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Meeting the Challenge of Explanation

Phyllis G. L. Chew

The promotion of language use and communicative competence is the predominant focus of the primary and secondary syllabuses in Singapore. Current textbooks by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore advocate key concepts inherent in communicative methodology, such as, thematic, communicative, integrated, learner-centered, contextualization, interaction and multi-media. (See for example, *New Clue* for the Secondary Schools and the *Pets* coursebooks for the Primary Schools)

There is nothing wrong with the word *communicative* except that it appears to make language learning seem so easy. There is an assumption that conversations are happy and felicitous without potential conflicts of interest, even though such misunderstandings are commonplace in the outside world.

There is an emphasis on the smoothness and untrammelledness of the process of language use. Little effort is made to highlight the relationship of language to constructs such as race, gender and power.

It is time for educators to adopt an explanatory perspective in addition to the main tenets of the communicative syllabus. Language education should begin to highlight how language is involved in the arena of conflicting values, ideologies and beliefs, and be involved in the demystification of hidden presuppositions and world views against which meanings are co-constructed by participants.

Explanation, Interpretation and Description.

The term *explanation* was originally associated with the Lancaster group of linguists

focussing on unequal discourse (Candlin 1987, 1990). Influenced by the prominence given to language in recent social theory - most notably the work of Foucault and Habermas - as well as the work of Halliday coming out of grammar, and the critical linguistics of Fowler et al. (1979) emerging from literary stylistics, semiotics and language education, the Lancaster group responded to what they perceived as a neglect of questions of power and status in the current state of discourse analysis (cf Thomas, 1989, Fairclough, 1992a, 1992b).

Explanation is better understood in the context of two other terms, *interpretation* and *description*, and which altogether gives us a wider and more complete perspective on language learning. Interpretation is concerned with a pragmatic array of functions, strategies of communication and actual spoken text. It examines discourse as the

skilled accomplishment of participants in the service of some social goal and gives importance to contextual variables like who the interactants are, their relative statuses, the topics being talked about, etc. all of which determine the appropriate forms of language to use. Description, on the other hand, is concerned with the formal study of text, the decoding of form or surface features and analyst-constructed sentence. The boundaries between description and interpretation are however more apparent than real because a descriptive account of social practices cannot be attempted without some form of interpretation (and vice versa). For example, no teacher merely produces just mere description of language items but picks out socially significant patterns and this implies interpretation.

Explanation means going beyond description and interpretation to the exploration of how ways of talking are actually powerful indicators of sectional interests, beliefs, values, and how the use of language is determined by the unstated values and interests of the social situation or generic form. Here, the context of situation moves far beyond the immediate situation of spatial and temporal categories (e.g. setting, participants, mode, etc.) concerned with Interpretation. It views language in society as "owned" and "operated" by socio-culturally defined groups of people. These people are accepted as "members" of the language they possess, using it to play various "roles" and give various "performances" with it. Learning to explain means learning ways of talking, acting, interacting, valuing and believing, as well as indicate the spaces and material "props" each institution or generic form uses to carry out its social

practices.

Language Education in Singapore

In the '50's and '60's in Singapore, language teaching and learning were basically descriptive and knowledge-seeking. Text was viewed as object and language education was synonymous with the learning of surface features of language. English was taught as a content subject aimed at providing students with a reading knowledge of English through the study of English grammar, where facts had to be analyzed and paraphrasing sentences were arduously imposed (Chua, 1990). The methodological approach adopted was basically that of grammar translation.

The preoccupation with description continued with the adoption of the structural method in the mid-sixties. Whatever changes which resulted from the influence of behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics in the sixties were superficial since grammatical categories were now defined in terms of distribution rather than meaning (Lee, 1983). The audio-lingual approach, then the favored approach, stressed the presentation of language materials in a particular sequence and resulted in the formulation of pattern practice and grading now so firmly established in the English classroom in Singapore.

