

# Communicative language teaching in the 1990s: a consumer's perspective

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## Abstract

This article describes my own, recent experience of being a language learner in a 'monolingual' context in which a broadly communicative approach was used. It is mainly an attempt to draw some general conclusions from the content of the detailed learner diary which I kept during my studies. In broad terms these support Holliday's (1994) scepticism as to the universal applicability of 'BANA' versions of the communicative approach.

*Cet article relate mon expérience récente d'apprentissage d'une langue dans un environnement unilingue au moyen d'une méthode à dominante communicative. J'ai essentiellement tenté de tirer quelques conclusions générales du journal détaillé que j'ai tenu pendant mes études. Elles vont, dans l'ensemble, dans le sens du scepticisme de Holliday quant à la possibilité d'appliquer de façon universelle les versions de l'approche communicative conçues en Grande Bretagne, aux Etats Unis et en Australasie.*

## Introduction

In July of 1994 I had the opportunity to attend a 40 hour intensive Catalan language programme in Catalonia<sup>1</sup>. Following the work of writers such as Bailey and Ochsener (1983), Brown (1985) and Bailey (1990), I kept a learner diary during the course. In this article I describe the main points which arose out of my impressionistic note-taking, particularly as regards the issue of 'communicative' approaches in 'monolingual' classes.

## The course and its context

The administrative, sociolinguistic and sociopolitical background to the type of course which I took is complex, but for the purposes of this article a brief description will suffice.

The semi-autonomous Catalan government runs a heavily subsidised series of Catalan language courses throughout Catalonia<sup>2</sup>, the lower levels of which are

designed for non-native speakers of Catalan. The courses are not within the secondary or tertiary systems (they are available to all adults, regardless of educational background) and they do not form part of a wider curriculum, but neither are they in any sense private (a 40 hour course costs about £17). For this reason, the provision cannot readily be categorised in terms of Holliday's (1994) distinction between Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA) and 'TESEP' situations. The physical realities of the classroom, however, bore more resemblance in my case to those of many European TESEP contexts than to the typically privileged environments of the BANA world, in that we were approximately 30 students in a cramped and badly ventilated room in temperatures of up to 40°C with a serious traffic noise problem<sup>3</sup>.

The 'technology' of these courses (in Holliday's sense) is of interest as the methodology used is avowedly communicative<sup>4</sup> and, although the classes are open to students of any linguistic background, the reality is in many cases a 'monolingual' one in that Castilian (Spanish) is shared as a lingua franca (if not as a mother tongue) by all the participants.

### **Keeping a diary: the procedure and the focus**

This article is not meant to be a discussion of diary writing as a research technique. Nonetheless, the reader may find useful a brief description of my reasons for taking the course and my approach to keeping the diary.

My purpose in taking the course was two-fold: to keep a diary and see what emerged from it and to improve my own Catalan. The latter was not a 'secondary' aim in any sense and mine was certainly not a case of learning a language in order to keep a diary. While as a professional teacher and linguist my interest in keeping the diary was strong, I also had a clear motivation of both an integrative and instrumental type to improve my own knowledge of the language. On the one hand, my wife is Catalan and the language is both my usual means of communication with her family and the language which she uses with our children. In addition to this, the course which I took is intended as preparation for an examination leading to an official certificate awarded by the government's Department of Culture, a qualification which I was keen to obtain for a number of reasons. These factors helped, I think, to ensure that my orientation was very much that of a 'real' learner, as well as a kind of introspective investigator, for the duration of the course (an 'unfalsifiable' and therefore arguably rather specious claim, I realise). This dual focus was further strength-

ened by the fact that the intensive summer course which I took in fact covered in 40 hours the same material which a 90 hour October-June course is comprised of; in this sense it is hardly surprising that I spent at least as much time learning and studying as I did introspecting and writing the diary!

All of the above, I would contend, helped me to minimise the amount of professional and theoretical 'baggage' which I brought to the experience while the course was actually taking place and in general it forced me to make my diary entries relatively brief and spontaneous. Finally, I tried to maximise this broad 'hands on learner' v. 'post hoc theorist' distinction by adopting a procedure in which for the duration of the course I resisted the temptation to read back over previous days' diary entries or to study any of the relevant applied linguistics literature.

