

Editorial

For you readers who are not convinced that serendipity is the stuff science is made of, a glance at the table of contents of the document you are now holding should dispel any lingering doubts, by revealing: 1) the spontaneous generation of a totally unpremeditated Special Topic Issue of the Journal; 2) the magic word in the computer search that uncovers our unsuspected meaningful pattern:

"communicative..."

It turns out that everyone is suddenly writing about the same thing: "communicative" (learning, method, purposes, acts, etc.) as it (they) relate(s) to our profession. It seems as if all of America, from top to bottom, were involved: from Steve Wallerstein in Santiago, Chile to Claude Germain in Canada. Furthermore, it is probably safe to assume that there is equal concern on the other side of the Atlantic, judging by the entire universe of our two-member set of papers by British-trained authors Fernando Castaños and Huw Williams. And in those cases, like Pamela Urdal's, in which the article's title fails to give its theme away, a quick skimming proves that it too is riddled with abundant reference to 'communicative' ----- (fill in the blank, teacher).

Since the editors know (you will have to take my word for it) that the articles were not intentionally selected to produce a 'staged' effect, and since any fool can plainly see that the odds against this being a mere statistical fluke (in everyday language, a coincidence) are about a mega-zillion-to-one, it would seem important to explain the phenomenon.

A fad? A pathological obsession? ESP (in the ancient sense of the acronym)?

Personally, it reminds me of the film, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Instead of all the UFO freaks suddenly turning up

in the same spot at the same time, all the 'communicative' teachers wind up in the same Journal. Have English Teachers really been closet E. T.'s all along?

Scratch that hypothesis. Although I confess I do not have much to replace it with, at this point there seems to be no harm in speculating.

Is "communicative" ----- ('teaching' and 'learning, let's say) like good government still is and teenage sex used to be, something a lot of people talk about and very few people actually practice? In other words, are we talking about communication because we are not doing it satisfactorily? Is the talk symptomatic of a crisis? Are we up in academic arms about "communicative" _____ ('stuff?') in the same way we get up in arms about air pollution, for example - when it has gotten to the point that we can scarcely breathe? Is it that the quality of communication (in Mexico, in the educational system, in our interpersonal relationships?) is deteriorating?¹

I find this possibility certainly a lot more plausible than the opposite: that the "communicative" talk reflects enhanced communication; that we and our students are so good at understanding one another that the Journal becomes the medium of our natural, if ultra-literate, celebration of communicative achievement.

If we are in fact looking for solutions to a communicative crisis in ESL, we will have to examine the possibility that institutionalized interaction between teacher and student is, by definition, non-communicative behavior. That is, in the classroom, communication is inevitably sacrificed for, or subsumed by, other objectives (as Wallerstein seems to suggest) such as: the Right Answer, the "appropriate target behavior," the "eliciting of strategies," etc.

¹ Neil Postman proposed a "Language pollution index" in 1969.

Only under rare circumstances is something real "at stake" (Wallerstein's phrase) in an environment governed by the educational objectives of our institutions and their concomitant discourse rules.

When this unreality is suspended, when teacher and student share some kind of extra-institutional 'close encounter', - bumping into each other in the park on a Sunday, for example, - they will immediately switch code. They will probably use Spanish instead of English, or if teacher's Spanish is not as good as student's English, be obliged to use a register of English as unintelligible and foreign to the student as any Martian dialect would be: the English spoken outside the classroom in that exotic, remote and unexplored territory: -Real Life.

D.H.