2 Relating forms to meanings

2.1 Introduction

The specific techniques discussed in this chapter will already be familiar to many readers. Here, the purpose is to show how they relate the acquisition of linguistic structures and vocabulary to the other three components of communicative ability described in the previous chapter, and how they therefore help to bridge the gap between linguistic and communicative competence.

The learning activities themselves are 'pre-communicative' rather than 'communicative'. That is, they aim to equip the learner with some of the skills required for communication, without actually requiring him to perform communicative acts. The criterion for success is therefore not so much whether he has managed to convey an intended meaning, but rather whether he has produced an acceptable piece of language. However, by emphasising the communicative nature of this language, the activities also aim to help the learner develop links with meaning that will later enable him to use this language for communicative purposes.

The term 'practice', as used here, includes not only activities where the learner's response is expected to be immediate (as in most drills and question-and-answer practice), but also those where the learner has more time to reflect on the operations he is performing (as in most written exercises). Each kind of activity has its role to play in helping learners develop both fluency of behaviour and clarity of understanding in their use of the foreign linguistic system. In each kind of activity, too, the linguistic forms may be more or less strongly related to communicative function and nonlinguistic reality. It is with this relationship that the present chapter is concerned.

This perspective also excludes other important factors which the teacher must control, and which are discussed in other methodological handbooks. One of these is the level of linguistic complexity which the learner is expected to cope with. This must clearly be adjusted to suit his learning stage within the course. Another is the linguistic relationship between prompt and response. At one extreme, the response may be composed largely of material already contained in the prompt, with very

little reorganisation (e.g. 'Do you think she's British or American?' – 'She's British'). At the other extreme, the prompt may give little help, since the response is related in meaning rather than in structure (e.g. 'Can you tell me the time, please?' – 'Yes, it's half past eight', or the instruction to 'Describe this scene'). The importance of these factors must not be underestimated. They are crucial in enabling the teacher to adjust the linguistic demands made on learners and gradually extend the linguistic competence on which their communicative ability will ultimately depend. Again, however, the present chapter is concerned with the links that exist between the forms produced and their communicative function.

In the examples, 'P' stands for 'prompt', such as the stimulus in a drill or a question put by the teacher. 'R' is the learner's 'response', whether spoken or written. 'Cues' are devices such as pictures or printed items, which help determine the content of what the learner says.

2.2 Structural practice

This form of practice is included here to provide a point of departure for other, more communicatively oriented activities.

Many of the audio-lingual drills produced up to the end of the 1960s are of this type, where the focus is exclusively on the performance of structural operations. Here, for example, learners must produce the correct form of the simple past:

P: John has written the letter.
R: He wrote it yesterday.
P: John has seen the film.
R: He saw it yesterday. (and so on)

I am not suggesting that learners are never aware of meaning in this sort of activity. However, this awareness is in no way essential to performing the operations, and it is likely that many learners will focus only on the structural changes that they have to make. Indeed, they are encouraged to do this by the nature of the relationship between prompt and response, which belong together only by virtue of their grammatical structure, not because they might be expected to occur together in the course of a real exchange of meanings.

Many teachers now exclude purely structural practice from their repertoire, in favour of the other forms to be discussed in this chapter. Nonetheless, we are still too ignorant about the basic processes of language learning to be able to state dogmati-

cally what can and cannot contribute to them. Structural practice may still be a useful tool, especially when the teacher wishes to focus attention sharply and unambiguously on an important feature of the structural system.

2.3   Relating structure to communicative function

The example just discussed can be easily adapted so that it rehearses the same structural facts, but in language which sounds more communicatively authentic:

P: By the way, has John written that letter yet?
R: Yes, he wrote it yesterday.
P: Has he seen the film yet?
R: Yes, he saw it yesterday.

The items now serve to illustrate communicative facts as well as structural facts: the prompt is an instance not only of a 'perfect interrogative' but also of a question, while the response is not only a 'past declarative' but also a 'reply'. That is, it is now possible to recognise the *communicative function* as well as the *structure* of the linguistic forms. We have begun to take account of the second domain of communicative skill described in chapter 1.

