8.5 Feedback

A particularly important factor in determining the learners' rela-
tive focus on linguistic forms and meanings is the nature of the
feedback they receive.

Feedback provides learners with knowledge of how successful
their performance has been. The concept of success is, however,
not absolute: it is determined by the focus or purpose of an
activity. Thus, if the purpose is to produce certain pre-determined
linguistic structures, success will be measured according to corre-
spondingly *structural* criteria, namely: how accurately and/or
fluently the structures are produced. On the other hand, if the
purpose is to convey or comprehend meanings, success will be
measured according to *communicative* criteria, namely: how effec-
tively communication takes place. As we saw at the end of the
previous section, an activity may combine both purposes, to
varying degrees. In this case, success will be measured according
to both structural and communicative criteria.

Feedback, likewise, may focus on the level of form and/or
meaning. Let us assume, for example, that a learner produces the
utterance 'Where you went last night?'. He may be informed
(e.g. by the teacher or by the correct version in a taped drill) that
the correct form is 'Where *did you go* last night?'. This is *structural*
(or 'formal') feedback, telling him how successful his perfor-
mance was according to structural criteria. Alternatively (or per-
haps, in addition), the same utterance may receive a response
which relates not to its form but to its meaning, for example the
answer 'I went to the cinema'. To the learner, this constitutes
communicative feedback: it tells him that his utterance has been
understood as he intended. Clearly, an utterance may be success-
ful according to communicative criteria even though it is for-
mally incorrect. Likewise, an utterance may be formally correct
but fail to convey the intended meaning.

Since feedback carries information about how successful the
learner has been, the nature of the feedback also tells the learner
what *criteria* for success are operative during a particular activity,
and therefore indicates what his own purpose and focus should
be. For example, if the teacher consistently corrects linguistic
forms, this indicates that success is now being measured by for-
mal criteria, and that the learner should therefore focus his atten-
tion (partly or wholly) on the production of correct linguistic
forms. On the other hand, when a teacher wants his learners to
focus on the effective communication of meanings, he must re-
inforce this focus by providing them with feedback about how

successful communication has been. In some activities, such as many of those in chapter 4, this feedback may be intrinsic to the task: successful completion of the task is itself an indication that communication has been effective. In others, such as most role-playing activities, the feedback is provided by the reactions of the teacher or (especially) of other learners – that is, their reactions to the *meanings* of utterances rather than to their linguistic form.

It is therefore important for the teacher to monitor the kind of feedback that his learners receive, from himself or from others, so that it supports the methodological purpose of the activity. For example:
- In pre-communicative activities, he will need to provide feedback relating to linguistic form. However, this does not necessarily exclude communicative feedback. For example, while he is drilling a new structure through question-and-answer practice, a teacher may react to the meanings of the learners' responses as well as to their formal accuracy. This can help to create the illusion of a 'communicative' exchange and thus reinforce the links between structure and meaning.
- In communicative activities, the teacher will need to provide communicative feedback. Again, this need not exclude structural feedback altogether. However, the teacher must be aware that excessive correction will encourage learners to shift their focus from meanings to forms. For this reason, as we saw in chapters 4 and 5, he may often withhold structural correction, or postpone it until after the activity.

8.6 The role of the teacher

In the previous section, as at various other points in the book, I indicated that a teacher might decide not to correct errors that he observes. To many teachers, this might appear to conflict with their pedagogical role, which has traditionally required them to evaluate all learners' performance according to clearly defined criteria. Certainly, it suggests that a communicative approach involves the teacher in redefining, to some extent, this traditional role.

One of the most obvious features about the development of communicative ability (so obvious, indeed, that it can easily be ignored) is that it occurs through processes *inside the learner*. The teacher can offer the kinds of stimulus and experience that these processes seem to require, but has no direct control over them. There is evidence, in fact, that whatever the teacher does to