision of a different worksheet to each of the players.

A workshop would be a better setting for discussion of the nuts-and-bolts aspect of developing and implementing communication games. I would like to mention, however, that each game is preceded by a 'briefing', a run-through of a stripped-down version of the game which gives the teacher a chance to demonstrate it to the whole class, and to make sure that they are ready for it, and that each game is followed by a 'debriefing', a general discussion of the total situation which has been uncovered which gives the teacher a chance to check up on what learning has taken place, and to deal with any difficulties which have arisen. I should also mention, although it is perhaps obvious, the very different role of the teacher in this kind of learning activity. Except during the briefing and debriefing, when he has the class in his usual firm grip, the teacher is likely to feel a bit left out. He shouldn't be, however. Besides functioning as a roaming linguistic monitor and linguistic resource, he may participate as a player himself and therefore function as a linguistic model for one group at a time, and at all times he remains the classroom manager, which in this case involves trouble-shooting the game.

I would like to close on a more uplifting note. In the Chinese course the games are a follow-through on material presented and practiced earlier in the unit. That's probably the way they should be introduced into classroom practice. In fact, I think their spread into other courses in other languages should probably proceed by piggybacking a game here and a game there onto existing materials. I invite you all to try it. But I would like to think that communication games, despite their undignified name, have a more central role to play. I would like to see a course
built around a sequence of communication games, with any other necessary inputs downgraded to the function of priming the learner for the games. I'm not sure that almost all presentation and practice of the material couldn't take place in a communicative context, with a great deal of openness to learner initiative in what gets learned. Anyway, it's worth a try.