The Myth of the Communicative Approach

In this paper a review and criticism of the term “communicative” is offered. Different textbooks that claim to be “communicative” are compared, and so are their forewords and instructors’ directions. The term “communicative” appears as referring to a number of different things which are explored here. There appears to be some contradictions between the intentions claimed by their authors and their actual contents. Their differences and similarities are also explored here. Textbooks’ rationale is contrasted against some reputed scholars’ opinion on the same concept. Some conclusions are extracted from this double comparison. The paper also looks into the difficult relation between approach and assessment.

The “communicative” claim.
Out of some ten Spanish textbooks at Beginner and Intermediate level, all of them claim, either in their cover or foreword, to be “communicative”. It seems the term enjoys a lot of popularity among publishers and teachers. The communicative approach developed mainly by Krashen and Terrell in the teaching of Spanish (as firstly applied in the Spanish method Dos Mundos) has also been applied to many other different language textbooks: Deux Mondes, etc. It seems to be a common practice in Australia to use the chapter division of the different versions of Dos Mundos or its equivalence in other languages in order to determine in a fast way the level of prospective students. I had the opportunity to check this practice myself in repeated encounters with colleagues from different languages and universities.

However, it soon becomes obvious that the different textbooks refer to the terms “communicative” and “communication” in very different ways. What follows is a description of their different uses.

“Communicative” as “talking”.
In some of the textbooks the term “communicative” refers to oral activities of different nature. For example, some of these activities are mere repetitions of model dialogues which are presented as topical of particular situations (purchasing a train ticket and so on). In other case, communication refers to open dialogue activities (guided conversation).

“Communicative” as “application of grammar”.
Almost all of the textbooks showed a similar organization of contents, frequently starting each lesson with a list of lexicon and grammar items. Communication thus refers to grammar in practice, as opposed to theoretical grammar. Communication means to apply the grammar contents of the chapter. This grammar is exposed and explained in a traditional way, very commonly including explanations in L1. There usually no explanation or rationale for the distribution and sequence of the lexicon and grammar contents (with the exception of the “Natural Approach” and its five underpinning theories by Krashen/Terrell). More often than not the assessment tools provided by these methods account for these grammatical contents, through out-of-context activities; i.e. multiple choice questionnaires and gap-filling verb exercises.

“Communicative” as “goal”.
Many of these textbooks follow a similar lesson sequence, i.e. introduction, practice and communication (Van Patten, 1998). Communication is the final stage of the learning process, not something that occurs all the time.
“Communicative” as “interaction”.
A vast majority of activities in these textbooks are designed to be executed verbally and in pairs. Some of the activities here include descriptions of pictures, multiple choice-ended fixed dialogues, sharing information activities, etc., which are designed to repeat, in pairs or groups and in a verbal way, different words, tenses and structures. “Communicative” therefore refers to the fact that two speakers are engaged in the activity rather than the particular nature of the activity.

“Communicative” as “skill”.
May of the textbooks refer to the developing of “the four communicative skills” and therefore include some specific activities for each of them, i.e. composition topics to be written, written texts to be read and understood, audio dialogues followed by comprehension questionnaires and lists of questions to induce discussion.

Discussion
These different meanings for the term “communicative” often coexist in the same textbook, appearing in different sections of the book. In many cases, the term is applied in a different way when referred to in the foreword, in the instructor’s manual and in practice, when applied in the student’s book.

The academic point of view
Some classic texts and authors were consulted in order to find some clarification of the term. These authors are publicly acknowledged for their participation and involvement in the research of Second Language acquisition in the classroom. All of them are also known to defend a communicative perspective on the process of learning a second language. Their names include T. Terrell, Van Patten, Savignon, Krashen and Nunan.

“Communicative” as “talking”.
In many of the textbooks explored, the term appears as an almost perfect synonym for “oral” or “verbal”, without any further reference to the specific nature of each of the activities. In this way, activities of such diverse purpose and structure such as reading short stereotypical dialogues, discussion of a social topic in pairs and description in pairs of each other learner’s clothes are all considered to be communicative. The only apparent common link to such activities seems to be the fact that they take place in an uttered way.

However, VanPatten (1998) specifies: “Speaking, reading, writing, or listening without purpose cannot be communicative […] To be communicative, an activity in the classroom must have some informational outcome (or social purpose)”. This is to say, not all things verbal are, per se, communicative. The communicative act is related to the social purpose of the activity which is realized through language, not just related to the medium in which language occurs. A functional context can’t substitute the “informational outcome”. The communicative fact, when it happens, can take place in any kind of medium, whether it is written or spoken.

