Teaching Communicatively Implies a Definition of *Communication*

Before you begin this chapter, read the statements below. At the end of the chapter you will be asked to go over these statements again to make sure you have absorbed the material.

For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:

		YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1.	I can offer a working definition of communication.	○	○	○
2.	I can describe the two major purposes of communication.	○	○	○
3.	I understand how the classroom is a "limited context" environment for communication.	○	○	○
4.	I can describe/explain how knowledge about communication informs choices and behaviors in terms of language teaching.	○	○	○

The principle at the center of this chapter concerns the nature of communication:

Teaching communicatively implies a definition of communication. This definition in turn will inform the decisions one makes about the curriculum and the classroom.

In this chapter we will explore these points:

- *A definition of communication.*

- *How context determines a good deal of the kind of communication that can happen in classrooms.*

- *Implications of the definition for language teaching.*

What better way to start a discussion about contemporary communicative language teaching than by talking about communication? Let's begin with something my former colleague, Sandra Savignon—the pioneer of communicative language

teaching in the United States once said: "Collecting definitions of communication is fun."

I'm not sure if it's fun, but it's very interesting. Whenever I give talks about communicative language teaching, I often ask the audience to work in small groups and to define communication by completing this sentence: "Communication is…" It is fascinating to see an audience of language teachers, many of whom claim to teach communicatively, struggle to come up with a definition. Why is this fascinating? Because, before I ask for a definition, I ask the audience members to raise their hands if they teach communicatively or know about communicative language teaching. Almost everyone raises a hand. Yet they struggle with a definition of the very thing that presumably informs what they do in the classroom.

In other words, what does communicative language teaching mean to these teachers if they don't have a definition of communication at hand? (By the way, have you stopped at this point to see if *you* can offer a definition of communication, and, if so, what that definition looks like?)

What I have come to understand is that many people believe communicative language teaching is anything that isn't "teaching grammar the old-fashioned way." This may be true sometimes, but not always. In fact, it may not be true at all. Just because a person doesn't teach "grammar the old-fashioned way" doesn't necessarily mean that person has a communicative classroom or the class activities are communicative. Why would I make this assertion? Let's look at a different situation to understand this claim.

Imagine you see a sign that says, "Come in. Enjoy our hospitality." You enter the establishment, and someone greets you, but without a smile. Is that person being hospitable? If you say, "No, a hospitable reception would include smiling and exuding some enthusiasm," you would be right, because the term "hospitality" means "a friendly and generous reception." You are expecting particular behaviors because of that term's definition. You remark to that person that he or she is not being hospitable, that a smile and "Welcome, welcome. We're so glad you could join us today," would be more appropriate. That person responds, "Well, I *am* being hospitable. I mean, at least I'm not being nasty." Would you accept "not nasty" as the definition of "hospitable"? Probably not. A person could be "not nasty" and still be cold, or not particularly inviting. The point here is: a definition of "hospitable" is not a definition of what it isn't, but a definition of what it *is*.

The same holds true for teaching communicatively. To teach communicatively means instructors have a working definition of communication that informs and inspires what they do. We can't define "communicative" by "what 'communicative' isn't." So we will start with a working definition of what "communicative" *is*.

The Nature of Communication

The definition of communication we will use here dates to work by Sandra J. Savignon in the 1970s. We will tweak it somewhat to emphasize some things that are pertinent to classrooms. The definition is this:

Communication is the expression, interpretation, and sometimes negotiation of meaning in a given context. What is more, communication is also purposeful.

Sounds simple, right? It is—but deceptively so, as we will see. Let's break the definition down before exploring any implications for language teaching.

- **Meaning.** This construct refers to the information contained in some kind of a message. For example, if someone says, "It's two o'clock" the literal message is that it's two hours past noon. But meaning can also refer to a speaker's intent. Maybe the person who says "It's two o'clock" is worried that someone else is taking too long to get ready or is unaware of the time. In this case, not only is this message about the actual time, but it also conveys the message, "We're gonna be late if you don't hurry up." So, meaning can be layered. There can be the overt or literal meaning, and then there might also be "hidden" meaning, or something the expresser means if we "read between the lines."

