

## THE 'COMMUNICATIVE' PRINCIPLE

### The purpose of any language learning is to communicate

Pupils' experience of foreign language learning today is very different from that which many teachers experienced when they were at school. In primary and special schools in particular, the emphasis is now very firmly on oral work and work is based on practical activities in which the foreign language is used for a clear communicative purpose.

This is not to say that learning lists of vocabulary and rules of grammar does not have its place in the learning sequence for most pupils, but that simply knowing 'how you say it in German', for example, is not enough; all pupils should be shown **how to use** the language they have learned to describe their own experience (albeit, for some, in simple terms); to express their own thoughts, needs and opinions; to respond to what others say to them, to ask as well as to answer questions.

#### ***Which of these examples demonstrates a communicative purpose?***

##### ***Example 1***

*a. When the teacher holds up a flashcard and says, "What is this?" the question is not a genuine request for information. It really means: "I want to know if you have learned this point. Prove it by telling me what this is." The pupil, of course, understands that the question is really a test, and responds accordingly.*

*b. In the course of a game, one pupil may ask another to guess what card s/he is holding, by asking the same question: "What is this?" The purpose is different, however; if the guess is right, the respondent takes the card and wins a point. If the guess is wrong, someone else will provide the right answer; there is no sense of failure and the pupil's confidence is not assailed. S/He will hope to get it right next time.*

##### ***Example 2***

*Note the difference in purpose between the following situations:*

*a. The teacher holds up a clock face, positions the hands and asks, in the foreign language, "What time is it?"*

*b. In the middle of a foreign language learning session, a pupil asks the teacher, in the foreign language, "What time is it? because s/he wants to know if it's time yet to go for his/her music lesson.*

### **Vocabulary learned should be useful**

Pupils should be asked to learn only vocabulary, phrases and structures that are **enabling**; that is, pupils should be able to **do** something with the language they have learned.

### **Language learned should be transferable**

The language items pupils learn should be **transferable** to situations other than the ones in which they are initially taught. The random element provided by games and game-like situations encourages this ability to develop naturally.

### **Responding 'communicatively' may not involve words**

Although all language activities should require a **response** from the pupil, that response need not always be an utterance in the foreign language; sometimes it will be a **physical response**, to an instruction in the foreign language, for example, or **reaction** to what has been said by someone else – laughing at a joke, for example, or expressing surprise or disbelief.

### **Using the language for real**

Once pupils are familiar with the new language and confident about using it, creative work can start: transferring what has been learned into new situations in which the pupil can begin to choose what to say (as, for example, in role play) and to utter phrases which are motivated not just by their need to practise the language, but their desire to express themselves, to say what they want or need to say, in the target language.