This was the general practice until the 1982 (Ministry of Education, 1982) secondary English Language Syllabus introduced what Ho (1994) described as the "rationalist" phase of language teaching. Emphasis was now explicitly placed on planning and stated objectives rather than the content to be mastered (Mok, 1987). However, this syllabus continued to remain essentially descriptive,

concerned mainly with usage rather than use. For example, while the grammar component was, in principle, only one of the features proposed in the syllabus, actual implementation in the textbooks gave it prominence. Each grammatical structure was, for example, represented as a separate exercise in the initial Language Use section of each unit in the CLUE textbook (CDIS, 1983).

By the mid-80's however, language teaching had begun to look towards interpretation, towards an emphasis on use rather than usage, and towards the actual strategies that people use to communicate. The 1984 RELC Seminar, for instance, was devoted entirely to communicative language teaching (cf Tickoo, 1987). It attracted papers on the application and adaptation of communicative language teaching in different indigenous contexts within the region. During this time, the Institute of Education language department also began to introduce communicative methodology to their trainee teachers. Discourse began to be viewed as the skilled accomplishment of participants in the service of some social goal and the importance of socio-cultural knowledge, such as spatial and temporal constraints, as part of context began to be recognized.

Such ideas were officially given sanction with the issue of the 1991 primary and secondary school syllabuses by the Ministry of Education, in a move viewed by many as a "paradigm shift" (Lim 1995). Implementation of the new secondary syllabus, began in January 1992, with full implementation in all secondary schools expected by 1995. The syllabus is, however, only one of a series of policy statements regarding language education needs in

Singapore. In addition to the English Language Syllabus (1991, the English Department Handbook (1988) and the textbooks themselves are the clearest articulations of a revised educational policy.

Pre-selection and sequences of structural items to be learnt, as in the traditional syllabus was drastically minimized. Language was now widely regarded as learnt social behaviour and a vehicle for communication. Sociolinguistic competence was recognized as essential and defined as the ability to understand and take into account the social context, in which communication took place (CDIS, 1991b).

Towards Explanation

Essentially centered on interpretation, the 1991 syllabus placed emphasis on the importance of context in the teaching and the use (rather than knowledge) of language. Its concept of context was based upon a positivist postulation of an idealized version of the sociolinguistic order as a stable and balanced synchronic state which existed "as a matter of observable fact." Context was more often than not the immediate context and patterns of appropriacy simply "there" to be learnt. There were no attempts to challenge the illusion of naturalness. Neither was the ideological shaping of language taken into account. Recognition of the differential social valuations of varieties and reference to the relation of power which lay "behind" language was not a consideration.

There is then a need to go beyond the interpretive to the explanatory, to go beyond what is said and meant, so as to infer and explore the social conditions which govern particular performances and interpretations. There is a need to see transparent ways of talking as powerful

indicators of social views and group values. Discoursal features and pragmatic markers characteristic of particular types of counters should be seen not just in terms of "correctness" or "appropriacy" but reflective and reproductive of social relationships between participants, and importantly between groups.

A Framework for the Classroom

An explanatory section could be added to the six language components in, for example, the Singapore secondary textbook *New Clue* (CDIS, 1993); and which would contain materials pertinent only to the objectives of explanation. The six sections are Getting Started, Reading, Language Use, Building Vocabulary, Listening and Writing, all of which provide varied and interesting communicative tasks for the students.

Basically interpretive in design, *New Clue* provide opportunities for students to interact and to acquire communicative competence through an integrated sequence of activities around a topic of interest. There are opportunities to learn how to speak in certain situation, that is, "learning to develop the capacity to activate the potentials of language, action and meaning with regard to the context" (Ministry of Education, 1988). Opportunities abound for student to interact with one another, to attempt tasks jointly and to produce an outcome which would be shared with the class.

Materials in the suggested explanatory component would however equip students for the apparent and hidden realities of communication in the real world. Materials here might focus on how the talk of significant texts whose nature is immediately recognizable to the learners and whose messages are of striking and immediate personal relevance, such as

educational, medical and legal discourse, affects one's life chances. A study could be made on the specialized vocabulary and syntax of such texts which, while appearing conventional and "normal", actually serves to increase the distance between speaker and listener or writer and reader (cf Chew, 1994). An attempt could also be made to increase awareness of the exercise of power by some groups over others as they are revealed in speech and writing (for example, the use of the inclusive "we"). Such materials would greatly contribute towards educating students to understand the odds, to make their own informed decisions about their language practice in the light of an understanding of individual and collective benefits and costs.