- **Expression.** This term refers to any entity's production during a communicative event. For example, someone could say, "Happy to see you!" Someone could text, "Can't wait to c u!" with three smiley faces. Someone could sign in non-oral language, "I'm happy you're here!" And, yes, a dog could wag its tail to let you know, "I'm glad you're home!" All of these exemplify that the expression of meaning need not be oral—or it not need be oral alone. As with a dog, some-times the expression of meaning is visual (tail wag, a scratch at the door, a lowered head). Even people express meaning without language (raising eyebrows, smiling, waving, eyes narrowing). In face-to-face interactions, people tend to use both oral and non-oral expression of meaning. I might say, "She said *what* about me?" with an incredulous look on my face that drives home my surprise or astonishment. For this reason, expert card players are said to have a "poker face"—they do very well at not communicating what's in their hands via facial gestures or body posture.

- **Interpretation.** Communication is not one-sided. Expression of meaning is communicative only if someone or some other entity is expecting to understand the message or intent. A person doesn't say "Happy to see you!" to no one in the room (unless she's an actor practicing a line, but that's not communication). Nor does a dog wag a tail to himself; he wags it for his owner to see how happy he is —or to another dog to signal the same. So at least one other entity must always be there to comprehend and interpret the message and intent of the expresser. Even if you write in a diary to yourself, you are doing something you expect yourself to read or maybe have people read upon your death.

- **Negotiation.** Communication is not always successful. Or it may be partially successful. If someone says, "Communication is complex," a response might be, "What does that mean?" The person responds with a question because of inability to grasp the expresser's message or intent (i.e., "What does she mean by 'complex'?"). So now the ball is in the communicative court of the expresser to

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elaborate. He's one more example.

BRUTUS: "So, let's double down."
MURPHY: "Devil down?"
BRUTUS: "No. *Double* down. You know, make the point even stronger, and not give in."
MURPHY: "Oh. I'd never heard that expression before."

In this sequence, Murphy thought he heard "devil," and a sequence of correcting the misinterpretation ensues.

Negotiation happens all the time, especially between types of people who may not communicate in the same way. Deborah Tannen's best-selling book *That's Not What I Meant* concerns communication between men and women, highlighting how often the two genders don't communicate in the same way. Men and women may "misread" each other during communication, not because of what is said, but because of *how* it is said. César Millán, the Dog Whisperer, has made a name for himself (if not a fortune) showing how people can effectively interpret and negotiate meaning with their canine companions.

Negotiation shows up in a myriad of ways. Here are some:

Statement: "I'm sorry, but I don't get what you're saying." "Say that again, please."
Comprehension check: "You know what I'm saying?"
Confirmation check: "Let me see if I got this right. You're saying that…"
Gesture or look: I spread my hands out with a look on my face that says, "Huh?"

All of these reactions and others are ways in which interlocutors initiate meaning checks, which can then lead to negotiation.

■ **Context.** The construct of "context" refers to two principal aspects of communication: the setting and the participants. We will review this in detail shortly.

■ **Purpose.** People always speak, write, listen, or read with a purpose. Just because someone's lips are moving or their hands are gesturing doesn't mean they're communicating. If what they're doing doesn't have a communicative purpose, then there is no communication. As with the construct *context*, we will elaborate on *purpose* shortly.

At the beginning of this chapter, did you think communication was something as simple as "exchanging ideas"? Or maybe "meaningful expression"? These are the typical definitions I hear when I ask this question to a large group. And, more often than not, teachers define communicative language teaching as "getting students to talk all the time." But, as we have seen, communication does not imply any of these

ideas by themselves. To see how communication is even more complex than we have observed, let's look at the two aspects of communication we have yet to elaborate on: context and purpose.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC…

Why do most people, teachers included, consider communication to be a one-way event (i.e., "getting your meaning across")? It has been my experience that most people fail to see communication as an interactive, dynamic process. Yet, at the same time, we *intuitively* know that communication is not in the hands of one person. Try this out: next time someone is talking to you, play with your body posture or gestures while listening. What does this do to the other person? Does it show how he or she is monitoring *your interpretation* of the message?