As we also saw in Chapter 1, communicative function is closely bound up with situational context. A further step in providing links between structure and function is therefore to contextualise the language and ask learners to practise responses which would be (a) realistic ways of performing useful communicative acts in (b) situations they might expect to encounter at some time. For example:

Your friend makes a lot of suggestions, but you feel too tired to do anything.
P: Shall we go to the cinema?
R: Oh no, I don't feel like going to the cinema.
P: Shall we have a swim? (*or* What about a swim, then?)
R: Oh no, I don't feel like having a swim.

Structurally, the learner is here practising the use of the gerund. Functionally, he is learning ways of making and rejecting suggestions. This functional aspect can naturally be emphasized by the teacher as he presents the activity. Also, as we shall see in chapter 7, the internal organisation of the course may highlight the communicative functions that students are learning to express, as well as (or even more than) the structures and vocabulary they are learning to use.

In these activities, then, the student is learning to relate

language to its communicative function. In the last resort, however, the actual operations are still of a purely structural nature, and may be carried out without conscious attention to meaning or situation. Thus in the activity just discussed, the change from 'Shall we + verb' to 'Oh no, I don't feel like + verb + ing' could be made mechanically even if we substituted a nonsense word for the verb. In other words, though we have begun to take account of the second domain of communicative skill, we have still not entered the third domain. This is where the learners must make linguistic choices that are not mechanical but correspond to specific meanings to be conveyed.

2.4   Relating language to specific meanings

We take a step in this direction when we make the learner adapt his language so that it reflects some aspect of nonlinguistic reality, such as the concrete situation, a picture, or personal knowledge. For example, in the activity discussed above, the learner may be instructed to respond to the suggestions in accordance with his own likes and dislikes:

P: Shall we go to the cinema?
R: Oh no, I don't feel like going to the cinema.
   or The cinema? Yes, that's a good idea.

Alternatively, he may be given picture cues which indicate which preference he should express:
   (The learner sees a picture of a park)

P: Shall we go to the cinema?
R: No, I'd rather go to the park.

The cue may be provided by the learner's general knowledge:

Contradict or agree with the speaker.
P: Chris Evert-Lloyd plays golf.
R: No she doesn't. She plays tennis.
P: Paris is the capital of Belgium.
R: No it isn't. It's the capital of France.
P: The Rhine flows through Germany.
R: Yes, I know it does.

Question-and-answer activity based on the classroom situation or on visuals, which is so integral a part of 'situational language teaching', requires the learner to relate language to nonlinguistic reality in a similar way. Many teachers now regard these techniques as artificial and lacking any relationship with communicative reality. The teacher asks questions, and the learners

make statements about facts which are already known to everybody:

P: Where's the pen?
R: It's on the chair.
P: Where's the chair?
R: It's next to the table.

Such a sequence may therefore be replaced by an activity in which the language is performing a recognisable and useful communicative function, as discussed in the previous section. For example, the learner may be asked to imagine himself giving directions to a stranger, basing his replies on a town plan:

P: Excuse me, where's the post office?
R: It's opposite the theatre.
P: Excuse me, where's the bank?
R: It's next to the cinema.

The realism and relevance of this language offer obvious advantages. In particular, they help to sustain learners' motivation and make the activity more appropriate to their probable communicative needs in the future (a matter which will be discussed further in chapter 7). Nonetheless, since the classroom situation is the nonlinguistic environment which is immediately real to the learners, it remains a convenient aid towards helping them to relate language to external reality.

2.5 Relating language to social context

The activities discussed so far have helped learners to link language forms with (a) communicative functions and (b) specific functional meanings which correspond to aspects of nonlinguistic reality. Students must also learn to relate language to the social meanings that it carries and to use it as a vehicle for social interaction. To this end, it is necessary to increase their sense of performing in a meaningful social context, rather than simply responding to prompts.

