WHILE WE'RE ON THE
TOPIC

BVP on Language, Acquisition,
and Classroom Practice

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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

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.

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.