

# Accuracy and fluency as polarities in foreign language teaching materials and methodology

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## Accuracy and Fluency as Polarities in Foreign Language Teaching Materials and Methodology

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However untidy theories may be, language teaching must proceed, for teaching has its own momentum, quite independent of discussions of principle. For this reason, theoretical discussion of classroom activity can only be justified if — ultimately — it helps classroom practitioners to become more effective. One of the side-effects of this claim is an obligation on those who write about language teaching theory not only to write as simply as possible, but also to produce theoretical categories which are not liable to create confusion when applied by teachers who have not been present at the original theoretical discussions. Just as Halliday (Halliday 1969) has claimed that grammatical theories should vary according to the purposes they are intended to serve, so theorists of teaching procedure must recognise the relationship between their theoretical categories and the purposes to which they will be put — and there have been many warnings recently of the dangers of complex theories being applied simplistically to education<sup>1</sup>. In this paper I hope to explore a distinction which is, it seems to me, not only useful, but also easy to grasp. I have found it a helpful means of clarifying my ideas about most classroom activities conducted in normal conditions in foreign language teaching. The distinction I wish to make is between *accuracy* and *fluency* as short-term objectives, and particularly I wish to explore the implications of making fluency the basic element in the language curriculum rather than accuracy.

As a result of work from a variety of sources, what is called 'communicative' language teaching has been widely accepted as a model. At the same time, certain aspects of a 'functional' approach have been received with some uncertainty by materials writers and teachers. While it is generally recognised that a statement of functional needs is a useful part of the input to a syllabus, it is not universally accepted that such a statement is either the sole input or even the most important input. Until such needs can be translated from a checklist into a generative system, decisions will still have to be made with reference to other linguistic features about sequencing and grading. The problem is that — unless we

1 See for example the discussion of the work of Bernstein in Stubbs (1976).

are prepared to rely on random exposure — we have to make some decisions about sequencing, and sequencing necessarily implies some criteria for grading, even if only at the selection stage. No inventory of needs (nor of anything else) can in itself encapsulate communication, because communication is dynamic while an inventory is static, emphasising the elements rather than the relationships between them. But a true communicative methodology will have to recognise the *dynamic* element in communication<sup>2</sup>.

Such a dynamic element is responsive to two main areas of constraint on the speech act. The first is the group of constraints imposed by the situation in all its richness, a combination of elements which is never exactly repeated, and the second is those constraints imposed by the investment of personality of the user of the language. Any description of a speech act is an abstraction which must either oversimplify or ignore these two main areas; yet the interaction between the participant and the situation will always be a dynamic, fluid process, and methodology must recognise this fact.

If we recognise the fluidity of this process, we may be able to benefit from an awareness of some of the methodological discussion taking place among mother tongue teachers of English, for they have been concerned with this issue for some time<sup>3</sup>. They are at pains to emphasise that we do not simply make use of an already existing language when we talk or write; instead we modify it and recreate it, perhaps giving it new meanings within boundaries which we have to establish with other participants in the discourse. In fact, the whole process of language use is one of *negotiation*: we do not use pre-set tokens, but we negotiate our meanings afresh each time we converse — because the situation is never an exact replica of any previous situation, and the participants' willingness to involve themselves is different in nature and intensity from their willingness on previous occasions. If this process did not take place all the time, the language would be static and we would simply be exchanging signals which represented permanent features of an unchanging universe. Furthermore, this process is present to some extent in even the simplest and most predictable message-communicating situation, while a great deal of language use is much more complex; we think, discover, classify and clarify, and we are actively involved in such processes in a way which is intimately bound up with our most straightforward messages. Foreign language teaching has not traditionally concerned itself to any great

2 For further development of this theme, see Brumfit (1978).

3 See particularly, Barnes (1976).

extent with such aspects of language use, but if we are really concerned to develop fluent and accurate use of a foreign language, can we afford to neglect them?

