Reviews
Comptes rendus

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: THEORY AND CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Sandra J. Savignon, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1983.

This addition to the Addison-Wesley Second Language Professional Library Series takes as its starting point the idea that the field of second language teaching methodology is at present characterized by *diversity*, and that "the emphasis is no longer so much on methods as it is on the *contexts* in which a second language is being learned and the needs and interests of those who are learning it" (p. vi). Accordingly, the book presents us with a comprehensive and insightful review of the nature of communicative competence and its implication for second language teaching.

The introductory chapter is an overview of the premises underlying communicative competence, and of the related but contrasting views of major theorists such as Chomsky, Hymes, and Halliday. In a few pages, the author is able to get to the essential background, but is then quick to move on to a discussion of the implications of this background for teaching methodology, and to a detailed comparison of audio-lingual and communicative approaches in which key terms such as *habit, function, notion,* and *speech act* each receive clear definition and analysis. In a welcome synthesis, Savignon goes some way towards showing how the different strands of competence interrelate, arguing that "a measure of sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence allows a measure of communicative competence even before the acquisition of any grammatical competence" (p. 45).

The second chapter deals with research on language acquisition, leading to a discussion of learner motivation in Chapter 3. As promised in the initial argument, the second half of the book, devoted to materials, curriculum design, and testing, flows directly from the background presented. In discussing materials, Savignon adopts a skeptical attitude towards any dependence on set-texts or core programmes in the L2 classroom, emphasizing the selection of a full range of materials and activities to foster individual learning. In a particularly persuasive section, she argues for the priority of selective *principles,* rather than slavish

adherence to inventories of categories, whether these be "structural" or "functional." A range of exemplary materials is presented which well illustrates the developing and various objectives underlying second language teaching, followed by a practical checklist which teachers can use to identify and select published materials in a principled way.

In her chapter on curriculum design, Savignon once again emphasizes the importance of conscious and principled choice from a range of options—options which will themselves be derived from a full understanding of particular second language learning contexts. Activities are outlined within several curricular "themes," ranging from "Language Arts" to "Language for a Purpose" to language "Beyond the Classroom." The final chapter presents a useful discussion of some central problems in cross-cultural testing, together with an efficient, if rather formal, analysis of important measurement concepts (including reliability, correlation, and validity), concluding with detailed consideration of how traditional testing procedures such as Cloze, dictation, and oral interview can best be tailored to measure communicative competence.

The strength of Savignon's text lies not only in the wealth of foundational information she provides, but also in the authoritative manner in which this information is selected and integrated. Within the framework of a strong general model of communicative competence, she presents a coherent and realistic picture of the choices to be made in given teaching contexts, and constantly forces the reader to think further about these choices as they relate to individual teaching experience. A feature which makes the book eminently readable is Savignon's eclecticism in support of her central arguments. Both reference to literary theory and to transcripts from her son's learning of French, for example, are included as rich sources for elaboration of the central theme. The book also draws clear distinctions between terms such as role-play and simulation, which are so readily confused. Savignon's book, although not introductory, will be of great value as a diploma and graduate level text, as it will be to all those interested in the foundational aspects of communicative language teaching and learning. The book includes a good range of discussion questions and activities which can be used in teacher-training.

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BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Ruth Cathcart and Michael Strong, Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1983.

Beyond the Classroom is a text which integrates survival vocabulary and structure with the emphasis on using the language. The introduction states that the text has been designed for high school and adult learners of English at the intermediate level. In fact the level of difficulty of lexical and grammatical items ranges from the upper beginner stage through to upper intermediate. The material is meant to be practical rather than academically oriented.

Each unit of the book is based on a topic such as money, looking for an apartment, applying for a job and so on. There are four parts within each topical unit so that, as the authors suggest in the introduction, one part can be covered each day (assuming a daily two-hour class), with the fifth day for review.

All four skill areas are covered in each day's section, with an emphasis on speaking and listening. A dialogue introduces the lesson. The introduction suggests that students listen with their books closed as the teacher reads the dialogue. But what is really needed here is a supplemental tape with all the conversations. What could be more unnatural than one voice taking two parts in a conversation? Pronunciation, vocabulary and idiom notes follow the dialogue.

