

A Post-Communicative Era?: Method versus Social Context

Adrian Holliday

Abstract

The communicative approach is now old to many people, but still 'modern' and problematic for many more. In considering a 'post-communicative era', we must acknowledge that there are principles implicit in the communicative revolution which cannot be ignored - the need to teach communicative competence, and the need to capitalise upon the existing competence that the student brings to the task of learning. Implicit in the second, is an appreciation of the student's *social context*. However, this aspect of the communicative approach is often ignored in favour of an older desire within the profession for *method*. In a post-communicative era, it is necessary to stop looking inward to the refinement of method, and to look outward to a more socially informed approach.

L'approche communicative n'est pas une nouveauté mais elle reste d'actualité et pose des problèmes à de nombreux enseignants. En envisageant une ère post-communicative, nous devons reconnaître qu'il y a des principes implicites dans la révolution communicative qu'on ne saurait ignorer - la nécessité d'enseigner la compétence communicative et celle de prendre en compte les compétences acquises qu'utilise l'étudiant pour apprendre. Également implicite est la prise en compte du contexte social de l'étudiant. Pourtant cet aspect de l'approche communicative est souvent ignorée en faveur d'un désir de méthode, plus ancien dans la profession. Dans une ère post-communicative, il est nécessaire de ne plus se replier sur la sophistication de la méthode mais de s'orienter vers une approche qui tienne davantage compte du contexte social des étudiants.

Some feel that we are into a post-communicative era, where the disciplines of 'approach' no longer seem relevant, where content and purpose decide what happens in the classroom (cf. Allwright 1991). At the same time, there are many teachers all over the world for whom 'communicative' is still a perplexing icon of modernity, and more who reject it as completely inappropriate to 'traditional' educational contexts. In this paper I shall argue that although we

may be in a post-communicative era, there is a core *social* element of the original communicative revolution which is still to be appreciated and achieved. This element has been opposed by an insistence on *method*. What is or ought to be dead is *communicative-as-method*.

I shall begin by looking at the original principles of the communicative revolution. Then I shall consider how preoccupations with method have diverted attention away from some of these principles. Then I shall discuss how this problematic situation might be addressed.

Communicative principles

To me, the basic communicative principles are that the teacher should (1) teach communicative competence, and (2) in so doing, acknowledge the existing competence the student brings to the classroom. I started being communicative when I stopped subjecting my students to a prescribed routine in which learning was an auto response to a tightly organised series of stimuli and disciplines - as represented in the lockstep of a structure-based syllabus in which listening came before speaking, came before reading, came before writing, and syntactic mistakes were not allowed. I began instead to treat them as intelligent human beings who already had a wealth of experience that had to be respected, capitalised upon, and perhaps discovered, in whatever ways were appropriate. Procedure, rather than being prescribed, was now in dialogue with whatever the students brought to the classroom in terms of needs, wants, learning styles, interests, and experience as communicating social beings in their own and perhaps other languages.

Neglect of the social

Communicating with the realities of the students was thus an important aspect of 'communicative'. It has long been realised in the sociology of education that these realities derive from students wide social and psychological experience of life (cf. Barnes 1969). However, at the time of the communicative revolution in English language education, the importance of the *social* seems only to have been intuitively appreciated, and was not addressed as thoroughly as the *psychological*. This may have been because preoccupations were still very much with linguistics and psycholinguistics - the psychology of how the individual acquires language in second language acquisition research (Savignon 1991). It was somehow known that the *cultures* of students were a significant consideration in communicative

language teaching, but, as I shall argue below, this knowledge has been ill-developed and perhaps misguided.

Preoccupation with method

Another reason why the social aspect of students' communicative experience has been neglected is that an older preoccupation with method has remained strong with many teachers and methodologists. This may well be a residue from the origins of English language teaching in the private sector, beginning with the Berlitz schools, and later developed through the growing industry of British private language teaching. The influence has now extended to the British Council and English language units and centres in the university sector throughout Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA). It was through method that the quality required by the private sector to satisfy the client could be assured.

