

# ***Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching***

***The roles of fluency  
and accuracy***

**Christopher Brumfit**

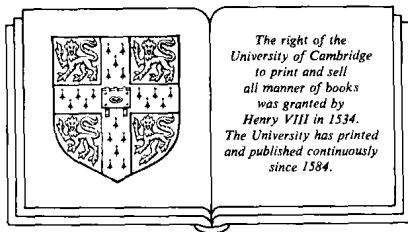
*Communicative  
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in Language  
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*Christopher Brumfit*



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# Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching

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For Simon

In what sense, we may well ask, do men 'make' their history? Conscious effort, deliberate attempts to explain the world to oneself, to discover oneself in it, to obtain from it what one needs and wants, to adapt means to ends, to express one's vision or describe what one sees or feels or thinks, individually or collectively – understanding, communication, creation – all these could be described as kinds of doing and making. But this omits too much: unconscious and irrational 'drives', which even the most developed and trained psychological methods cannot guarantee to lay bare; the unintended and unforeseen consequences of our acts, which we cannot be said to have 'made' if making entails intention; the play of accident; the entire natural world by interaction with which we live and function, which remains opaque inasmuch as it is not, *ex hypothesi*, the work of our hands or minds; since we do not 'make' this, how can anything it possesses be grasped as *verum*? How can there be a *scienza* of such an amalgam?

Isaiah Berlin: Vico's Concept of Knowledge  
(Berlin, 1980: 115)

# Preface

This book derives from my Ph.D. thesis, 'The Basis of a Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching', presented at the University of London in January 1983. A large number of changes have been made, some quite major and many minor, in order to make it more suitable for a wider audience.

I had to make an important decision about the academic paraphernalia, references and footnotes, which attach themselves to theses. Many of these I have cut, but it seems unfair in a work which is deliberately synthesising educational, philosophical and linguistic scholarship to prevent readers from following up arguments and checking their own agreement with my interpretations. Consequently, I have retained enough scholarly apparatus to enable critics to attack me. In spite of the title, much of this book is a general argument, and illustration of that argument, about the nature and justification of research in teaching methodology. This argument can only be justified by reference to the earlier arguments and research from which it springs – so the references and notes are there, it is hoped unobtrusively, for those who wish to exploit them.

CJB  
August 1983



# Acknowledgements

The arguments on which this study is based have been conducted over a long period with many people, who may well not recognise their own contributions, let alone agree with the final position adopted.

Selection of those to mention is always invidious, especially when colleagues and students have been so generous with their time. I am conscious, however, of particular debts in the argument offered here to the following: Brian Abbs, Dick Allwright, Roy Boardman, Geoffrey Broughton, Ken Cripwell, Patrick Early, Rod Ellis, Roger Flavell, Roger Hawkey, Peter Hill, Keith Johnson, Josie Levine, Alan Maley, John Munby, John Norrish, Anita Pincas, Ken Reeder, Harold Rosen, Richard Rossner, Earl Stevick, Peter Strevens and Monica Vincent.

I am also grateful to N.S. Prabhu for permission to make use of Bangalore material, as well as for much stimulating discussion.

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# **Introduction: what this book stands for**

This study is an investigation of ideas in an area which is unclearly defined as a field for research: teaching methodology. Administratively, it is classed as a sub-branch of education, but it is clear that educational disciplines alone cannot provide an adequate base for the examination of principles in the teaching of a particular subject. Nor, it is argued here, can the linguistic sciences alone provide a basis for the teaching of languages, for the interaction of language with, on the one hand, personal needs of language users and, on the other, institutional constraints of the users' setting will make an autonomous, linguistic theory of performance impossible. The researcher in this area thus has two choices available. One is to reject this argument, limit the field, and idealise the data, so that it becomes manageable in terms of criteria appropriate to one of the agreed disciplines: linguistics, psychology, or sociology. The other is to remain in the same position as the practising teacher, but to try to examine that position as critically as possible. This choice entails accepting three conditions, all of which make discussion in methodology particularly difficult:

- i) generalisations and principles must be capable of being related directly to existing teaching conditions, including teachers as they actually are, institutions as they actually are, and resources as they actually are;
- ii) information, principles, metaphors and (to use the vogue term) 'insights' will be drawn from a whole range of different sources and integrated into some sort of coherent position which is directly translatable into classroom behaviour;
- iii) perceptions must reflect the position of the teacher in the classroom – that is to say that they must in the end refer to the process of intervening in the lives of others in order to assist desirable changes of behaviour.

We expect all teachers, implicitly through the ways in which we train them, to accept these conditions in their professional self-consciousness; but most research in education imitates research in other disciplines, differing only in the context or subject matter of the study. In this study, we are attempting to perform exactly the same kind of conceptualising task that we demand of language teachers, but at a higher level of abstraction. This inevitably creates certain problems.

