Benefits and Strategies of Communicative Language Learning

By Paul Overland

Communicative language learning seeks to bring students beyond grammatical competence to a point where they are able not only to decode a language can begin to manipulate the language in private dialog. This is known as communicative competence.

The Communicative Advantage

By encouraging oral ability as well as literacy, communicative language learning embeds the language at a deeper level. A language employed for private dialog will resist atrophy longer than a language learned strictly through grammatical explanation and translation exercises. While the student of Biblical Hebrew ultimately will not need conversational ability, a measure of that ability will help him or her retain literacy skills longer—which remains the ultimate goal when learning an ancient language.

Strategies

Several strategies further communicative language learning, including private dialog, an immersion environment, and instructional songs. These already drive instruction in many modern language classrooms, but are seldom employed in ancient languages.¹

1. ENCOURAGE PRIVATE DIALOG AMONG STUDENTS.

Definition: Students who manipulate a language to express their own desires or opinions have achieved the ability to engage in private dialog.

Rationale: The importance of guiding students to communicative competence may be seen in Schinke-Llano’s description of the progressive levels of language learning. Note in particular the third level, where she draws attention to private dialog (analogous to communicative competence):

In order for learners to progress…they must move from object-regulation (a stage in which the facts of the environment control the learner) to other-regulation (in which an ‘expert’ mediates by providing strategies) and finally to self-regulation (in which the learner controls the activity). Important to the emergence of self-

¹ Inspiration for this project sprang in part from conversations with Dr. Randall Buth, author of Living Biblical Hebrew for Everyone (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Perspective, 1999). Other components have arisen from my own research and experience in language learning and teaching.
regulation is the use of private speech (or private dialogue, as Wertsch, 1980 refers to it).²

Too often language instruction has overlooked the importance of communicative competence, thereby missing a vital step in a student’s progress toward proficiency. Instead, traditional language learning has focused on developing grammatical competence.

Tarone and Yule describe how teachers are working to correct this deficiency:

In recent years, there has been a major shift in perspective within the language teaching profession concerning the nature of what is to be taught…. [T]here has been a change of emphasis from presenting language as a set of forms (grammatical, phonological, lexical) which have to be learned and practiced, to presenting language as a functional system which is used to fulfill a range of communicative purposes.³

Larsen-Freeman adds that “learner centeredness, combined with the shift to a focus on communicative competence, has helped to transform the language teaching field dramatically in the past twenty years.”⁴

Two clarifications are helpful at this point. First, an emphasis on communicative competence does not erase the need for explicit training in grammatical structures. Rather, mastery of grammatical structures forms a waypoint en route to a higher level of learning, that of communicative competence. Second, oral fluency is not an end in itself for the student of Biblical Hebrew. It provides a means of engraving the language to level of deeper retention. Then, after years have eroded a degree of recall, the residual language facility will still enable Hebrew literacy, which is the learner’s ultimate goal.

Techniques: Private dialog can be engendered through fictitious student biographies progressively unveiled through dialog handouts. Visual aids of a complex sort (scenic posters, topographical models) can also foster a desire to communicate. When channeled into the target language, this communication forms private dialog.

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2. **Establish an Immersion Environment of Instruction.**

**Definition:** An immersion environment obtains when *the target language also serves as the language of instruction*, a significant asset when seeking to achieve communicative competence.

**Rationale:** Facility in a language advances to the degree that a learner is able to *think in the target language*. When students find themselves surrounded by the target language with little or no dependence on a mediating mother tongue, their ability to think in the target language accelerates dramatically. It is not surprising that “immersion education has received increasing attention since the 1960’s as one of the most effective means to facilitate second language acquisition.”\(^5\) With their need to train citizens with bilingual ability, Canadian educators have emerged as leaders in the field of language immersion. The potential benefits for immersion instruction in Biblical Hebrew remain to be tapped.

**Techniques:** An immersion environment can be fostered early on by using the target language for oft-repeated phrases (e.g., “Turn to page xx,” or “Repeat together,” or “How does one say [foreign word] in English?”). A booklet providing ready reference to frequently used terms facilitates this process.

3. **Aid Retention by Instructional Songs.**

**Definition:** Instructional songs link selected components such as alphabet, numerals, and grammatical structures with melody, to aid retention.

**Rationale:** Acquisition of key components (such as noted in the definition above) has generally been limited to a *visual learning process* of rote memorization. The student is issued a printed list or chart, and is told that there will be a quiz over the material the next day. By poring over the lists, slowly they are embedded in one’s memory. Contrast the ease of learning and improved retention achieved when the same information is transmitted not only by visual means but by *auditory* means as well, and that, *linked to melody*.

It should be kept in mind that auditory learning is *vital to enabling communicative competence*. Particularly in the early stages of language learning, students are unsteady when it comes to vocalizing words. They feel intimidated, afraid of embarrassing themselves. They very much need to *hear* what the language sounds like before they will attempt to vocalize for themselves. After crossing this barrier they will be able to progress toward communicative competence.

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Lozanov and Gateva have demonstrated the importance of instructive song. When they augmented grammatical instruction with songs composed in the target language, they found that students were helped considerably.\footnote{Georgi Lozanov and Evalina Gateva, *The Foreign Language Teacher’s Suggestopedic Manual* (New York, NY: Gordon and Breach, 1988), p. 80, with sample songs on pp. 98 (Italian) and 246ff (Russian). See also Lozanov, *Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedia* (New York, NY: Gordon and Breach, 1979).} D. and T. Webb explain why this is so: “Music acts as a premium signal carrier, whose rhythms, patterns, contrasts, and varying tonalities encode any new information.”\footnote{D. Webb and T. Webb, *Accelerated Learning with Music* (Norcross, GA: Accelerated Learning Systems, 1990), n.p., quoted by Eric Jensen, *Brain-Based Learning* (San Diego, CA: The Brain Store, 1995), p. 251.} By providing engaging songs that have been carefully selected or composed, students young and old find it easier to learn and retain new languages.

**Techniques:** By beginning with the desired rhythm (mimicking the stress pattern of words), one may develop a simple, slow, repetitive melody that can carry the desired word list or phrase into the memory of students. If the song’s style resembles the target culture, so much the better!

Communicative language learning is an engaging development in the field of ancient language acquisition. It opens numerous opportunities for creative instruction, and may serve to captivate students and teachers alike for years to come.