In early lessons, one structure point and/or function is isolated from the dialogue for practice. As complexity increases in subsequent sections, students are expected to manipulate two such items. This is where the format is weak. The structure exercises, to be done orally first, and then written (perhaps as homework), introduce extraneous vocabulary and do not follow the given topic. Structures and functions are intermingled. Although the exercises themselves seem well-constructed, the progression from one exercise to the next is not smooth. Students are expected to jump too quickly from one structure or function to another. Obviously the instructor would select the appropriate exercises in each part. The "What do you say?" exercises, expanding on the original dialogue, are excellent because they often include work on recognizing and practising different speakers' roles; for example, identifying the appropriate context for "What's the matter, sweetheart?" as opposed to "How are you feeling today, Mrs. Garcia?"

An appendix provides all the material necessary for the listening exercises called "What do you hear?" The instructor reads passages or sentences and students must aurally discriminate verb tenses, ordinal numbers, etc., or answer comprehension questions. There is ample variety in tasks from lesson to lesson. Each part concludes with "Put it to work" which

gives supplementary activities ranging from vocabulary lists to filling out forms and finding information in newspaper ads. After every three lessons, there is a quiz reviewing structure points and language content.

Beyond the Classroom would be an extremely useful text, especially in a multi-level class, because of its varying levels of difficulty. The material is well-suited to adults and would be easy to use without extensive explanations—any necessary explanations are given in the introduction. However, while there is an emphasis on "real language," teachers looking for functional material may be surprised that the authors place so much emphasis on grammar.

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A NEW START—CANADA: A FUNCTIONAL COURSE IN BASIC SPOKEN ENGLISH AND SURVIVAL LITERACY

Mary Selman and Linda Mrowicki, Agincourt, Ont.: Dominie Press, 1984.

This is an extensive, detailed and self-contained language course, designed for Canadian adult immigrants who are at the basic learning level. As the authors state in the introduction, their primary aim is to develop listening comprehension and speaking skills so as to enable learners to understand and speak with native speakers in the community. They have succeeded by providing materials which are not only relevant to the learner's needs but essential for everyday living. In addition, they have provided instructors with clear, tried and tested instructions for activities which are varied, practical and easily presented.

Before giving examples of specific components of the course, certain general observations may be made about the basic design and themes contained in the course material.

- The course is designed to promote cross-cultural understanding for new Canadians, by involving learners in a variety of situations which commonly arise and which are essential for everyday living.

- By providing instructors with options appropriate for both literate and non-literate learners, the course is adaptable to the requirements of a multi-level class.

- The course materials promote immediate communication in the class and thereby promote confidence for essential communication in the wider community.

The Student Book

The book is divided into 111 units, each involving the learner in real life situations. Examples are: giving personal information, adding up and counting change, correcting mistakes, meeting a neighbour, using a vending machine, etc. To deal effectively with the particular situation, appropriate functions (e.g., describing, asking, insisting, correcting, etc.) are used and the correct grammatical structures and relevant vocabulary are developed in a progression of activities, ranging from ones which are highly-controlled in content to those having less predictability.

Listening and speaking activities are pertinent to many of the situations, reading and writing activities are included when required (e.g., filling in forms, reading and writing the time, reading signs, medicine labels, food advertisements, etc.).

In each of the units, the basic situation is portrayed with a clear and simple picture and an accompanying dialogue (taped). Learners are given the opportunity to practice the dialogue with the class, with smaller groups, and individually.

The following is a typical example.

Unit 84: Describing a Problem
Picture: A man talking on the phone; water dripping from the ceiling
Written dialogue: Man: Hello.
                 Moua: Hello, I'm in apartment 5. The ceiling is leaking.
                 Man: OK, I'm coming.
                 Moua: Thank you.

Additional dimensions are added by showing pictures of a leaking toilet, a broken window, a broken stove, a broken furnace, a leaking refrigerator, etc.

Teacher Book

The length and detailed contents of the Teacher Book are indicative of the complete and comprehensive nature of the course design. The introduction alone includes much valuable and practical information for instructors, including guidelines for presenting new material, guidelines for presenting literacy activities and specific suggestions for student orientation, multi-level classes and evaluating student progress.

For each unit in the Student Book, the Teacher Book provides a parallel section dealing with the objectives of the lesson, the materials required, written transcripts of the recordings and the precise steps to be taken for each of the activities. Suggestions are also included for activities which can be selected for extending the situation by adding dimensions to it and by transferring to other situations within the class and to real situations in the external community. A typical example follows.

Unit 84: Describing a Problem

The objective here is to develop further language ramifications following the initial identification of the basic situation. To do so, learners role-play designated situations.