Context

Context is a powerful dimension of any communicative event. Referring to *physical setting and participants*, context constrains how people communicate. For instance, being in a classroom is not the same thing as being at a dinner table at home. Interacting with your doctor is not the same as interacting with your twin, your parents, or your romantic partner. **As context shifts, so does the nature of communication.**

For example, let's look at three different contexts in which "Jake," a fictitious 19-year old university student, participates. Although Jake is a constant in each context, the setting and the other participants change.

[with his best friend at lunch at Chipotle, post E. coli scare, to be sure]

JAKE: Here's a question only you can answer.

FRIEND: OK. Shoot.

[in his political science class]

JAKE: [raising his hand] Professor. I have a question.

PROF: Sure, Jake. What is it?

[at home with his romantic partner, watching a Netflix movie]

JAKE: [leaning in, almost whispering] I have to ask you something…

PARTNER: Hmmm?

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> **" Context is a powerful dimension of any communicative event. Context constrains how people communicate. "**

In each context, Jake is trying to do the same thing: initiate a conversation by announcing he has a question. But it's clear he does this very differently in each context (i.e., each set of settings and participants). How odd it would be if, in his political science class, he lowered his voice and whispered to his professor, "I have to ask you something…" or if he raised his hand in front of his romantic partner and said, "I have a question." These oddities exemplify how *where* we communicate and *who* the participants are constrain (or guide, shape, direct) how we use language to express (and interpret) meaning. In everyday life, context may change multiple times throughout the day. We just saw this with Jake.

Here's another example. In my life, I may be at home with my dog at one time, with my trainer at the fitness center at another, at the grocery store in the produce section with someone who is stocking broccoli on another occasion, in the hallway with a colleague whom I consider a friend, or in the hallway with a colleague whom I don't consider a friend and don't trust. And on Thursdays at 3 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, I am on the air in a studio for *Tea with BVP* with strangers calling in about language acquisition and language teaching. These contexts are all different, and how I interact with each person in each setting may, and often does, change. But that change is not just about *how* I talk about something, but also *what* I talk about. I might tell my dog, "Give me a kiss. I'll be home later." Yet I would never say to a colleague, "Give me a kiss. I'll see you tomorrow." I might talk to the produce guy about his new haircut (he recently got a short Mohawk), but I would not talk to him about second language acquisition and teaching.

Let's stop and think about how I'm writing this chapter for you, the reader, because this situation is also a context. I'm at my computer trying to express some meaning to you, the reader. Your job is to interpret what I mean, sitting wherever you are, likely reading silently to yourself. There are ways to express meaning in this context, and ways not to. And, because we can't negotiate meaning, I reflect a lot more and choose my words more carefully. After all, you're not here in front of me to say, "Huh?" or "Whoa, dude. Can you say that again?"

Moreover, the focus of this book is language teaching, specifically particular principles for contemporary communicative language teaching. It would be odd for me to suddenly offer you a recipe for my famous Trans-Atlantic paella or my awesome five-chili *mole* for enchiladas. (BTW, that's pronounced 'MOH-lay,' not 'MOHL, like the little critters that dig up your lawn. *Mole* is a Mexican word borrowed from the Aztecs.) Context for communication affects how we communicate and what we communicate about.

Here's one final example of how context affects communication. Remember when we mentioned how men and women communicate differently? Well, compare the following two conversations I overheard on distinct occasions. I selected them for this chapter because they have a related topic. Names have been changed…

[Fred and Dave are working on my house and have just shown up. They haven't seen each other in a while.]

FRED: Man! You're skinny.

DAVE: I know, right?

FRED: Yeah. OK. Let me show you what's up today.

[Chloe and Mimi have just run into each other at the mall.]

CHLOE: Oh, my gosh! Mimi, you look fabulous!

MIMI: Really?

CHLOE: I'm not kidding. You've lost so much weight. It really looks good on you.

MIMI: Thanks. I went on this new exercise program.

CHLOE: Well it worked! How much did you lose?

MIMI: Just over twenty pounds.

CHLOE: What does John think?

MIMI: Oh, that's right. You don't know! We split up.

Acknowledging that we cannot generalize for all men and women, in these interactions I immediately noticed that the men's comment on weight loss was restricted to the concrete without elaboration: Wham, bam! Comment is done and noted. The women's interaction, on the other hand, involves reaction, elaboration, and so on. It would have been odd for the men to do what the women did, and vice versa—that is, for the women to be "perfunctory" like the men. Participants in context help to determine both what is talked about and *how* it is talked about.