Central to the notion of method is that lessons have a prescribed step-by-step procedure. Its advantage is that teachers can be trained very precisely in its mastery. This appeals to many private establishments who wish to generate a chain of schools with the same house style and quality, and also to some government establishments where a bureaucratic guarantee that teachers X and Y will be on the same page at the same hour is desired. *The disadvantage of method is that it is universalist and dogmatic in the sense that it cannot easily be adapted to different social contexts.*

Method has largely been discredited in the literature. This is partly due to a realisation that it has diverted energy towards methodological 'brand loyalty' and complacency, and partly due to the 'failure' of the methodological comparison experiments in addressing the differing social factors operating in different classrooms (Allwright 1991:6). However, it has persisted with many teachers and teacher educators throughout the world for the following reasons.

- (1) Large numbers of non-native-speaker teachers, unsure about their *language* ability, feel more secure within the safe confines of method. Intellectually, in many parts of the world, method is also considered to be more in tune with an authoritarian teacher image than 'democratic' communicative language teaching. In short, method is equated with *control*.
- (2) Many teacher educators find the 'academic' rigour of method more appropriate to the tertiary sector where much teacher education in the

world takes place.

- (3) There is no necessary conflict between method and the more traditional psycholinguistics-oriented syllabus (p.2), where the variety of social context is not a factor.
- (4) Method is more easily packaged and exported from the BANA private sector, where it originates, to the state tertiary, secondary and primary institutions (TESEP) of the rest of the world (Holliday 1994a).

Communicative-as-method

Reason (3) is illustrated in the way in which many teachers fit communicative activities into the established practice and production stages of the structural syllabus (Allwright 1982:2). The outcome is what has been termed a weak communicative approach, where communicative refers to oral work in which students practice conversational skills in pairs or groups, in which they are allowed to communicate with each other rather than just with the teacher (Holliday 1994a, 1994b:170). As Long and Porter (1985) rightly argue, such activities considerably enrich classroom life by varying and extending the opportunities that each student has to *use* English. However, this focus on the linguistic aspect of 'communicative' has served to take attention further away from the social aspect. I would go so far as to suggest that most English language teachers throughout the world now equate 'communicative' quite narrowly with oral group and pair activities. Figure 1. explains how this methodising of one aspect of the communicative revolution ignores social context and is thus not communicative at all.

<i>Communicative</i>	<i>Communicative-as-method</i>
Responds to <i>social</i> factors in what students bring to the classroom (i.e. social context)	Comprises communicative <i>activities</i> which are fixed within a prescribed lesson sequence
Essentially <i>adaptable</i> , because social context varies from one scenario to another	Not adaptable to different social contexts, therefore <i>not communicative</i>

Figure 1: Methodising of 'communicative'

Post-communicative issues

The underdevelopment of the social in the communicative approach has both created and been affected by a series of issues and misconceptions that are only recently coming into focus. These may indeed be post-communicative issues in the sense that they represent a post-communicative-*as-method* era in which the narrowness of a weak approach is now beginning to make itself known.

Large classes

Many teachers working in the TESEP sector world-wide see that the communicative-*as-method* is completely inapplicable to large classes. The group oral activities lay great demands on classroom resources. They require a *learning group ideal* which prescribes a very small class tuned to maximum oral participation, with the teacher always on hand to monitor (Holliday 1994a, 1994b:53, 1994c). As with the origin of method, it is the BANA private sector which is most able to maintain this ideal. However, TESEP classes are larger, and non-native-speaker teachers find it harder to make students who share one mother tongue to use English in oral practice. They also feel less confident in monitoring and responding to the more open-ended language that these activities produce (ibid.). Thus, many TESEP teachers, who find communicative-*as-method* intellectually appealing, feel guilty that they cannot actually implement it (Coleman 1990). The irony is that in their belief that communicative-*as-method* does not work, they sometimes return to a more traditional method, which, because of its BANA origins is just as alienating.

Another side of the large class issue is that the dominance of the BANA learning group ideal creates a mistaken attitude that all large classes are educationally, and indeed culturally deficient. It is true that large classes in many developing countries are the product of low resources. However, there are state education systems in several well-resourced countries, such as Japan and France, which do not necessarily see small classes as preferable and large classes as deprived. Furthermore, within state education systems, classroom behaviour is unlikely to have the same social function as in the BANA private sector from which the learning group ideal originates.