While it is true that the process of moulding and creating described in the previous paragraph is found most conspicuously in speculation and argument rather than casual discourse, it is never entirely absent, and is certainly a major feature of the acquisition of the mother tongue. It does not, of course, take place solely through language: the total human interactive capacities are involved. But foreign learners are concerned with this total interaction in their mother-tongues, and there are many strategies used in mother-tongue communication which the foreign language classroom discourages when it could encourage. If we really want to develop fluent language use perhaps we should be very careful not to treat foreign language learning as if it is a totally different process from mother tongue use. There are, of course, major differences in social organisation between the normal mother tongue situation and the foreign language classroom. It would be ridiculous to pretend that these do not exist. But it may be inefficient to allow the social features of foreign language *teaching* to determine the conditions of foreign language *learning*. Supposing we do place foreign learners, to a greater extent than we have in the past, into situations where they have to grope linguistically, where they are forced to paraphrase and to adjust to other speakers who are in the same position as they are, what consequences will follow? Suppose we remove total security from at least part of our classroom activity, shall we thereby assist development of language-using abilities which have traditionally been neglected?<sup>4</sup>

A major advance in this direction will be dependent on the utilization of insights drawn from a number of areas of research. Studies of interaction in the classroom and in other situations should enable us to become increasingly efficient in specifying the items to be taught. But any specification of items on the basis of such research will still be a descriptive specification, and therefore static. There are major problems involved in the translation of static descriptions into the dynamic form necessary for classroom activity, but these will perhaps be solved by research into learner strategies. Furthermore, research into learner strategies — and mother tongue acquisition strategies — may shed more light on the complex involvement in language learning of personality traits. We may expect there to be many different learner strategies, and it will be a long and difficult task to devise a clearly worked out methodology which

4 Further discussed in Stevick (1976).

is really responsive to the implications of recent research tendencies. However, we are increasingly aware of the extent of individual commitment to the process of language learning, and the psychological barriers which need to be overcome, so that it is likely that the process will be assisted rather than ignored — which is some sort of an advance.

This preamble may appear to be somewhat grudging, but there are good reasons for caution. Language teaching is not the same as description in many ways, and there are two ways which it is vitally important for language teachers to remember if they are to avoid false gods. One is that language teaching cannot avoid being concerned with the whole of language: the processes of generalization and standardization which are conventional procedures in science may be appropriate in the *discussion* of language teaching, but constructs built on such procedures will inevitably break down when faced with the real classroom situation because the interaction of students and language immediately takes us to the specific, raw data again. This is not to say that those who discuss language teaching should eschew such conventions — indeed without them discussion would be impossible and we would have to resort to mysticism — but it is to say that it is not helpful to teachers to over-emphasise the general at the expense of the particular. It is possible to make generalizations about friendship, but we would be ill advised to make such generalizations a basis for our personal relationships.

The other way in which language teaching differs from description, vitally for teachers, lies in the fact that learning will take place without any direct reference to teaching or talk about teaching procedures. Descriptive linguists have a near monopoly of description, but everyone acquires one language, and most people in the world acquire parts of at least one more. Even in school there is no way in which learners can be told to stop learning for a bit, however much they might sometimes wish to! The teacher can never thus be totally in control. Although scientists have often appeared to wish to control education, they cannot, fortunately, and nor can the teacher. Clearly it is helpful to lessen the teacher's uncertainty, but to imply that one day certainty can be reached is to mislead, and to mislead dangerously.

We can, however, teach ourselves to accept uncertainty, and to see it as a strength. Since the uncertainty proceeds from the complexity and unpredictability of the range of relationships which language reflects and supports, such relationships could be encouraged as material for the teacher to use rather than reject. A genuinely student-centred approach would allow in language much unpredictably organised activity. And such an approach need not be in conflict with clear objectives and a sense of direction in a course. Indeed, a general principle of most education is to



move from the known to the unknown, but as long as the main emphasis in language teaching is on language as knowledge, a deficit view of the learning process has been established. If the emphasis is on the interaction between learners, using language, the learner's own abilities, already developed in this direction by his experience with his mother-tongue, can be much more fully exploited. I have suggested elsewhere<sup>5</sup> that it is possible, indeed, that the major change involved in 'communicative' teaching strategies may be an apparent reversal of procedures. The traditional mode of language teaching has been as in figure (i).

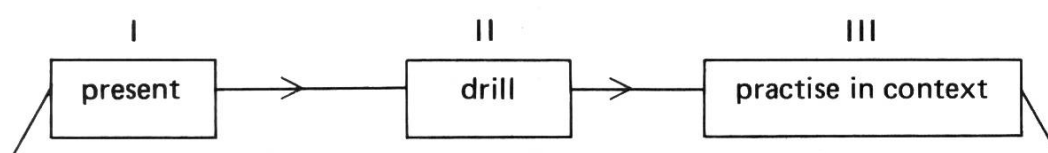


figure (i)

A communicative mode may be as in figure (ii).