Code-switching also exemplifies how context affects communication. Code-switching occurs when a bilingual (a knower of two languages) uses and "mixes" both languages when talking to someone in the same group—another bilingual. I'll use myself as an example when I talk to my sister:

BILL: I've been waiting for you to call.

GLORIA: Dianna and I were checking out the casinos.

BILL: *Hijole.* Man, *nunca les paran las patas*. You have a nice house *y mira*, you're never home.

GLORIA: Ha, ha.

In this typical exchange I mix English and Spanish, something we've done in my family since we could speak. And sometimes that mix is in the same sentence. I do this only because my sister is part of my code-switching bilingual group. I would do this with other people whom I perceive to be part of my group (and I can alter the parameters of that group at any time). However, if I were traveling in Spain, I would not code-switch with native-speakers there, because: (1) I don't perceive them to be part of my group, and (2) I don't know whether they're bilingual like me. So, something like code-switching—the "when and with whom" of it—is determined by context: participants and setting. (Notice that I'm not code-switching with you right now, *¿verdad?*)

Just to say it again, context is essential for shaping communication. In classrooms, context exerts a major and hidden constraint on communication. This is because the context never changes. That is, the setting is always the same: four walls, students' chairs and desks or tables, a teacher's desk or table, and so on, within the broader context of the university/school that make the physical layout constant. The participants and their social roles never change; the students are always the students, and the instructor is always the instructor. Unlike the scenarios we reviewed earlier, there is no dog in the classroom, and the students and teacher are not at home. There is no grocery store and no produce-guy stocking broccoli. There is no hallway with colleagues in it. It is a fixed setting with the same participants every time they meet. The question then becomes, "What kind of meaning can we express, interpret, and negotiate in this fixed context?" Before we can answer this, we need to address the purpose of communication.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

We all learn what "bad words" are in our first language. Think of a bad word, and ask yourself, "In what contexts (in what settings and with what people) would I use that word, and in what contexts would I avoid that word?" What about "bad words" in the classroom? Is the classroom a context in which bad words are "allowed"?

Purpose

People (and entities, if we include non-humans) communicate for a purpose. We don't use language, gestures, signs, or anything else involved in communication without a reason. James F. Lee and I have often talked about communication having two broad, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, purposes: (1) psychosocial, (2) cognitive-informational.

The psychosocial use of language most frequently involves communication to establish, maintain, and effect (and possibly *affect*) relationships and roles among two or more entities. The simplest example involves the use of social exchanges. I drafted this book during an election year, and people periodically called me requesting donations for a candidate, cause or party. When those people called and I answered, our communication typically proceeded as follows:

CALLER: "Hi. Is this Bill VanPatten?

BILL: Yes.

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CALLER: Hi, how are you today, Mr. VanPatten?

BILL: Fine. And how are you?

CALLER: Oh, I'm doing great. My name is Stephanie, and I'm calling on behalf of…"

Think of how odd and rude it would have been if I'd answered the phone and the person had said immediately, "I'm calling on behalf of…" That would have been bad communication. We expect some "niceties" as part of such a communicative event to "grease the wheels" of the interaction. The person has to establish contact with me first, establish some kind of relationship, and perform those "niceties" before going on. This is one example of the psychosocial use of language during communication.

Another example occurs when we use terms of endearment by saying "Yes, dear" to our spouses, or when I say, *"¿Qué quieres, Cariño?"* to my dog. The uses of *dear* and *cariño* (the Spanish equivalent of "dear" or "sweetie") are purposeful and signify to the other person or entity a special status or relationship with me. The same is true when we say "Sir" or "Ma'am" or when we extend a hand when we first meet someone while saying, "Nice to meet you." All of these uses of language as part of the communicative event are psychosocial in nature.

Another major reason we communicate is to express or obtain information, or to learn or do something (i.e., complete a particular task). We call this kind of communication **cognitive-informational use of language**. As you read right now, you are engaging in the cognitive-informational purpose of communication. You're reading because you want information about a particular topic. The grocery clerk asks "Paper or plastic?" to determine which type of bag to pack your items in. The newscaster on the local channel is talking into the camera to communicate information about local and national events, and we watch and listen because we want to "know stuff." The clerk at the running store asks me how I would like to pay, and I say, "With a credit card." I communicate this information to complete a purchase.