The ethnocentricity of professional-academic cultures

State education is likely to be less commercially instrumental than the private sector, with wider educational objectives such as socialisation - instilling in

young people the social skills and attitudes appropriate to the society in question (Holliday 1994a, 1994b: 93-95). Large classes often encourage a social distance between student and teacher, which gives the teacher an academic authority that is socially desirable in many societies. In such societies, the high contact, intensely participatory BANA learning group ideal may be entirely inappropriate. Although its creators might believe that the learning group ideal is universally desirable, it is as much an *ethnocentric* creation, of a particular professional-academic culture, as any TESEP classroom is the creation of a political, educational or national culture. The learning group ideal has its own social requirements which are *different* but not superior to those of other classroom ideals. It represents an alternative rather than a superior professional-academic culture to that of many TESEP contexts. In Holliday (1994b) I use Bernstein's (1971) analysis of educational codes to argue that the learning group ideal derives from an integrationist professional-academic culture, which is skills-based. As such, it attacks the knowledge-subject-based collectionist cultures of much of TESEP education. The presence of a collectionist paradigm in teacher education would explain the need for prescriptive theory in many parts of the world. Sharpe's (1992, 1993) ethnographic study of French primary education suggests a collectionist orientation.

Appreciating social resources

In a post communicative-as-method era, it is therefore important to recognise the social values represented in different classroom contexts - whether they be large or small. They may indeed overrule any context-ignorant psycholinguistic principles present in the learning group ideal. A truly communicative approach should have the capacity to create methodology to suit, for example, a situation where teachers or lecturers need to maintain a social distance with their students, and where student numbers *and* established role relations make it difficult for teachers to monitor every word which is said. (See Holliday 1994: 184-188 citing Azer.) Each social context must be seen as a resource within the framework of which English language education can be created (Naidu *et al* 1992).

The 'non-native-speaker' fallacy

That many non-native-speaker teachers find method linguistically easier to cope with to some extent represents a false-consciousness. The belief that the non-

native-speaker was less able than the native-speaker has, until recently, been taken for granted. There is, however, now an increasing literature describing the attributes of non-native-speaker teachers (Phillipson 1992a). It has been suggested that the notion that they were less proficient than native-speaker teachers was created to protect the native-speaker vanguard of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992b:27-28). Indeed, the very term, 'non-native speaker' has a derogatory implication. When it is shortened to 'non-native', it has the powerful effect of alienating local teachers from their own environments. Although they may be teaching their countryfolk within the communities of their birth, they have been made to appear intruders because the lesson is an English lesson.

What the *local* teacher possesses, which the native-speaker *foreign* teacher finds it hard to learn, is a *local knowledge* of social context. If we take Phillipson's imperialist paradigm to its conclusion, it is imported BANA communicative-as-method which has disinherited this local knowledge. An imported method, which requires very high language competence to monitor open-ended oral activities, gives native-speakers an undeniable superiority. At the same time, its prescription of classroom procedure rules out adaptation to local context (Figure 1) and renders the local knowledge of local teachers redundant. The prevailing methods of English language education, whether structural or communicative-as-method, have in effect been native-speaker methods. They have attracted non-native speaker teachers because of their simplicity; but at the expense of local knowledge.

Phillipson's paradigm is however flawed. It accuses the producers of English of imperialism; but at the same time it implies that the recipients of English have no minds of their own, depicted as periphery civilisations (ibid.:57). The producers of English are naïve if they think that all those non-native-speaker teachers who come to BANA institutions to attend courses in communicative-as-method really intend to *use* it. This might be true of inexperienced teachers; but experience of real classrooms back home will soon change this. It is easy for BANA teacher educators to interpret non-native speaker lack of interest as some form of cultural lack, and participation as victory. In fact, these different reactions may be due more to the indirect effects of the course than its content - degree of opportunity for travel, promotion, increased status, professional interaction etc. These secondary aspects may be far more meaningful in terms

of the social realities to which TESEP teachers belong; and teachers will choose accordingly. Communicative-as-method thus becomes a commodity which in itself might have little value, but which has worthwhile side-benefits.