## *Introduction*

The desire to remain closely in touch with conditions as they actually are leads to caution and perhaps a lack of speculative excitement. But at the same time, we cannot allow all discussion of teaching to ignore the rules that are imposed on teachers by the nature of their positions as teachers. Without denying the value of idealised constructs and divergent thinking unconstrained by the fetters of immediate responsibility, we need also to demonstrate and practise the art of assessing the value for teaching of the work in areas that are less constrained.

The process of drawing upon research findings, theoretical constructs, and practical suggestions from a wide range of potentially relevant sciences inevitably results in major risks of error. We shall be dependent on secondary sources for some, at least, of our observations; and we can master some disciplines only at the expense of others, or of our contact with the teaching in the service of which the interdisciplinary exercise is being performed. Synthesis may be seen simply as a derivative activity, unsuitable for serious research pretensions, and the difficulties arising from an attempt to be interdisciplinary may be seen as resulting from a refusal to focus sharply on clearly identifiable problems. Yet we cannot afford to leave all questions of how to synthesise research conclusions to teachers actually working in classrooms, for – more often than not – they lack expertise, training, and above all, time for such activity. Furthermore, the frequently-desired integration of theory and practice requires illustrations of the process of doing this at all levels. It is no service to the profession if all those who are theoretically minded address themselves exclusively to questions that can be answered within the frameworks of existing disciplines. Particularly, in departments of teaching methods, it is essential that we attempt to examine precisely the kinds of questions that we expect our students to examine. If we do not do this, however badly, we shall be leaving the most difficult problems to those who have least time, facilities, or inclination to explore them.

Working from the position of the teacher means that there is an inevitable antagonism between many research approaches and that which we have adopted here. This is partly because research is often descriptive, either looking at the teacher from outside (a position inappropriate for teachers attempting to improve their own performance), or looking at learners, or language, or classrooms with non-interventionist intentions. This does not prevent the teacher from making use of such data, of course, but it does mean that insofar as teachers appear in research studies they are often portrayed over-simply or unsympathetically, either because the teacher's function may be peripheral to the main object of the study, or because researchers have little fully committed experience of teaching and misconstrue its nature and its function. But again, this is all the more reason why we should not refuse to address ourselves to research from the teacher's perspective.

Ultimately, this is a study based on personal experience of teaching, which is thus, in retrospect, necessarily systematised and idealised. From that experience, theory, observation, speculation, and practice have been examined in order to attempt to clarify the principles underlying the experience. The first chapter tries to explore the status of such principles and the nature of our understanding of teaching. The difficulty lies in the tension between our recognition of teaching as primarily a product of the relationship between human beings, and the view, tacitly supported by the structure of the educational hierarchy and the design of teacher training, that it is some kind of applied science. It will be argued in this study that there is no necessary antagonism between these two positions, but a research tradition that emphasizes the latter at the expense of the former will only exacerbate the tension.

This is a study, then, that attempts to be interdisciplinary and integrative, even if that means that it cannot operate within the work of any single discipline. It concerns itself with the needs of normal state educational systems, even when these may limit the possibilities of educational innovation. And it examines language-teaching principles from the point of view of teachers who, as a profession, are committed to positive intervention in the lives of other people. Above all, it is an attempt to devise a simple conceptual framework for the whole of language teaching, within which the needs of specific courses can be worked out according to the requirements of local conditions.

# **1 Research methodology, teaching methodology, and educational values**

This book operates simultaneously in the fields of education and applied linguistics. Its initial impetus is educational: the language-teaching profession has developed over the last seventy years or so a mass of experience backed up to varying degrees by research, but there often appears to be a conflict between the art of teaching and the science of understanding the nature of language and the nature of teaching. This book attempts to express a view of language teaching, within a general educational framework, which is both coherent scientifically and philosophically, and compatible with the common-sense apprehensions of teachers whose experience and temperament lead them to commitment to *language teaching*, but not to a particular concern with scientific or philosophical insights. In part, therefore, this argument may equally apply to the teaching of any subject, for it is concerned with the relationship between principle and practice, or between what can be analysed and what is experienced. In this sense I am defining the role of teaching methodology in relation to both theory and practice, and physics or history teachers will recognise the difficulties just as much as language specialists.

Since, however, my particular concern is with language teaching, much of the argument will develop out of a view of the nature of language. Necessarily, then, we shall have to examine various implications of linguistic theories for the classroom. But we shall not consider these in isolation, for no real-world problem will be solved by the direct application of linguistic models, for these are idealised constructs which will inevitably be distorted as they come into contact with all the non-linguistic factors that also influence our activities as human beings.