In short, the cognitive-informational purpose of communication and language use involves the need to know something, and often the need to perform or complete a task.

In everyday life, psychosocial and cognitive-informational purposes of communication overlap, because we often alternate between them during an interaction. Let's look at an example from the grocery store. (I love grocery stores….) The scene takes place in the seafood section and the clerk is someone I know from my visits to the store. Read over the interaction and note the interweaving of psychosocial and cognitive-informational purposes of communication.

CLERK: Hey, man. What's up? Good to see you. *(psychosocial)*

BVP: Same here. How's it goin'? *(psychosocial)*.

CLERK: Oh, livin' the dream. You know. *(psychosocial)*

BVP: I see you got your hair cut. *(psychosocial)*

CLERK: Yeah. It's easier this way. *(psychosocial and cognitive-informational)*. What can I do for you today? *(cognitive-informational)*

BVP: [pointing] I need a half-pound of this salmon here. *(cognitive-informational)*

CLERK: [weighing and wrapping] Got any plans for the holiday? *(psychosocial)*

BVP: No. Just hanging out with my dog. *(psychosocial)*

CLERK: Here you are. Anything else you need? *(cognitive-informational)*

BVP: Nope. That'll do it. *(cognitive-informational)* Thanks. *(psychosocial)*

CLERK: No problem. Catch you later. *(psychosocial)*

BVP: Later. *(psychosocial)*

In this not so-fictional interchange at my grocery store, it's easy to see how the clerk and I deftly move back and forth between psychosocial and cognitive-informational purposes of language as we communicate. In the latter, our utterances are used to accomplish particular parts of the task of purchasing fish. When he asks, "What can I do for you today?" he is asking me this because he needs to know what to do. I say, "I need a half-pound of salmon," because he can't give me what I want unless I tell him. But when the clerk says, "Got any plans for the holiday?" he is not really interested in what I'm doing. He's just being polite, "making conversation," showing interest in me as a person. My response really makes no difference to him. However, if he wanted to invite me to his house and wanted to know if I'm free, he might say the same thing. Then the question, "Got any plans for the holiday?" would have a different purpose: it would be cognitive-informational, because he needs to know the answer so he can make the invitation "more formal."

> **" The point of this discussion, then, is that communication between two or more entities always has some purpose. …we don't use language for the sake of using language. ""**

The point of this discussion, then, is: communication between two or more entities always has a purpose. When we use language with each other during a communicative event, we don't do so for the sake of using language. We use language to get something done or to let someone know something. This contrasts with what happens in many language classes—but we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before we talk about classrooms, let's look at two potentially confusing examples of purpose.

When people gossip, what is the purpose? Psychosocial, or cognitive-informational? The answer is that it can be both. First, we tend to gossip only with people we trust (hopefully). We create an intimate "us and not them" environment when we gossip. We send signals during the gossip that we are special to each other, thus maintaining a relationship with someone—as is the purpose of psychosocial use of language. At the same time, we might be exchanging information for a different outcome: I may be warning my gossip partner about something that is going to happen, thus suggesting explicitly or implicitly that she or he should prepare for an event, or maybe not trust someone. This is cognitive-

informational. My communication has a purpose that goes beyond the language itself.

I used to—and occasionally still—perform standup comedy. There's nothing as rewarding as being on a stage and trying to be funny—and nothing scarier. But am I communicating with an audience when I do it? If so, what is my purpose? Psychosocial, or cognitive-informational? Clearly the most obvious purpose of a standup comedian is to make people laugh. But what does this have to do with the nature and purpose of communication? To be sure, standup comedy is a communicative event: I, on stage, am expressing some kind of meaning, and the audience, sitting at their tables, are interpreting that meaning. And if the communication is successful, there is laughter.

Is that laughter a psychosocial or cognitive-informational outcome of the event? Or, as with gossip, might there be some overlap between the two? To be honest, I'm not sure. We might include a third purpose to language use: to entertain. When we tell a joke or write a story, for example, our purpose is to entertain someone in some way. Once again, we see that all communication has a purpose that is not about the language itself, but about something else. Language use without purpose is not communication.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC...