“Communicative” as “interaction”.
In some of the textbooks the term “communicative” appears to mean the opposite to “instruction”. Communication is what happens after the input has been delivered. This means, basically, the production of language in pairs or groups in the classroom. But as we saw
before, not any kind of interaction is necessarily communicative. Not any kind of production is communicative. Savignon (1972): “Communicative competence: the ability to negotiate meaning—to successfully combine knowledge of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse rules in communicative interactions”. Saying just about anything in pairs or groups is not enough to make the utterance communicative. The interaction needs to be meaningful.

“Communicative” as “application of grammar”.
One of the pillars of the Communicative Approach is the stress on proficiency rather than knowledge of the second language. In particular, *Dos Mundos* makes a big effort in underling that acquisition, and not learning, should be the main priority in the classroom:

> “Proficiency, or communicative competence, is the ability to understand and convey information and feelings in a particular situation for a given purpose. In the Natural Approach we determine, for example, if the student is able to ask a native speaker how to get from one location to another and understand directions given by the native speaker. Accuracy is a small part of proficiency, but in no sense is it the only goal of an NA course or even a prerequisite for the development of communicative proficiency.” Terrell (2002)

However, the way the student is assessed seems to contradict this very principle. This issue about assessment is further discussed later in the paper. Moreover, the grammatical skeleton that underpins the textbook seems to be in contradiction with the communicative manifesto: In fact, most textbooks contain traditional grammar headers in their tables of contents. Although this could be easily justified as a tool for users to organize the material, with sole commercial and practical intentions, it is nonetheless outstanding to find such content organization in the very same textbook from which the former quote was taken (*Dos Mundos*, 5th edition).

“Communicative” as “goal”.
Often the chapters in these explored textbooks share a similar sequence, based on grammar content: warming up phase, introduction, practice, and communication. In this sense, “communicative” refers to the ultimate goal the tools included in the textbook are aiming to, but the term doesn’t convey that original observation about language as communication. Communication appears to be the result of the application of a grammar-based method rather than an specific modus operandi based on the realization about the nature of language itself. The term is used more like a conceptual tool rather than a conviction on the nature of language.

Once more, Van Patten (E) contradicts such use of the term: “scholars do not distinguish between skill-getting and skill-using. […] “Communicative” refers to language acquisition. (Or, better yet, language acquisition occurs because of communicative events.)”. Communication is a goal, not necessarily a granted fact within the day-to-day classroom interaction.

“Communicative” as “skill”.
It is almost impossible to find a single textbook not referring, or revolving around, the four skills (talking, listening, writing, reading) as the ultimate communicative acts. Yet, Van Patten (E) explicitly denies they can be considered communicative the way they are traditionally used in the classroom:

> “Communicative” refers to language acquisition. (Or, better yet, language acquisition occurs because of communicative events.) […] Speaking, reading, writing, or listening without
purpose cannot be communicative […] To be communicative, an activity in the classroom must have some informational outcome (or social purpose).”

**Conclusions**

In the books of text, the term communicative is found frequently overused and often in contradiction with the uses of the term by academics. One possible reason for this is the exploitation commercial of a term with much success that perhaps not completely understood by its own users.

There is a great closeness, at least in appearance, of the use of the term “communicative” by these researchers and the orientation of semantic type of methods based on the grammar of Halliday. This aspect is explored in another part of the present essay.

There is a clear important chain of contradictions: contradictions between academics and authors of the books of text. Also, contradictions between the intentions declared by these same authors and the practical contents of their methods. A seemingly unsolvable contradiction is between the application of a communicative approach and the need of many institutions to an evaluation of the grammatical corte.

Also appears as a possible contradiction the nature of any book of text on its own: For being communicative, a text perhaps should limit itself to provide materials of reference, more than activities and fictitious dialogues.

*If language is a system for expressing meanings, and if different learners have different communicative ends in view, then surely these different communicative ends should be reflected in the things that learners are taught* (Nunan, 1999)

*...To acquire communicative competence the key component of the course must be to allow the student to use the language for real communication and that exercise and drill are neither necessary nor sufficient* (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

**Assessment in the Communicative Approach**

Citar VanPatten, [F]. Communicative language ability —the ability to express one’s self and to understand others— develops as learners engage in communication and not as a result of habit formation with grammatical items (Lee & VanPatten, 1995).

Further to review: relation between classroom input and practice, and assessment. What do we assess? How do we rate it? Shouldn’t delivery of courses and assessment be consistent? We tend to instruct language in a “communicative way” (or at least, inspired by it) and yet we tend to assess in a grammar-inspired form. Is this appropriate?