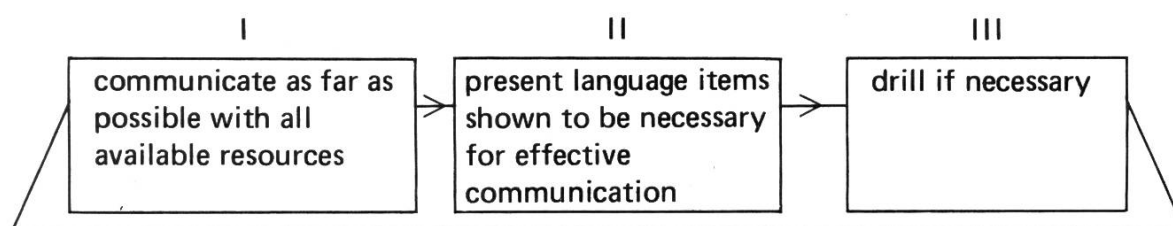


figure (ii)

The process is of course cyclic, but any emphasis on communicative interaction will tend to drive the teacher towards entry at a different point in the cycle. The process then becomes student determined in detail, though still teacher determined in broad outline, through the design of the syllabus.

A model of this kind will subtly change the nature of teacher responsibility. He will need materials of different kinds from in the past<sup>6</sup>, and the relationships between units will be expressed in different ways. The core of the course will become a series of situations demanding communicative activities of varying kinds (the specificity will depend on the teaching situation), and there will be a vast range of support materials, much of which could be traditional in design. Communication would be

5 In 'Communicative' Language Teaching: an Assessment, in Strevens, P. (ed.), In Honour of A. S. Hornby, Oxford University Press 1978, pp. 33–44.

6 Similar to those discussed in Allwright (1977).

central to materials and syllabus structure, rather than items preselected by the teacher, because fluency would have been given a central place methodologically. Many of the materials based on role-play and simulation which are now coming on to the market will be appropriate to the second model, as well as much activity traditionally promoted as contextual practice. The main problem is that design rarely goes beyond the level of materials. A true syllabus must have both a specification of items directly related to materials, and a way of showing increased difficulty, methodologically as well as through content specification. To create a syllabus out of materials is essentially an empirical task, for if we are willing to allow arguments about the complexity of the language learning operation, we must accept that no descriptive model can be, on its own, the basis for the development of the syllabus. The applied linguist may provide a detailed needs analysis, which will perhaps help the teacher to know when to stop, and also what external demands may be made on the syllabus. But beyond this point, the syllabus can only develop through the interaction of learners, teachers, materials and teaching situation. A process of constant adjustment will need to be made in the adaptation, not only of materials, but of the relations between the material units, and the relations with methodology. For this process some fairly simple categories need to be established which will be readily comprehensible to most teachers, and appropriate to the materials and classroom activities. The basic distinction between accuracy and fluency seems to be the most useful classification for this purpose.

Such a distinction has been implicit in much recent discussion; indeed it could be seen to lie behind Wilkins' distinction between analytic and synthetic syllabus organization (Wilkins, 1976). As with any fairly crude generalization, there are problems of exact definition, but it is not difficult to show that accuracy is concerned with the nature of the language chosen, and fluency with the ease with which it is produced or understood. The advantage of making the distinction is that it can be shown to students as well as teachers that both are necessary, and that some exercises will be aimed at one and some at the other. No theory is needed to support their practical usefulness in basic language or teacher training classes.

Traditional foreign language courses have tended to build up the learner's knowledge of the language, step by step, using the model indicated in figure (i) above. The basic concern there has been with accuracy, usually in terms of a linguist's idealized system. Such a system may or may not have a strong empirical basis, but its use pedagogically must be based on a social judgement of the language used by a particular language community. The model may be based on literary sources, though it need

not be, but it will always derive from a static view of a non-negotiable system which the learner 'receives' from the teacher — a package view of language teaching. As a basis for teaching, an idealized system can only be justified as a short cut, as a way of enshrining the central truths of the target language, with the hope that subsequent modification will take place as experience is gained of a wider and wider variety of situations. To insist on accuracy in imitating a model — however generalized — entails taking a number of risks: that students will always be inflexible in their use of the language, that literary forms will always dominate spoken forms, that communication skills will be neglected because the emphasis is always on the code at the expense of the interaction and message, and so on. Very often, especially in second language teaching situations where influences outside class have compensated for the unrealities of the classroom context, such disadvantages have been overcome, but in foreign language situations they often have not been.