When, after the course had finished, I came to read my diary entries I found that the bulk of them seemed to fall into four main categories. I shall now discuss these, along with some of their implication as I see them. They are:

- the nature and demands of the course
- roles and affective factors
- the L1 in the classroom
- methods and techniques

## **The course**

### ***General orientation***

My notes from the first day record the fact that the teacher spent some considerable time dealing with a large number of 'administrative' points. These ranged from the content and focus of the course and materials, attendance and punctuality requirements and other 'ground rules' (e.g. 'please do not use Castilian in the classroom', 'feel free to ask questions at any time' etc.) to evaluation procedures and more 'trivial' matters such as the time and length of each morning's break.

My notes suggest that I very much appreciated receiving all this information (in manageable doses) right at the beginning. To take an example, the first few days' entries in my diary are full of comments such as "I'm very concerned, despite myself, with evaluation" (5/7) and I do not believe that such a concern is untypical. While the tendency of many students to focus on testing procedures and outcomes in this way may be undesirable, it seems to me that for teachers to adopt a 'Don't worry about that now, we'll deal with it later in the course' policy is probably frequently counterproductive. I, for one, had to

have a clear idea of where I stood and what was required of me before I could really begin to get on with much learning.

As it happens, all of this orientation took place in the target language so it had the additional advantage of being excellent listening, reading and note-taking practice. However, I would argue that it is of such importance that where the target language is not a feasible option it should be dealt with in the L1 (e.g. beginner classes in monolingual contexts). What should be done in the case of low level 'multilingual' groups in BANA settings is obviously more problematic.

### *Hard work*

We were also told on the first day that the course would be hard work and that our progress would depend substantially on our commitment outside the classroom as well as in it; it was and it did! Indeed, my experience over the month did a great deal to strengthen a conviction that assiduity and application are among the most important variables in second language acquisition in adults and that there is no point in teachers pretending otherwise. It is perhaps worth noting that participants in some other role reversal experiments of this kind (e.g. Lowe 1987) appear to have come to similar conclusions.

This contrasts sharply, of course, with the Krashenite (e.g. Krashen 1982) and neo-Krashenite view, still by no means devoid of influence in of the BANA world, that it is 'acquisition' (i.e. 'effortless learning') which really counts and that 'hard work' (in the guise of 'monitor use') is at best useless. In its extreme form this has led to the bizarre phenomenon of the blind leading the sighted, to my mind, as Krashen's acolytes (BANA owners of the technology, often monoglots themselves) admonish TESEP 'consumers', who are often already polyglots, against wasting their time on 'learning' rather than just sitting back and 'acquiring'. As many have pointed out (e.g. Gregg 1984), Krashen's theory is seriously flawed on both empirical and 'logico-deductive' (Nunan 1992) grounds. Equally, I would have thought that a spell in a classroom making a serious effort to learn a language would be enough to persuade anyone of the essential absurdity of a 'strong' position on acquisition v. learning.

I would argue that even 'weak' positions on this issue within BANA technology need to be approached with a healthy scepticism. In my experience, at least up until quite recently BANA teaching and training tended to be concerned almost exclusively with what goes on in the classroom itself and, by default if nothing else, a rather dismissive attitude tended to prevail as regards the enormous

amount of valuable work which learners can and do carry out away from the classroom, even where technological resources are limited. Yet in my own case, as a learner, I think I can say with confidence that the work that I did outside the classroom was crucial as regards my progress (the circumstances, of course, were arguably unusual in that the course was so intensive).

## **Roles and affective factors**

### *The organised teacher*

"I keep thinking, 'I hope he's going to take in the homework'." (11/7)

A recurring theme in my diary is my appreciation of the fact that our teacher was organised and well-prepared and that the framework described in the first lesson was adhered to. For example, trivial as it seems to me with hindsight, it appears that having been told that classes would start at 9.00 sharp I was concerned that if I made the effort to be there at that time that the class, full or not, should indeed begin on the dot. More importantly, the letters, shopping lists etc. that I produced as written homework became objects of considerable personal investment and it was of great importance to me that the teacher took them in when he had said he would and returned them promptly.

Like most teachers, I try to be reasonably organised in my own work, but it was something of an eye-opener to me to experience just how significant minor 'details' of this kind would be to me as a learner. For me, at least, our teacher's attention to them was the most decisive factor in the development of a feeling that he fundamentally cared about our learning and was enthusiastic about his own teaching; in a way this was at least as important to me as the actual methodology employed.

### *The affective element*

"He's now using more people's names, including mine - and this makes up for the fact that I got all the 'xyz' exercise wrong." (5/7)

As a highly experienced language learner, teacher and teacher trainer I had expected, with an arrogance or naivety which was not apparent to me at the time, that any 'affective' problems I might have during the course would, if anything, consist of a tendency towards over-confidence. In fact, the reverse took place and I was surprised by the amount of anxiety that I experienced and by how much significance affective factors held for me.