Recovery of local knowledge

In a post-communicative-as-method era, teachers must liberate themselves from the confines of method and rediscover their local knowledges. This realisation has been there for some time in British education, where teachers have been encouraged to apply local knowledge through reflection and action research, and where social appropriacy is monitored through increasingly sophisticated evaluation procedures. This new technology of teacher-as-researcher is now also common in the BANA literature. The problem, however, is that it *is* very BANA in its orientation. I was recently helping an English department in a European university to set up a programme evaluation procedure. The British and American contingent in the department dominated all discussion, while the local staff held back in apparent acquiescence. However, away from the meetings, over coffee, a local lecturer told me about how she had been carrying out informal research to help her respond to her students' needs for many years. Her procedures were sophisticated; but because they did not fall within the terminology and checklists of the BANA technology, she hesitated to call them 'evaluation', and they never featured in the plans and discussion. What *she* had been doing was based on her local knowledge, and was likely to be far more appropriate than any BANA machinations (cf. Holliday 1994b:193, citing Szulc-Kurpaska).

What we need in a post-communicative-as-method era is a TESEP technology for appreciating and tapping local knowledge.

The myth of culture

Another misconception concerns culture in the classroom. The tendency has been to look at the cultural differences which students bring to the classroom as constraints on communicative-as-method - exotic behaviour traits which get in the way of prescribed method. Because of this, the focus has been on strategies for teaching students from these 'cultures' how to learn in the way prescribed by the learning group ideal. If the learning group ideal is itself ethnocentric, and represent a different, rather than superior professional-academic culture, this amounts to cultural imperialism. This 'us-them'

perception of other cultures results in a *tribalisation* in which other cultures are seen as simple, homogenous and perhaps even 'primitive' to the extent of being educationally deficient (Holliday 1994c, citing Said). Appropriate student behaviour is thus defined according to an ethnocentric learning group ideal.

The social cannot be restored to the communicative approach until appropriate student behaviour is defined according to the social reality from which it springs. If this does not happen, it is impossible to build on students' existing communicative experience. If teachers are to value and build upon what students bring to the classroom, student behaviour, no matter what form it takes, must be seen as *contributory* to classroom methodology. I have had recent experience with students from Hong Kong. According to the learning group ideal, they did not have good learning strategies because they rarely said anything in English without a constant subtext in Cantonese. It was not until I stopped trying to force an English *lingua franca*, and allowed the students to use the Cantonese subtext - which represented an extremely competent level of peer collaboration - that things began to improve. When left alone, they formed their own groups and worked extremely rapidly to produce excellent English in written and spoken task outcomes.

Parameters for a post-communicative era

To conclude, I shall offer the following parameters for a post-communicative era. They may seem utopian; but I feel that if some of these are not already trends, they at least represent the way things ought to go.

1. 'Communicative' should cease to be a label attached to method. Communicative-as-method is proving to be unworkable.
2. 'Communicative' should become a basic parameter for all activities, and as such retain all the principles of the original revolution - to teach communicative competence *and*, in so doing, address the social requirements of all parties.
3. This would require that the social should become a basic factor in all activities and not be second best to the linguistic and the psychological. Sociology should therefore become a core expertise, with ethnography a basic tool. Hence, 'communicative' becomes more than a reference to classroom procedure. The term has already been used to refer to an interpretive, exploratory social science, in which communication with all parties is a basis (cf. Grotjahn 1987:56, 65-67).

4. Key to this is that TESEP experiences and expertises should take their rightful place in the ideological superstructure of the profession. There are some very small signs of this in the literature and conferences. The TESEP successors of BANA-funded aid projects are beginning to have their say. They are becoming the majority at masters and doctoral level, albeit still in mainly BANA universities. It is time that publishers should look to the TESEP sector if they want something new.

That there is already a wind of change was evident in a recent quality and standards inspection of a language centre in a British university. The final report took on a negative tone in that the teachers were criticised for not being sufficiently 'lively' and 'innovative' in the classroom. On analysis, the conflict seemed to be ideological. The inspectors wanted the teachers to comply with communicative-as-method, in which lessons are prescribed as involving a certain type of creative participation. The teachers had a more genuinely communicative aim - to address the real needs of the students. Indeed, the teachers claimed a long, analytical experience of the 'culture' of their students. A substantial amount of action research was being carried out in the institution; and there were very favourable evaluation reports from the students. The inspectors' insistence on communicative-as-method was thus completely inappropriate to the social context of the institution's classrooms.

That this took place within the BANA sector was significant. Despite the anxiety of the teachers over the inspection report, I see this a healthy sign that prescriptive method is on its way out, though not without a fight. Many of the students of course came from a more TESEP world, as the majority of younger students do.

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The Author

Adrian Holliday is Senior Lecturer in the Language Studies Department at Canterbury Christ Church College, UK.