THE 'DEEP-END' STRATEGY IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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In a recent paper[1], Brumfit suggests that a lasting impact of communicative language teaching may involve a change in traditional classroom procedure, as below:

Traditional procedure	Stage 1	Present
	Stage 2	Drill
	Stage 3	Practice in context

Communicative procedure	Stage 1	Students communicate with available resources
	Stage 2	Teacher presents items shown to be necessary
	Stage 3	Drill if necessary

The example on the following pages[2] illustrates one way in which this second procedure might manifest itself in materials (though it will be argued later that this example in fact compromises with the procedure as represented above). The aim of this short paper is to consider advantages and disadvantages of the communicative procedure, which for obvious reasons will be referred to as the 'deep-end strategy'.

The strategy departs from tradition (and will offend traditionalists) in a number of ways. It reverses, for example, the usual sequence of 'reception to production' in which the student's initial role is that of listener or reader (Stage 1) and only later (Stages 2 and 3) that of producer. In the deep-end strategy the student first produces; he listens or reads only at State 2. The strategy also reverses the sequence of 'atomistic to holistic language practice' since in it the student first practices the entire behaviour and only later (Stage 3) drills items in isolation.

SECTION A: ORAL PRACTICE

1   What would you say?

Peter and Barbara have been out together. Peter wants to take her out again tomorrow.

They arrive at Barbara's house. They've both had a good time. What do they say?

Peter invites her. She accepts.

They make arrangements before saying goodnight.

2

Practise inviting in these situations:

i) You haven't seen your boyfriend/girlfriend for at least a day! Maybe he/she can have lunch with you tomorrow.

ii) Your landlady took you out last week. Maybe you should ask her out once. There's an Agatha Christie play on at the theatre on Friday.

iii) Jon's having a party this Saturday. A new French girl has just arrived in your class. Maybe she will come with you.

iv) You want to go to the cinema on Monday evening, but you have no one to go with. Ask a classmate.

v) You and your friends are leaving England next week, and you are all having a dinner party together. You want to invite your teacher.

3   a) Here is your diary for next week. Decide what you are doing on three days. Write it in your diary.

Sunday	
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	

But perhaps the most important departure from tradition is that at Stage 1 of the strategy the student is placed in a situation where he may need to use language not yet taught. Indeed, it is a central characteristic of the strategy that the student is taught at Stages 2 and 3 language which he needed at Stage 1. 'Teaching', that is, succeeds rather than precedes 'use'. An important implication is that, because at Stage 1 the student will almost certainly find his available resources inadequate, he is likely to make mistakes.

In this way the strategy contrasts sharply with established behaviourist procedures of 'shaping' which seek to avoid situations in which student error might occur. But it is precisely for this reason that the strategy provides opportunity to practice skills important to the acquisition of communicative competence (and which the behaviourist procedures ignore). These skills involve the ability to search for circumlocutions when the appropriate language item is not known; to perceive when the listener has not understood what was said and to struggle to rephrase it; to search the memory for items learned long ago - or half-learned, or just met in passing. The ability to muster in this way imperfect linguistic resources to a communicative end is a fundamental one. It is one which until he reaches high proficiency, the student will have to employ constantly and quickly - constantly because so often as he attempts to express himself in the foreign language he will find his resources inadequate; quickly because the constraints which hold in a conversational situation demand rapid response. The deep-end strategy should help to develop in the student a type of confidence essential to learning a foreign language: the confidence to attempt to say something which he knows that he does not really know how to say.

The strategy's implicit recognition of such skills is what makes it communicative. It fits well within a language teaching aiming to develop fluency (as the ability to perform skills like these quickly) as well as accuracy, and it can only do so because the 'free communication' occurs at Stage 1. If Stage 3 of the traditional procedure does involve an element of risk taking this is often by accident rather than design. The teacher assumption is that the language used at Stage 3 will be the language learned at Stages 1 and 2. The procedure has been set up precisely with this link in mind. The student will, moreover, probably share this assumption and can therefore be forgiven for viewing stage 3 as a vehicle for practicing Stage 1 and 2 language rather than as an exercise in true communication. He will, in Widdowson's (1979) terms, see it as practice in 'usage' rather than 'use'. This may well in turn result in stultified interaction as the students struggle to fit what they want to say into the language they have just learned. Free practice in the 'deep-end' strategy is likely to be more 'natural', if less accurate, than in the traditional strategy.

A further advantage of the communicative procedure is its diagnostic value, for both teacher and student. It tells the teacher what the student does and does not know, and this provides the framework for subsequent teaching. Information on what the student knows ensures that time will not be wasted on items already mastered, while information on areas of weakness provide a means for making Stage 2 and 3 teaching needs-specific. From the student's point of view, Stage 1 draws attention to areas where available resources are inadequate, and this should have considerable motivational value. Thus Stages 2 and 3 will not only be, but will be seen to be, needs-specific.

Another attractive feature of the strategy as exemplified in the exercises given earlier is that it is flexible as regards student level. Since any function may be expounded in various more or less complex ways, students at a variety of levels may do Exercise 1 above. Thus with low-level students Picture 2 may elicit:

Peter :   Can you come to the pictures tomorrow?
Barbara : Yes.