Why do people talk to themselves? What purpose does this serve? Clearly, they aren't "practicing language." So what are they doing?

Language and Communication are Not the Same Thing

By now you should be able to state what communication is, reciting the definition like the Pledge of Allegiance:

Communication is the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning with a purpose in a given context.

Note: this is *not* a definition of language. In Chapter 2 we will discuss the nature of language, defining it as mental representation that is implicit and abstract in nature. That is, "language ≠ the expression and interpretation of meaning…"
Communication can make use of language but encompasses more than language. How so?

Earlier we discussed dogs communicating. They use eye contact, body posture,

tail position and movement, barking, whimpering, and other non-linguistic ways to express a variety of meanings. That is, dogs communicate *without* language. Likewise, when humans communicate, they use more than language, incorporating gestures and body posture (usually unconsciously) as they express and interpret meaning. And sometimes humans communicate without language, such as soldiers or FBI agents in the field trying to maintain silence by using a system of hand signals and gestures to communication information such as "Cover me," "You go right, and I'll go left," "Move forward" and so on. And if someone winks at you without saying a word, you probably understand what that person means.

The distinction between language and communication is important because people (including teachers and students) often confuse language and communication, sometimes using them interchangeably. Later in this book we will talk about why we really can't be "language" teachers.

Implications of a Definition of Communication for the Classroom

Why is it important for language teaching to have a working definition of communication? It is important for two main but related reasons. The first is that if we bandy the term "communicative language teaching" or we say "I teach communicatively" then we imply that we have a definition of communication and that this informs what we do.

Imagine, for instance, someone who says, "I'm a French chef" but, when pushed, can't specify what it means to be a chef in the French tradition. How do we know that chef follows the French tradition? Also, if a psychiatrist says, "We follow the Jungian school," but has difficulty articulating how her practice is tied to Jung, then how do we know that psychiatrist is truly Jungian? Or if a next-door neighbor says, "I'm a Democrat," but can't articulate what the Democratic platform is or what Democrats stand for, then how do we know whether that person is a Democrat or not?

Hopefully the point is clear. "Communicative language teaching" must have some set of underlying principles, including how a definition of communication informs language teaching. So the first implication in our discussion is:

Communicative classrooms involve the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning with a purpose in the context of the classroom.

Such an implication has profound consequences for how we think about and evaluate what we do. Are the instructor and students "practicing" language, or are they actually communicating? To answer this question, we must ask:

■ How much time do instructors and students spend on the expression and interpretation of meaning?

■ Is there a purpose to this expression and interpretation of meaning (i.e., psychosocial or cognitive-informational)?

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A good hard look at many classrooms would suggest that what transpires is language practice, not communication. So how "communicative" are these classrooms? Let's look at what are typically called **display questions**. Display questions are designed to elicit a specific response in order to demonstrate that the responder understands something and can respond with the (one and only one) correct answer. In this example, a teacher is asking questions about colors:

TEACHER: What color is John's shirt?

STUDENT A: White.

TEACHER: White. Correct. And what color is Marie's hoodie?

STUDENT B: Green.

TEACHER: Green. Very good. And what color is my tie?

STUDENT C: Uh, blue and, uh, purple.

TEACHER: Right. It's blue and purple.

Here we see the use of display questions to "practice the vocabulary of colors." There is meaning involved, to be sure: students can't respond if they don't understand the questions. But there is no psychosocial purpose and no cognitive-informational outcome. The interchange has no purpose other than to practice language and colors. The teacher's responses of "correct" and "good," for example, are clearly suggestive of the purpose of the activity. If practicing language is the reason for doing something, then that event or activity cannot be communicative.

Let's contrast this classroom example with an eye exam, in which the eye doctor is testing the patient's ability to perceive colors.

DOCTOR: Tell me what color the square is.

PATIENT: Green.

DOCTOR: Now, what color is this square?

PATIENT: Red.

DOCTOR: Next one. What color do you see?

PATIENT: Blue.

DOCTOR: And now? What color do you see?

PATIENT: Purple.

[The doctor makes notes on the computer.]

