

The major emphasis of ELT discussion over the last few years has been notional/functional syllabuses and communicative approaches to language teaching. It is interesting to note that even the *Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia's* new journal has as the theme of the first issue 'Focus on Communicative Methodology'. Let's look at some of these terms, including the term 'communicative approach'.

When a major development takes place in the area of curriculum design, it is quite common to hear a host of definitions for any new term. Thus it is with 'communicative approach'; it has been and is still being interpreted in many different ways by many different people. In fact, there is quite a lot of disagreement about what precisely constitutes a 'communicative approach' to the teaching of second and foreign languages. The confusion is compounded when people equate notional/functional with communicative, and 'communicative approach' with 'communicative methodology'. In reality, 'approach' and 'methodology' are two different things.

'Approach' is most usefully used to describe one's general philosophical, educational viewpoint – the set of ideas that one brings to the whole business of language teaching. 'Methodology' covers the set of decisions as to the ways in which what is to be taught is combined with the how of teaching techniques. Another way of putting it is that 'approach' describes the theoretical issues, 'methodology' the practical ones. It is my opinion that there is no such thing as a 'communicative methodology', but this will be treated later.

To get back to definitions, we also need to clarify the equation of 'notional/functional approach' with 'communicative approach'. While 'communicative' may legitimately be used to describe a set of ideas – an approach – about the language learning/teaching process, 'notional/functional' cannot be. Notional/functional is a label to apply to syllabus and not approach or methodology. Notions/functions are the components of syllabuses – sets of categories derived from a

particular way of describing language.

Now that the differences between methodology and approach and communicative and notional/functional have been sorted out, let us return to the question of this article: What actually is a communicative approach to language teaching?

Perhaps it is easier to start by suggesting what the communicative approach to foreign and second language teaching is *not*. First, it does not necessarily imply a special emphasis on spoken language. Many teachers believe oral communication is the only type of communication to be 'taught' in the classroom. Communication also takes place in writing and reading. Many people in Malaysia need to be able to read and write in English in performing their jobs; in fact, the ability to read English is probably more important than the ability to speak it.

Second, the communicative approach does not necessarily demand radical changes in classroom arrangement and management. This is a great source of trepidation among teachers. It is true that pair work and group work are particularly important techniques in the communicative approach because of the emphasis on meaningful interaction. But at the same time, such techniques are not absolutely essential to a broadly communicative approach to language teaching. The traditional teacher-centred classroom can also provide possibilities for interaction between students.

Third, there is no such thing as a 'communicative method' for the reasons given earlier. There are some language teaching techniques which are obviously communicative but there are others which are obviously not. If we take language teaching games, for example, and study them carefully, we can distinguish between those which are communicative and those which are not. Many are just drills in disguise. The only truly communicative ones are those which demand problem-solving or exchange of information through the medium of the second or foreign language.

Fourth, the communicative approach does not neglect the teaching of structures (or grammar) as many teachers suppose. It is important that students get the forms of English right but it is more important that they get the meaning right. Many students can possess the written 'theory' of the second or foreign language but still be unable to successfully use it orally in an authentic situation.

What then constitutes a communicative approach? The key feature, the crucial factor seems to be the way in which it looks at the whole process of language learning. It recognizes the centrality of communication. It recognizes that the major focus of language use is for normal communicative purposes. This is quite, quite different from the earlier grammar/translation and oral/structural approaches. The major emphasis of both these approaches is form or structure. They treat language essentially as a formal system. Although language is a formal system there are other elements that need our consideration, especially the communicative functions that people need to perform whenever they use a language. And these functions are closely related to the reasons why students learn a second or foreign language at all. In the communicative approach, form and function are treated as being equally important; they are interdependent.

A second important element of the communicative approach, is the emphasis on meaning. Much greater attention is being placed on the importance of meaning, of purposeful application

of the target language as a tool of communication. What is important is the use of real language for authentic purposes. There is also a stress on students being exposed to 'real' language as opposed to simplified language. Textbook writers are being asked to provide authentic passages and genuine practice exercises. There is a move away from grammatical but inauthentic sentences like 'I am a boy/girl', 'I have two legs'. Although such sentences illustrate the formal properties of English, they carry very little meaning. Compare these two sentences: 'I am a teacher', 'I have two sisters'. These sentences at least convey some new information to the listener. Real language use is interactive. It is highly unpredictable and it involves the sending and receiving of meaningful messages. Formal language practice, in contrast, is non-interactive, highly predictable and largely meaningless.

Happily, this move towards more communicative types of English curriculum in Malaysia, is leading to the production of materials which are of much greater interest to the students and to the teachers. Although there are people who believe that the communicative approach can never come up to expectations and who question why this approach has not given rise to the expected improvement in students' ability to communicate in English, it is highly unlikely that anyone would want to go back to the narrowly-conceived view of language learning characteristic of the earlier formal approaches.