A fluency-based methodology, on the other hand, would not only be student-centred by providing the teacher with diagnosis before treatment, but would also correspond more closely to the students' experience of language activity by concentrating on those aspects which learners are aware of in the natural language learning situation. The student would have comparative freedom to experiment and innovate, while knowing that there would be the possibility of support through accuracy-based activities where necessary. The teacher's subsequent task would be essentially remedial, in that all new teaching would be on the basis of adaptation of existing systems developed by pupils in their fluency activity. New teaching would be patching up of unsatisfactory aspects of the fluent system. The emphasis would be on improving what the student can do rather than introducing him to something which he cannot yet do.

Materials would be of two types: those which aimed to set off fluent language behaviour (and in the early stages it would be a matter of as fluent as possible behaviour), and those which aimed to instill accuracy in areas which experience had shown would need particular attention. Many traditional materials could be used for accuracy work, but many new materials would be needed for initial fluency work.

Such an organisation could still be constructed as a fairly tight syllabus. The only major difference from traditional syllabuses could be that much care is given to devising materials which ask students to grope and paraphrase in communicative situations *before*, not after they have been taught new items, with the new items being optional elements in the course. Methodologically, the use of group and pair work, of role-play and of student-centred activities of various kinds would need to be commonplace. Altogether, it would seem to be a useful general dictum that all



students should become fluent in the dialect of English that they have as the fundamental aim of the teaching programme.

In this paper it has not been possible to be more than suggestive about the implications of a fluency-based curriculum for language teaching. There are a number of major difficulties to be faced which I have not touched upon, apart from the design of materials. I have not, for example, considered the risks of the development of 'classroom pidgin', or of problems for non-native teachers in determining what is genuinely 'communicative' language. Both of these relate to classwork. However, it does seem important that we should recognise the role of 'process' in language work, as well as product — and this paper has attempted to discuss some of the issues raised by doing that.

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Commentary by T. J. A. Bennett, Hochschule St. Gallen

I read Mr. Brumfit's paper with considerable interest and found myself in agreement with a good proportion of its contents. I found particularly refreshing his pointing out that teachers are not omnipotent and that certainty about teaching and learning processes is a thing that we are unlikely ever to achieve, at least in the foreseeable future. His central proposition relating to fluency and accuracy seems to me a useful and comprehensible yardstick to give teachers and students, though I am not sure that the two concepts are exactly polar opposites.

Mr. Brumfit's proposed changing of the place at which one breaks into the L2 learning cycle cannot fail to stimulate and interest teachers, and it can surely be profitable if the use made of fluency is related to the context where the lesson takes place, namely the classroom. The building of L2 confidence I would regard as highly desirable, and, clearly, his proposed approach could help to increase this. His remarks reveal the close connection of his work with the activity of *teaching* languages rather than with reflecting in some ivory tower on the more abstract aspects of the process. This is not to say that his paper is a "nuts-and-bolts" affair bereft of a theoretical basis, merely that his enthusiasm for the academic heights is tempered by a knowledge of the practical situation that the theory relates to and by a healthy respect for its complexity.

We are all, I imagine, accustomed to the roar passing bandwagons and to the delighted shouts of those who have just jumped on to the latest one (though we rarely hear their groans when they find that the bandwagon is not going where they thought, until they have jumped onto the next one). Not so long ago the bandwagon was called "structure drills"; more recently, many enthusiastic travellers have been abandoning it, though, and leaping onto others called "communicative" approach and "functional" approach. Mr. Brumfit puts this development into proper perspective, though he is, to my mind, over-optimistic about the merits of his communicative approach and makes some statements whose implications go further than I, personally, would accept.