Even though this first chapter is only indirectly related to language teaching, it is a very important chapter for my argument. Later in the book I shall be exploring appropriate teaching procedures for language teaching to non-native speakers. But I shall not be regarding this exploration as primarily 'scientific' nor as largely 'intuitive'; instead, I shall argue that methodological innovation in teaching is a kind of social intervention which cannot be precisely measured or controlled, though it can (and must) be monitored. Since there are strong forces in education which would like to concentrate on what is measurable and provable, and equally strong opponents who resent attacks on their instinctive class-

room improvisation and creativity, the adoption of a middle position needs to be justified.

I shall look briefly, then, at key questions on the nature of scientific understanding. In the first section of this chapter, some key problems in the exploration of human behaviour will be examined. In the second, these problems will be related explicitly to issues in teaching methodology. In the third, we shall address ourselves more directly to problems in language-teaching methodology.

## 1.1 Science, human science, and non-science

Teaching is an activity which is performed, directly or indirectly, by human beings on human beings. Consequently, everyone who writes about it is a potential teacher or pupil. For this reason alone there will be influences on our assessments of what we observe in teaching which will be quite different from those on our observations of non-human activities. Furthermore, in practice those who write on teaching are more likely to bring to bear ‘personal knowledge’ (Polyani, 1958) of a fairly direct kind than those who write on some other aspects of human behaviour – for example, anthropologists working in a culture different from their own.

### *Kinds of knowledge*

One of the most important problems posed by the recognition of ‘personal knowledge’ is that of establishing the status of the various different ways of knowing about something. One major distinction of this kind was much discussed in the late nineteenth century when the social sciences were being established as legitimate areas of study, though it has been ignored in more recent behaviouralist approaches to social sciences. In work leading up to his *Ideas about a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology* in 1894, Dilthey developed a distinction between *verstehen* (to understand) and *erleben* (to experience), which is crucial in any discussion of academic work on teaching methodology. He was primarily concerned with differentiating between the natural and social sciences, but what he has to say has a direct bearing on the experience of teachers who have become teacher trainers, or methodologists.

We do not show ourselves genuine disciples of the great scientific thinkers simply by transferring their methods to our sphere; we must adjust our knowledge to the nature of our subject-matter and thus treat it as the scientists treat theirs. We conquer nature by submitting to it. The human studies differ from the sciences because the latter deal with facts which present themselves to consciousness as



external and separate phenomena, while the former deal with the living connections of reality experienced in the mind. It follows that the sciences arrive at connections within nature through inferences by means of a combination of hypotheses while the human sciences are based on directly given mental connections. We explain nature but we understand mental life . . . The experience of the whole context comes first; only later do we understand its individual parts.

(Dilthey, 1894, cited from Dilthey, 1976: 89)

Although much recent thinking on the interaction between perception and understanding (for example, Popper and Eccles, 1977) would question the account of scientific understanding given here, the distinction as made by Dilthey does emphasize the unique character of an investigation of human activity carried out by another human being.

One way of accepting the role of experience is to see it as authenticating the object of study. Winch claims

that a historian or sociologist of religion must himself have some religious feeling if he is to make sense of the religious movement he is studying and understand the considerations which govern the lives of its participants. A historian of art must have some aesthetic sense if he is to understand the problems confronting the artists of his period; and without this he will have left out of his account precisely what would have made it a history of *art*, as opposed to a rather puzzling external account of certain motions which certain people have been perceived to go through.

(Winch, 1958: 88)

It may be objected, though, that part of the process of understanding art or religion depends on our being able to see them from the outside as 'certain motions'; indeed, this is the principle of 'making strange' identified by Soviet formalist literary critics as one source of literary understanding (Bayley, 1966: 103–4; Hawkes, 1977: 62–6). There is no reason to produce an analysis for someone who already has understanding, so the process of analysing must demand some ability to stand outside the object; but an analysis which shows no sign of understanding the experience risks mistaking the function of the experience and therefore misinterpreting its characteristics.

It is possible, however, to make a stronger claim for experience, a claim which goes back at least as far as Vico, who reacted strongly to what he perceived as the excessively cognitive emphasis of Descartes. Berlin characterises this as follows:

It is a knowing founded on memory or imagination . . . This is the sort of knowing which participants in an activity claim to possess as against mere observers; the knowledge of the actors, as against that of the audience, of the 'inside' story as opposed to that obtained from some 'outside' vantage point; knowledge by 'direct acquaintance' with my 'inner' states or by sympathetic insight into those of others, which may be obtained by a high degree of imaginative power; the knowledge that is involved when a work of the imagination or of social diagnosis