Several points come to the fore in my diary entries. I was initially very

nervous about actively participating in front of the class (even in 'choral' drilling on the first day) and therefore grateful that the teacher made use of pair and group work and introduced individual nomination of students gradually and sensitively. It also meant a lot to me that his general demeanour (although he did not go in for 'praise') was one which suggested an implicit belief in our ability to succeed and that he learned and used our names. Furthermore, the fact that he did not pretend omniscience but was willing to acknowledge errors and occasionally describe some of his own past learning difficulties took on an importance which in retrospect appears almost inordinate, although at the time it was key - 'He's only human, too'; 'If he had problems with this, then maybe I can do it too' etc.

More than anything, the experience brought home to me dramatically just how much being a teacher is about power and control whereas learners tend to be beset by vulnerability and uncertainty and how important a part it is of a teacher's job it is to be sensitive to this imbalance. On the other hand, the experience reinforced a belief on my part that such sensitivity is best exercised in subtle ways (especially in cross-cultural situations) and that overt 'humanistic' activities are not the answer in most contexts.

### **The L1 in the classroom**

#### *Contrastive linguistics*

"Often when I start to think 'Surely a comparison with Castilian would clarify this best', the 'last resort' comparison appears either from the teacher or the book." (14/7)

My diary contains a number of entries which refer to comparisons made between Catalan and Spanish in order to explain a variety of points. This technique was used, albeit sparingly as my diary entry above suggests, at a number of levels which included phonology, morphosyntax, lexis, orthography and pragmatics and my impression was that it contributed substantially to the quality of the teaching and learning. By the end of the course I was more certain than ever that interlingual comparison and contrast constitute techniques which, by starting from where the learner is at a given point, harness important cognitive-heuristic strategies. Clearly, some aspects of language are more amenable to an intralingual approach (the relative proportions will obviously depend in part on the 'distance' between the two languages in question), but it seems to me that one of the basic pedagogical responsibilities of teachers of

'monolingual' classes must be to make informed, principled decisions in this respect.

This, in my view, points to another of the basic problems of the transfer of BANA technology to TESEP contexts in that much 'communicative' teacher training still seems to be predicated on the assumption that the typical BANA situation of 'multilingual' groups taught by (monoglot) native speakers of English is in some sense an ideal which teachers in other (more representative) contexts should aspire to mimic and recreate. This strikes me, now both as learner and teacher, as a spurious notion.

### **Prohibition of use of the L1**

'When I say to you, 'what does x word in Catalan mean?', you must give me a definition, not a translation into Castilian'. Rough translation of a statement made by our teacher (4/7)

Despite what was said in the previous section, it was made very clear to us, both implicitly and explicitly, that the only permissible role of Castilian in the classroom was in the occasional pedagogical comparisons made by the teacher. We were expressly prohibited from using it in interaction with the teacher (see above) and there appeared to be a certain pressure on us to use it among ourselves during pair and group work, coffee breaks etc.

In fact, this prohibition caused relatively few problems of a practical nature as the learning context was highly conducive to its success, since the L2 and 'L1' were highly cognate and there was already a fairly high level of oral/aural competence in the class (this, of course, is by no means akin to the majority of contexts in which ELT takes place). Nevertheless, I felt that there were repercussions at the affective level. We were given no rationale for this policy (surely a serious error of judgement in itself) and one could therefore only speculate as to its purpose. I am reasonably certain that in reality its rationale was supposed to be 'purely' pedagogical, but this did not prevent me from feeling rather embarrassed (and rather resentful at feeling the embarrassment) when, for example, a teacher walked past in the corridor or the coffee bar while a group of us were speaking Spanish. I found myself feeling vaguely culturally disenfranchised and wondering whether, at some deeper, perhaps subconscious, level the prohibition implied a rejection of 'Spanishness' itself (and that without even being Spanish myself).

Phillipson (1992) discusses this sort of issue in some detail and refers to

evidence (p.193) which suggests similar reactions in other contexts. I emerged from the course convinced that if such a policy is to be imposed then the students should be made aware of exactly why it is being done, but that it is probably ill-advised anyway, on both practical and affective grounds.

### **Methods and techniques**

Somewhat to my surprise, my diary entries show that methods and techniques were not my main concern as a learner. I had expected to take a critical interest in every methodological 'move' that the teacher made (rather as one does as a teacher trainer) but this appears not to have happened, to the extent that my entries can be condensed into one basic point.