To go straight to my central doubt about the "communicative" approach: I doubt just how communicative much of it really is or *can be*; certainly, many such methods do not come up to the high standards Mr. Brumfit obviously sets. The problem, in my opinion, ultimately resides in the nature of the teaching situation itself, a situation which, quite simply, is artificial, in the sense that it is different from most of the rest of human activities. It is difficult to imagine most L2 learners in schools really wanting to communicate with their teachers during the whole (or even the greater part) of every lesson in L2; indeed I would submit that, in the average school context, 90 % of learners are uninterested in communication with the teacher under such conditions for the majority of the time (though they are doubtless more interested in communicating with one another — but in L1!). If this is so, I doubt whether the dynamic element in communication that Mr. Brumfit refers to ever comes into play very much. He alludes to group and pair work, role-playing, etc., but I am not convinced that such exercises yield much profit if the desire is not present, from the start, to actually say something. In other words, the exercises which form a large part of the basis of the method are often just as meaningless as the "meaningless" structure drills

the latter replace, if not more so. They are meaningless because the students do not want to talk about, and are not interested in, the subject on which they are expected to communicate. There is also the problem of monitoring what is happening in group work and taking the necessary corrective measures.

In his paper, Mr. Howatt refers to another problem with role-playing as a teaching method, namely the inexplicitness of the relationship between language and the social action which engenders it, but I shall not go further into that here except to say that, like him, I doubt the usefulness of attempting to act a role that neither the teacher nor the student actually knows anything about. Neither shall I go into the authenticity of much that goes under the name of dialogue (and is therefore the basis of role-playing activities) in many textbooks and courses, except to say that, quite often, nobody actually speaks that way, let alone does so in the situation in which the conversation is supposed to take place (real-life conversations and communication at the newsagent's are not usually about newspapers at all, nor are they so boring!).

I have reservations about Mr. Brumfit's suggestion that learning L2 and learning L1 are similar in that the language concerned is being re-created, re-shaped, re-negotiated with other participants in the discourse. Certainly, in the case of L1, this is arguably so, since the language will serve as the learners' tool of communication throughout their lives, and they really *will* be collectively responsible for shaping the language. However, I doubt whether L2 learners are in any way in a position to re-shape and re-create the L2, precisely because it is not their medium of perception of and reaction to the world and because another group (the speakers of that language) *is* in that position.

Mr. Brumfit suggests that we should put L2 learners into situations where they are forced to grope linguistically and operate outside the area of total certainty, in a group of fellow students who find themselves in the same position. This seems to me a somewhat doubtful enterprise, for a variety of reasons:

1. It is difficult enough to persuade many adolescents and adults to say something in front of class when they are fairly sure of being able to say it more or less correctly; I doubt whether these inhibitions would be reduced by putting the students into a situation where they are forced to grope *beyond* what they know.
2. Pushing students into the unknown is likely to lead to one of two things, either:
  - a) relapses into L1 or
  - b) poor linguistic performance, which will tend to be learnt by speakers and listeners, and, as we all know, unlearning erroneous

habits is much more difficult than learning good ones from the start. To be fair, Mr. Brumfit mentions the problem of classroom pidgin, but it is not clear how serious he thinks it is, though he seems to imply that it is not insuperable.

3. Being forced to grope linguistically is, of course, what happens in L1 learning, but there are indications (a point made by Mr. Howatt) that the methods used in learning L1 are not necessarily appropriate for learning L2. I am reminded here of the Canadian experience of immersion (an L1 learning method applied to L2 learning) in the province of Quebec, as related at the 1978 5th. International Congress of Applied Linguistics at Montreal; it was found that English-speaking children, starting primary school who were given six years immersion in French still made elementary mistakes at the end of the six years and were less proficient at the language than pupils given a four-month intensive course (it should be added that the immersion was total only in the first school year, when 100 % of *education* was in French, and, after that, tapered down to 50 %).

In view of these considerations, it would be interesting to know what Mr. Brumfit sees as being the role of L1 in the method that he proposes. He suggests that a discussion of what the students would like to say should be the corner-stone of their linguistic progress; this discussion and the description of how they would say these things, at the very least, will presumably take place in L1, so that what seems to me one of the central aspects of the proposed method does *not* involve communication in the L2, which is a great pity.

Lastly, three perhaps simplistic but basic questions worry me:

- 1) How does one *start* teaching such a method, i. e. when there is zero knowledge, how does the teacher get the students to experiment with the language?
- 2) How would the teacher ascertain what his groping, experimenting students are trying to say (since they cannot say it in L2), except by use of L1?
- 3) By what criteria would the teacher decide *which* structures to offer his students in order to enable them to say what they want to say?