Examples

    a) You have a nail in your shoe. It hurts your foot. Describe the problem when you take it to the shoe repairman.

    b) Your TV was stolen from your house. Report it to the police. Describe the problem.

    c) Your newspaper did not come. Call the newspaper department.

    d) You bought a cake. It is stale. Take it back to the store.

Students are also encouraged to identify situations or problems that may arise outside the class. The authors suggest that these situations be practiced in the class and then handled out of class. Subsequently, students are asked to report on their conversations and the results.

Most of the 111 individual units are linked, so that language learned in one (e.g., Unit 84: Describing a Problem) can be transferred to and utilized in other related situations (e.g., Unit 86: Insisting, Unit 85: Reporting). This unit inter-relationship is a useful technique for reenforcing the learning process.

The display materials included in the Teacher Book are particularly useful. There are 13 character cut-outs, representing the characters in the situations described in most of the units. This personalizing of activities, through the use of real people, is useful in developing and maintaining the student's interest in the topics. Characters depicted include Tran Ahn Tuan, who works the night shift at Ace Company; Somsy Thammavong, a housewife who attends English class; Sarem Nouam, a mother of two who works in a factory; and Mary Baker, a senior citizen and grandmother. ESL teachers will be familiar with the importance of permitting students to identify with characters similar to those known to them in their real life situations.

The Literacy Workbooks

These two volumes, for the non-literate, complement the Student Book and set out parallel activities. The activities correspond to written materials in the Student Book. For example, Unit 17 in the Student Book deals with colours and clothing and requires the literate learners to write the names of the clothing depicted. In the corresponding section in the Literacy Workbook, the activities suggested include reading, tracing and copying the depiction of the item of clothing, circling the correct item and circling the correct word opposite the depicted item. This enables the teacher to move from the literate to non-literate learner with ease, utilizing the appropriate technique, as required.

This clear, concise and well-organized material is highly recommended for instructors dealing with multi-level beginning classes.

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TEACHING THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE

Gillian Brown and George Yule, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

It is generally agreed among teachers that effective spoken communication is one of the most difficult of the language skills for our students to grasp and for us to assist them with. *Teaching the spoken language* addresses this problem by examining the nature of spoken language and by presenting some practical ideas for the classroom.

Chapter 1, "The spoken language," examines the nature of spoken English and the differences between it and written language. A secondary classification is made according to the basic functions of language, transactional and interactional. The main purpose of transactional language is the "transmission of information" while the main purpose of interactional language is "the maintenance of social relationships" (p. 11). Written language, according to the authors, is primarily transactional (with the exception of literature and love letters) while spoken language is

mainly interactional. However, they conclude the extended *transactional* turns should be the focus for explicit teaching in a spoken language course for foreign students. The reasons given for this rather surprising conclusion, considering the analysis that precedes it, are based on difficulty, context and feasibility.

1. Difficulty: Students can transfer social/interactional skills from their first language. Transactional language, particularly for long turns, is more difficult.
2. Context: Students need transactional language to deal with the industrialized, bureaucratized society they will be living in.
3. Feasibility: In terms of methodology it is difficult to sustain "chat."

In Chapter 2, "Teaching spoken production," the authors criticize the functional syllabus which encourages short turns (of two or three utterances) rather than extended turns. Instead of learning a set of things to say, students need strategies which they can apply over a range of contexts. Various types of information transfer exercises (e.g., ordering jumbled comics) are presented as examples of ways in which transactional language can be practiced in the classroom to develop these strategies. During these activities teachers can provide learners with useful and realistic language when they need it.

Chapter 3, "Teaching listening comprehension," deals with the relationship between teaching speaking and listening. To learn to use the spoken language "creatively and appropriately" implies the parallel development of listening skills. Students must be exposed to different types of spoken language, not just to that of teachers. However, it is not only that the models of spoken language must be expanded but the attitude to comprehension must also change. The process of understanding spoken language is a process of arriving at a "reasonable interpretation of what a speaker intends" (p. 57); it does not require one hundred percent comprehension.

Chapter 4, "Assessing spoken language," examines the problem of deciding what constitutes good spoken English. Too often in the past standards of correctness have been based on artificial or idealized language. Realistic criteria enable teachers to assess student performance more reasonably in terms of grammatical accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, the appropriateness of register and vocabulary, and the success of the communication.

The final test of any book on teaching English is how well its principles and ideas translate into effective teaching. By presenting many examples of authentic speech (both in the text and in the accompanying cassette) as well as some concrete examples of how spoken language can be taught

effectively, the authors have added to the "armour of tools and strategies which every teacher needs." I have already tried several ideas and found them to work.

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