### ***Traditional techniques, communicative language teaching and sugaring the pill***

"Look at the order of events today. Communicative approaches have tended to assume that language learning is inherently/basicly **tedious** and that the bitter pill must be sugared". (18/7)

This was written after a particularly stimulating and worthwhile class in which most of the time was spent doing and discussing accuracy-focused exercises from the coursebook in a fairly teacher-centred way, most of which would meet few of the 'standard' criteria of 'communicativeness' (see e.g. Harmer 1993).

While I agree with Holliday that the 'communicative revolution' has been a lot more than the "interesting ripple on the surface of twentieth-century language teaching" that Swan (1985) described it as, my experience as a learner made me feel that another of the problems of BANA technology has been its tendency to emphasise intricate, 'realistic' activities at the expense of simpler more 'traditional' activities which appeal to the learners' actual or potential interest in learning from overt discussion of how language works and how it is used. It seems to me that this can be explained partly in terms of an erroneous assumption that the problem with discredited methods such as grammar/translation is the fact that they focus overtly on language so much (as opposed to *how* they do so). Indeed, it is perhaps also a reflection of the *fact* that the BANA countries responsible for the exportation of communicative methodology are, certainly as far as Europe is concerned, rather paradoxically among the most linguistically unsophisticated societies. Anyone involved in initial ELT

teacher training or teaching undergraduate linguistics in the UK would, I think, back me up here. I was struck, on the Catalan course, by the degree of linguistic awareness among the learners which our teacher was able to draw on, both of an intuitive kind (perhaps because they were all already at least partially bilingual) and at an overt metalinguistic level.

It is self-evident that teaching methods and techniques should be adapted to the strengths and weaknesses of the environment in which they are used. BANA technology needs to be sensitive to the level of knowledge *about* language and how it works which exists in many TESEP contexts.

### **Conclusions**

The study confirmed for me the validity of the caution which Holliday expresses about the one-way, universal exportation of BANA technology (and I had deliberately avoided reading his article in any detail until after the diary was finished). I came away from the course convinced that the things which really count are not always the finer points of (communicative) methodology which BANA technology has often tended to focus on and that, as Holliday suggests, a greater awareness of the importance of specific social contexts is a vital attribute of outsiders involved in bringing about changes in any educational setting.

Above all, I became all the more convinced that wherever possible teacher trainers should be teachers and, no less importantly, teachers should also be learners, if only for short periods occasionally. Unfortunately, administrative hierarchies and resource constraints tend to work against the realisation of such a state of affairs, both in the BANA and TESEP worlds. Nevertheless, in my view the nearer that the ELT profession can get to this 'ideal', the more the BANA/TESEP 'credibility gap' will be reduced.

The notion that teachers should be also be researchers is currently a fashionable one. My experience earlier this year suggests to me that it is perhaps equally important that researchers and trainers should try also to be teachers and learners.

### **The value of the diary study**

It goes without saying that the reactions of one person to one four-week language course do not in any sense 'prove' anything and that the conclusions that I draw from my experience do not meet standard social science research

criteria such as external and internal validity (e.g, Nunan 1992, p. 123 and passim). Furthermore, in addition to being, like Bailey and others but unlike most learners, a "linguist and a teacher" (Parkinson and Howell-Richardson p.128), in this article I lay myself wide open to accusations of having set out (even if subconsciously) to confirm my own prejudices and pander to the bees in my own particular bonnet.

On the other hand, as I described earlier, I did attempt to approach the experience as 'naturalistically' as possible and in that sense the diary and this article are perhaps a contribution to the exploratory, pre-experimental (or indeed non-experimental) tradition described by Bailey and Ochsener (1983) and others. If nothing else, my remarks can stand as those of one successful language learner - I passed the course!

### Notes

1. My participation on the course was funded by the generous financial assistance of the University of Sunderland.
2. Catalonia, an area located in the north-east of the Iberian peninsula, constitutes one of the autonomous regions into which the semi-federal Spanish state is divided. Catalan is a Romance language which has between 6 and 9 million speakers, the majority of them in the principality of Catalonia. The language is often described as having most in common lexically with French to the north and morphosyntactically with Castilian (Spanish) to the south and west.
3. I am not in a position to know how typical or otherwise these conditions were.
4. *COM*, a journal devoted to the teaching of Catalan to adults, published by the government's Department of Linguistic Policy, makes this abundantly clear. The 29 issues of the journal are full of references to a commitment to a communicative approach.

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