The following are descriptions of some lessons representative of an explanatory perspective:

Oral Work: Role Play

Role plays in communicative teaching textbooks are often based on the establishment of a situation or series of situations (for example, bus stop, encounters in the workplace, shop, etc.) and structured exchanges and improvised exchanges based on the basis of assigned roles. Their central aim is frequently for students to explore language in use, to gain experience and to try out different linguistic situations. However, since there is usually no analysis, issues of context and identity are not addressed and therefore there cannot be any sense of significance for the students.

An explanatory lesson would begin by, for example, asking students to draw up their own role play situations and defining the following:

- the participants in the role play
- the social identity of the different

- participants and their roles
- the kind of language they speak and what special features it is characterized by
- the topic, or topics of the role-play situation
- the perspective or perspectives taken by each participant
- the institutional context or contexts, that has a bearing on the role

One preliminary activity for this exercise is to ask students to examine three role-play situations so that they would be able to see the differences in the forms of encounter. It would be better if they could find examples in real contexts and draw some conclusions from them. This would help them when they construct their own role-play situations. Such comparing and contrasting of different contexts of role play would enable students to discern the genre characteristics of each type of discourse so that they could better anticipate and explain potential areas of conflict especially where sectional interest and power relationships are salient issues of life.

In this way, a new kind of emphasis on knowledge and research -- both largely absent from the practices of description and interpretation -- would emerge. Knowledge about how language works in specific social situations could be usefully communicated, and students could be given the means to conduct their own research projects into matters like linguistic role play.

Vocabulary: Building Awareness

Where the teaching of vocabulary is concerned, an explanatory lesson would be concerned not so much with the description of forms of grammar and vocabulary per se or of the ways and

means of text interpretation, but rather with how their use reflects and expresses social differences or inequalities between participants in an interaction. The basic focus here is the discarding of the idea that the "vocabulary" of a language is some sort of neutral label which comes from nowhere in particular and belongs to everyone independent of class, gender and race (Chew, 1992).

The following is an exercise aimed at sharpening students' awareness of vocabulary. Students are first asked to work in a small group to agree on an order of importance or an order of interest of the following:

abortion, drugs, peace, euthanasia, capital punishment, nuclear weapons, etc.

Once this has been done, they would then proceed to discuss questions such as:

- What are the main aspects of the issue?
- What different opinions/opposition are there in relation to this issue?
- How do different kinds and different groups of people regard this issue?

While a communicative approach would have stopped at this point or continued with a follow-up activity such as an expository writing assignment based on this discussion, a concern with explanation would mean going a step further. It would mean, for instance, asking students to consider carefully the kind of language used to express different positions taken up by people in relation to the issue they are dealing with. (This can be done as a speech, dialogue, as writing work or assignment). This

further step would reveal ideologies and beliefs which are associated with lexical items.

Reading: Genre Identification

The task of any successful speaker or writer is first and foremost to understand the demands of generic form (Elliot and McGregor, 1989). As structured or staged ways of getting things done by means of language in a particular culture, a knowledge of generic forms afford us the opportunity to narrow the range of possible interpretive frames a participant may find being employed in a given situation (Kendon, 1990).

A lesson on genre may begin by the examination of two or three texts. The procedure can involve the construction of a "structure box" (Peim, 1993) which would identify elements and the ways they tend to get organized. Such a box would offer the opportunity to look at general features of the genre, or discourse, of selected texts. Inside the structure box may go in elements such as identities, places, events, time, and so on.