In contrast to what happened in class, the eye doctor is not asking display questions to get the patient to practice colors. Instead, the doctor must know if the patient can perceive colors in order to determine any visual problems. Asking the questions has a cognitive-informational outcome: the doctor needs the answers to reveal a conclusion about the patient's perception.

In short, these are not display questions. They are **context-embedded queries** designed to answer questions about eyesight. There is a purpose and an outcome related to completing a task. In contrast, the teacher asked display questions

designed to get learners to practice colors, not to express and interpret meaning. One event is communicative; the other is not. **Just because mouths are moving does not mean a classroom event is communicative.** This is equally true whether we are talking about instructors or students.

Following is another example culled from Pete Brooks' work, published in 1990, looking at classroom interaction in Spanish. The instructor is presumably asking questions about people, but his real intent is to practice adjective agreement. (In Spanish, adjectives must agree with the nouns they modify, as in *la casa blanca* ['the white house'], but *el libro blanco* ['the white book']).

> INSTRUCTOR: *¿Es antipática?* ('Is she mean?')
>
> STUDENTS: *No.*
>
> INSTRUCTOR: *No. No es antipática.* ('No. She's not mean.')
>
> STUDENTS: *Es muy simpático.* ('She's very nice.')
>
> INSTRUCTOR: *¿Simpático?* [with rising intonation on the final syllable] ('Nice?')
>
> STUDENT: *Simpática.* ('Nice.')
>
> INSTRUCTOR: *Sí, es muy simpática.* ('Yes, she's very nice,' confirming the grammaticality, not the message.)

In this interchange, it is not clear whether anyone really cares about what is being said (i.e., the meaning or the message). For the instructor, what is important is the *how*: the grammaticality of adjective endings. This exchange therefore has no communicative purpose. Just as important is how students in that class played out the instructors' behaviors when put into pairs to "communicate." Here is an excerpt from a communicative practice between two students:

> STUDENT A: *¿Cómo son Carolina y Luz?* ('What are Carolina and Luz like?')
>
> STUDENT B: *Carolina y Luz es, no, son rubi[?]s* ('Carolina and Luz is, no, are blond [vowel quality not clear enough to distinguish between *rubias* and *rubios*, hence the ? in brackets])
>
> STUDENT A: *Son…* ('Are…' [holds tone]) *rubi… a…rubias*.
>
> STUDENT B: *¿A o as?*
>
> STUDENT A: *As.*
>
> STUDENT B: *As. Sí, rubias* [pronounced stress on 'as' of the adjective]

In this "communicative practice" the students are not focused on any real expression or interpretation of meaning; they are looking at a picture together and already know the two females in question are blonde. Instead, the students are doing what they perceive the instructor to be doing; using "communication" to practice a language point. No communicative purpose—psychosocial or cognitive-informational —is discernible in this event; the purpose is simply to practice adjective agreement.

These kinds of interactions are important to review, because teachers often say they teach communicatively and engage in "communicative activities" when they may

not be doing so. To repeat: just because mouths are moving doesn't mean something is communicative. For an event to be communicative, it must have a purpose that is not language-related but related to one of language use's two major purposes: psychosocial or cognitive-informational.

> ## WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC…
>
> It isn't easy to imagine gossip in the classroom. But what about entertainment? Are there communicative events in class involving entertainment? (Simply playing music in class does not count!)

This discussion brings us to a second reason why a definition of communication is important in language teaching: context. Once again, context is the setting and the participants:

The classroom is a fixed context that constrains the purpose of communication as well as what gets talked about and how it gets talked about.

By "fixed," I mean the context never changes. The classroom setting is always the same: four walls, desks/chairs, blackboards/whiteboards, projectors, etc. It is neither a restaurant nor a doctor's office nor a travel agency. Furthermore, the participants are always the same: the students are students, and the instructor is the instructor, and they have no other roles or occupations during class time. No one is a doctor, a patient, a travel agent, or a client trying to book a trip. This constrained context, then, means certain class activities that some claim to be "communicative" actually are not. (Another chapter will touch on the nature of classroom activities and tasks, so here we will limit our discussion to role-plays.)