An initial step in this direction is to free the activity from dependence on the teacher or tape, so that learners begin to *interact* as equal partners in an exchange, rather than merely *re*acting to stimuli. For example, after an initial period when they learn to make and reject suggestions under the teacher's control (as in preceding sections), they may be asked to interact in pairs. One learner may then have a set of cues indicating what suggestions he has to make, while the other responds either according to personal preference, or from a second set of visual cues.

12

The stimulus for interaction in pairs may be provided by asking learners to obtain information to complete a questionnaire. For example, it may be a question of discovering each other's preferences between various pairs of items ('S' = 'student'):

(S1 has to complete a questionnaire)

S1: Which do you prefer, tea or coffee?
S2: I prefer tea.
   or I prefer coffee.
   or I like them both.
   or I don't like either.

(And so on, for other items on the questionnaire).

At a later stage, two exchanges may be combined to form a longer conversational sequence. The cues in the following activity might be a list of general and specific alternatives, from which the partners would select their suggestions and preferences:

(The list of alternatives would include:

cinema: detective film, love film
meal: Indian meal, Chinese meal
drink: beer, coffee
concert: jazz concert, classical concert)
S1: Shall we go to the cinema?
S2: No, I'd rather go to a concert.
S1: What kind of concert?
S2: I'd like to hear some jazz.

If the exchange is provided with a beginning and an end, it becomes a coherent dialogue in a recognisable social setting:

(Using the same list of alternatives for cues)

You and your friend have been studying together in the library all afternoon. One of you is now tired of working.
S1: Let's go out now, shall we?
S2: Where to?
S1: How about going for a drink?
S2: Oh – I'd rather have a meal.
S1: What kind of food would you like?
S2: I'd like a Chinese meal.
S1: Good idea. Let's go then.

When learners have acquired adequate command of a suitable repertoire of items, they may use them to perform in an 'open dialogue'. This requires them to identify more strongly with a social role, in order to create whole responses during a piece of social interaction:

You are visiting a friend, Peter.
Peter: Let's have a drink. What would you like, tea or coffee?
You:

Peter: I'll put a record on first. Do you like jazz?
You:
Peter: What do you feel like doing afterwards?
You:
Peter: All right. Well, I'll go and make the tea/coffee.

A similar effect may be achieved through a 'cued dialogue', in which learners interact on the basis of a series of cues. These specify the communicative function to be expressed, but otherwise leave learners to create the interaction themselves, by selecting appropriate language from their repertoire. Learners may have separate role-cards so that, at least the first time the dialogue is performed, there is an element of uncertainty and spontaneity about the interaction:

Partner A	*Partner B*
You meet B in the street.	You meet A in the street.
A: Greet B.	A:
B:	B: Greet A.
A: Ask B where he is going.	A:
B:	B: Say you are going for a walk.
A: Suggest somewhere to go together.	A:
B:	B: Reject A's suggestion. Make a different suggestion.
A: Accept B's suggestion.	A:
B:	B: Express pleasure.

Through these activities the language has become increasingly embedded in a context of social interaction. Gradually, too, the learner's performance has become less controlled by specific linguistic prompts and more controlled by the need to produce language in response to the functional and social demands of social interaction. With open dialogues and cued dialogues, we begin to enter the realm of creative role-playing, which will be discussed in chapter 5.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned primarily with training learners in the 'part-skills' of communication: enabling them to acquire linguistic forms and relate them to communicative function, nonlinguistic reality and social context.

There are no set formulae to determine the teacher's selection from among these activities. His choice can only be determined

by his understanding of the ultimate goal and by his judgment of where the learners stand in relation to it. In the early stages of a course, he may expose learners to the same basic linguistic material in sequences of activities similar to the one followed in this chapter, so that they can move gradually towards the ability to participate in meaningful interaction. Later, learners will have achieved greater independence in their learning and use of language. They will therefore be able to move more swiftly from the initial learning of new language to the point where they have integrated it into their repertoire and can use it in more independent forms of interaction.

Open dialogues and cued dialogues already require the learner to develop a moderate degree of independence in using the language he has learned. The next three chapters will discuss activities which provide learners with opportunities to develop further in this direction.