Structure Box

including, for example:
 identities
 events
 beginnings
 endings
 time
 places
 objects

The extent that these elements themselves produce certain kinds of meanings can be examined by looking at the possibilities that the genre may offer for redefined meanings. In this way, the creation and the reading of meaning may be understood as at least partly as a property of genres. Since genre

codes the effect on social changes of social struggle and present themselves as uncontentious, if not natural forms, such an activity would aid students to explore how naturalized ways of talking are actually powerful indicators of sectional interests, beliefs and values or how the use of language is determined by the unstated values and interests of each generic situation.

A further explanatory activity is to examine whether the reader and/or the author is inside or outside the structure box, thus prompting questions about the very identity of the text.

Writing: "Think Book"

Besides just emphasizing the process of writing as in the current syllabus, there would be a stress on procedures for making the writing process transparent. One technique suggested is to encourage children to keep a "think book", in which they jot down their thoughts, feelings and reasons for choices made in words or grammatical structures of language, etc. Besides enabling learners to share thoughts and experiences, such a book would encourage them to reflect critically on their individual perceptions in relation to whom they are writing for and what context they are writing in. In this way, a critical sense of readership may be cultivated. In writing an event, learners may decide to provide different versions for different audiences, and this in turn might affect language choice, and decisions about what to include or exclude. Through discussion, the teacher can help learners see how a change in wording or in the structure of a sentence or in the order of a paragraph might change the whole perception entirely.

Enrichment: Advertisements

Language materials in this section would focus on the use of "persuasion" by the mass media. In advertising, for instance, language is often used to manipulate not just ideas but the emotions of the reader or listener. Because the media is the dominant socialization influence today, language teaching should begin to focus upon developing the critical and analytical capacities of children and their ability to creatively transform and challenge the conventions of discourses and practices.

The study of advertisements (similarly, of television programmes, soap operas, popular music, stories and cartoons) would be a good way to study how the media attempts to persuade people directly and indirectly. While a communicative task might involve students in the writing of advertisements or the answering of questions on advertisements, a concern with explanation would require students to, for example, uncover the ideology inherent in advertisements through the following questions:

- who is the advertiser?
- what is the explicit purpose of the advertisement?
- what kind of person or company is the advertisement advertising?
- how does the advertiser relate to the audience's self interest?
- what common interests does the advertiser claim that he share?
- does the advertisement call into play a widely accepted value or belief?
- what language does the advertiser use to suggest harmony
- how abstract are the words? Why? Why not?

In this way, it is possible to highlight once again how language

is involved in the arena of ideologies and beliefs. It is a tangible step towards the demystification of hidden presuppositions and world views against which meanings are co-constructed by participants.

Conclusion: the Challenge of explanation

Explanatory procedures are needed in the classroom as a means to engage participants in explaining things, connecting events and placing these events and objects in the context of patterns, structures and causes.

It should be noted that explanation does not supplant but actually augment the main features of the 1991 syllabus by introducing an additional dimension to language teaching and learning. Flexibility is maintained since it is not so much a syllabus for classroom action for immediate transmission, but rather a principle, a curriculum framework for debate which will properly allow for a range of different tactical realizations by teachers in their distinctive classroom settings.

Teaching strategies continue as essentially task-based and student centered. The teaching of the four skills remain integrated through a thematic emphasis (CDIS, 1991a, 1991b). Teachers continue to relate English lessons to a wide range of "real life experiences through a specific social problem, for example, drugs, sharing of fears, story telling." (Ministry of Education, 1988: 1-1). The teacher remains in a much fuller sense of the term, "a facilitator of learning, an advisor, a classroom manager and one who provides psychological support for language learning in the classroom rather than as a dispenser of knowledge" (Ibid.: 12).

If we wish to educate students in language and not just train them, we must begin to consider the

incorporation of the explanatory aspect of language teaching into the syllabus. Only when learners understand the reproductive and ideological capacities that lie behind the choice of the "appropriate" language, can they become empowered, both personally and socially. Only in this way can one realistically fulfill what is stated as the "official function of the schools", which is:

to develop our pupils to their greatest potential and to prepare them for all aspects of adult life ... the English curriculum should help pupils to develop their linguistic and communicative competence to meet both their present and future needs in the personal, educational, vocational, social and cultural spheres.

(CDIS, 1991).

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