While a more advanced group may produce:

Peter :   Listen, Barbara. There's a new play on at the New Theatre
           next week.
Barbara : Oh? What is it?
Peter :   It's Tom Stoppard's 'Dirty Linen'. You haven't seen it,
           have you?
Barbara : No.
Peter :   I've heard it's very good.
Barbara : Well, it sounds interesting.
Peter :   Yes. Anyway, how would you like to go and see it. I
           planned to go myself anyway.
Barbara : Well yes. I'd like that. But I've got quite a lot on
           next week. When ...

Exercise 2 has a similar flexibility; low-level students may concentrate on one of the given exponents ('shall we...' perhaps) while higher levels can practice them all.

If we now forget the exercises given earlier and concentrate on the strategy as represented in the diagram at the beginning of this paper, we find that it has one serious disadvantage which poses the teacher and/or materials producer with a considerable problem. For if students are given a genuine opportunity to communicate freely at Stage 1, it follows that we shall be unable to predict what will be said and what shortcomings will be revealed. Hence it will be impossible to prepare in advance the content of Stage 2 and 3 teaching. There are teaching situations in which this may not matter. In them the students would communicate with available

resources and the teacher would identify areas of need. He would then go to a resources room which would contain banks of drills to cover all possible areas of need. He would return to the classroom with appropriate materials and proceed with the lesson. It is a scenario requiring both huge resources and nerves of steel - huge resources because the banks of drills would indeed have to be exhaustive, and nerves of steel because the teacher would have to be willing to give lessons with very little advanced preparation.

In many teaching situations where huge resources and nerves of steel are lacking this procedure would be impossible, though this is not to say that it is an undesirable objective to work towards. Note that the procedure does indeed involve a drastic change in the role of materials. They cease to provide a set of exercises to work through in prescribed sequence, and become a bank of resources to select from.

If the deep-end strategy is to be used in general teaching situations, some means of predicting and circumscribing Stage 2 and 3 activities needs to be found. One possible solution is illustrated in the exercises given earlier. In these the materials producer presents at Stage 2 language which he predicts the student 'may have wanted to use' at Stage 1. This is a compromise because the lesson proceeds on the basis of predicted rather than necessarily shown needs, and the solution thus loses diagnostic value. It may happen, in Exercise 1 given earlier, that the student uses none of the forms presented in Exercise 2 but invites with the exponent 'let's' which he gets wrong. This invalidates the utility of Exercise 2 as it stands. It may also happen, more seriously, that the student invites correctly, but makes arrangements incorrectly, again invalidating the utility of Exercise 2. But note that in the first of these eventualities, adaptation is possible. Because the cues in Exercise 2 are situational, they can be used to practise any exponent of invitation including ones not presented in the box. The solution is a compromise, but it is one which does at least allow materials to be produced and hence some predictability to be given to the lesson.

A second solution, useful for the teaching of writing to unilingual groups, is the following[3]:

Students are given an (imperfect) essay written by a member of the same language group	Students rewrite the essay correcting the mistakes
Stage 1	Stage 2

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ Students compare their version  │
│ with a model version            │
│                                 │
│                                 │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
            Stage 3
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┌──────────────────────────────────┐
│ Students work at their own        │
│ speed through a given 'bank       │
│ of drills', selecting             │
│ those calculated to eliminate     │
│ the mistakes they failed to       │
│ recognise at Stage 2              │
└──────────────────────────────────┘
            Stage 4
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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ Students write an essay on       │
│ a connected topic                │
│                                  │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
          Stage 5
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This solution retains diagnostic value since at Stage 4 the student is only drilling items he has failed to correct at Stage 2. And because the students' production at Stage 2 is based on an initial imperfect essay, the materials producer has a finite number of errors to deal with, and hence drills to provide. These drills constitute a bank and no one student would probably need to do them all. But the solution compromises on another aspect of the strategy – the 'initial communication with available resources' is based on a piece of writing presented to the student; it is thus neither entirely free nor (since it is an exercise essentially in error correction) does it practise all the processes involved in composition.

To return finally to the question of level. To many teachers the deep-end strategy will share with other communicative approaches a lack of guided control over student exposure to and practice of language. This will suggest to them that it is only really suitable at the post intermediate level. Certainly the strategy invites the specific question: to what extent will communication at Stage 1 be possible when the student (at beginner or near beginner level) has no available resources? Experimentation, along the lines of Savignon (1972) may reveal that the strategy is possible even with beginners, but this (empirical) question must remain unanswered until the experimentation is done. More certainly, the approach will have advantages for the student who has learned grammar in a traditional way, and needs it to be 'activated'.[4] Given that much of past language teaching has tended to be slowly incremental and to delay activation of structural knowledge, it may well be that an approach which follows a short, intensive 'crash' structural course with immediate activation by the deep-end strategy will be successful. In this approach the student would be introduced to structures in a traditional way; but the time spent on non-communicative practice would be minimised and the structures would be 'recycled' as soon as possible within the communicative framework of the deep-end strategy.

NOTES

1. Brumfit (1978). These procedures are also discussed in Brumfit (1979).

2. Johnson and Morrow (1979).

3. The present writer has been developing materials along these lines for use by Spanish and Portuguese speakers.

4. Johnson and Morrow (1979) is subtitled 'a language activation course'.

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