Many instructors love role-plays. A role-play involves students acting out various scenes such as ordering a meal in a restaurant or asking questions of a travel agent for a trip. Such activities are often presented as communicative. But, fun as they may be, are they really communicative? At first blush these activities appear to involve some kind of expression and interpretation of meaning. Yet they are actually not communicative, because they ignore the classroom context and have no purpose other than to practice language. Again, the classroom context is its fixed setting and unchanging participants. Students aren't restaurant customers. They aren't tourists needing help getting from point A to point B. Such activities ignore the actual communicative context of the classroom and try to make the classroom into something it isn't.

I recall discussing this issue at dinner with a Japanese instructor during my visit to another university. She didn't like what I was saying and insisted that, when she created role-plays, she was "changing the context" of the classroom. I said, "No, it's impossible to change the context of the classroom. The classroom can't be anything

other than the classroom." She insisted she could change the context. I insisted she could not, because context is defined in a particular way.

This interchange suggested to me that some instructors, when they hear a definition of a construct such as "communicative" or "communication," try to change its meaning to suit what they do. I am not suggesting that role-plays can't be fun, serve some *instructional* purpose, or raise awareness about something related to language and its use; just that, in and of themselves, **role-plays are not communicative activities**. They are simply language practice with no purpose other than to practice doing something with the language, and no psychosocial or cognitive-informational outcome. Nor are they "entertainment." In short, role-plays ignore the classroom context: the setting and the participants.

We will explore in some detail the implications of the definition of communication for classroom activities in the chapter on tasks. But imagine a teacher who recognizes the classroom context and who its participants are. That teacher might create activities or tasks that encourage students to use language to learn about themselves and the world around them. That teacher has purpose behind activities that is not language practice but perhaps something like: "At the end of this activity, you will know exactly what questions to ask someone to truly find out where they fall on a scale of neat/messy." Or, "At the end of this activity, we will know whether we fit into the guidelines for good sleep habits as determined by the National Sleep Foundation." We will explore tasks and activities in the communicative classroom in another chapter. For now, keep the following statement in mind:

The definition of communication informs what it means for a classroom to be communicative.

Foundational Readings

Lee, J. F., & VanPatten, B. (2003). *Making communicative language teaching happen* (2nd Ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. W. (Eds.). (1983). *Language and communication*. New York, NY: Longman, Inc. (See especially the chapters "The Domain of Pragmatics," "Rules of Speaking," and "The Structure of Teachers' Directives.")

Savignon, S. (1998). *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Discussion Questions and Food for Thought

1. Review the chapter and make a list of all bolded or italicized words (except non-English words), terms and concepts. Can you define each one or explain what it means? Can you give examples?

2. Describe how context affects or doesn't affect how you communicate and use language. Example: how you text a friend versus how you write an email message to a professor or a superior. Try to give at least three examples in which context causes you to change how you use language and how you communicate.

3. Watch ten minutes of a TV show or ten minutes of a movie with the sound turned off. What messages do you pick up through facial expressions and body posture or gestures when you can't rely on language?
4. Observe a language classroom and make note of the following:
   a. What is the ratio of display questions (designed to practice language) to context-embedded questions (designed to get information about a topic)?
   b. What is the ratio of teacher responses such as "Right," "Correct," "Good" "Excellent," and so on, to responses such as "I didn't know that," "Really? You did that?", "I can't believe that," and others? Do you see the difference between the response types? What do they indicate about the focus of the teacher?
5. This chapter stated that classrooms are fixed contexts. Review what this means. How would you answer these questions?
   a. How does the classroom context influence both what is talked about and how it is talked about?
   b. Which of the following makes the greatest sense to you at this time: (1) Classrooms are good places for the psychosocial purpose of communication. (2) Classrooms are good places for the cognitive-informational purpose of communication.
6. Based on what you know so far, how do you react to the following statement: "Language classrooms can be, at best, 50% communicative in nature."
7. List at least five things you learned in this chapter that you did not know before. If you are taking a class, compare your list with someone else's. Do your two lists reveal anything?

I... **For each of the "I" statements below, indicate which applies to you:**

	YES, FOR SURE!	SORT OF.	NOPE.
1. I can offer a working definition of communication.	○	○	○
2. I can describe the two major purposes of communication.	○	○	○
3. I understand how the classroom is a "limited context" environment for communication.	○	○	○
4. I can describe/explain how knowledge about communication informs choices and behaviors in terms of language teaching.	○	○	○