# UNIT 3. THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS. FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE. LANGUAGE IN USE. THE NEGOTIATION OF MEANING.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding language as a vehicle for communication is central to teaching English as a foreign language. The communicative turn in linguistics and pedagogy has shifted the focus from isolated linguistic structures to the dynamic process through which meaning is constructed and negotiated. This unit explores the nature of communication, the main functions of language, the way language operates in real contexts and how learners manage to overcome communicative breakdowns through negotiation of meaning.

This unit draws on seminal and contemporary studies in the field of communication and language pedagogy, including *Language and Communication* (Jakobson, 1960), *Language as Social Semiotic* (Halliday, 1978) and *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014), which provide foundational insights into the functions of language and meaning-making processes. It also incorporates the model of communicative competence proposed in *Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing* (Canale and Swain, 1980) and the role of interaction as conceptualised in *Input and Second Language Acquisition Theory* (Long, 1983). Pedagogical applications are supported by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001), which emphasises real-world communication and the negotiation of meaning as key aspects of language use.

## 2. The Communication Process

Language is a form of social behaviour that enables humans to exchange ideas, express emotions and accomplish tasks through symbolic means. According to Halliday (1973), language is a semiotic system whose primary function is to enable communication. Hymes (1972) reinforced this notion by framing language in terms of communicative competence, highlighting the social and contextual aspects of speech.

Human language is unique compared to other communication systems in its productivity, displacement, duality and traditional transmission (Crystal, 1985). It allows speakers not only to describe the world but also to engage others, reflect on their own thoughts and interact with a wide range of contexts.

Communication can be verbal or non-verbal. Verbal communication includes both oral and written forms, while non-verbal communication involves facial expressions,

gestures, posture and other paralinguistic elements. These two modes often work together to construct meaning.

Models of the communication process, such as Shannon and Weaver's (1949) information theory, describe communication as the transmission of a message from sender to receiver via a channel, subject to noise. Moles (1961) added the importance of a shared code between participants. Jakobson (1960) extended these models by identifying six elements: context, sender, receiver, message, code and channel, each of which is linked to a particular communicative function, such as referential, emotive or phatic.

Communication is not linear but interactive, involving feedback and adjustment in real time. The ability to maintain and repair communication is an essential part of communicative competence, especially in a second language.

## 3. Functions of Language

Jakobson (1960) and Halliday (1978) provide complementary frameworks for understanding the functions of language in context. While Jakobson identified six core functions based on the components of the communication act, namely referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalinguistic and poetic; Halliday proposed a model rooted in social interaction, particularly influential in educational contexts.

Halliday's meta-functional theory outlines three broad categories: the ideational function, representing experience; the interpersonal function, enacting social roles and relationships; and the textual function, organising discourse coherently. From these, he derived seven language functions relevant to early language development: instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, imaginative and informative.

In the classroom, these functions help teachers analyse how learners use language, not only in structured tasks but in spontaneous interaction. For example, a learner using English to ask for clarification performs a heuristic function; when greeting classmates, they use the interactional function.

Understanding these functions encourages teachers to design tasks that activate a variety of communicative purposes, beyond vocabulary and grammar. Role-plays, debates, problem-solving tasks and storytelling are all examples of classroom activities that elicit multiple language functions and promote communicative competence.

## 4. Language in Use

The notion of language in use involves analysing how people choose linguistic forms based on context, purpose and interlocutor. Pragmatics, discourse analysis and sociolinguistics provide theoretical foundations for this area. According to Hymes (1974), knowing a language means knowing how to use it appropriately in different contexts.

Language use is governed by genre, register and style. Genre refers to the type of communicative event (e.g. a job interview, a complaint letter); register to the field, tenor and mode of discourse (Halliday, 1985); and style to the speaker's personal choices. In

the classroom, these dimensions can be taught through authentic materials, modelling, and contrastive analysis.

Rivers (1981) distinguished between two levels of language in use: manipulating linguistic elements to create grammatical meaning, and using language for social interaction. This distinction underpins communicative approaches to teaching, which view grammatical competence as one part of a broader set of abilities, including sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980).

In practice, language-in-use tasks might include completing a transaction in a simulated shop, writing a complaint email or participating in a classroom discussion. These tasks emphasise fluency, appropriacy and the dynamic nature of communication.

## 5. The Negotiation of Meaning

Negotiation of meaning refers to the process by which interlocutors resolve communication breakdowns and ensure mutual understanding. It is particularly relevant in second language acquisition, where learners often lack the full linguistic repertoire to express their ideas or understand others.

Michael Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983, 1996) asserts that negotiation of meaning facilitates acquisition by providing learners with modified input and feedback. This can happen through clarification requests ("Do you mean...?"), comprehension checks ("Do you understand?"), confirmation checks ("You said X, right?"), and recasts (reformulations of the learner's utterance).

Learners also use communication strategies to overcome gaps in knowledge. Tarone (1981) classified these as avoidance strategies (e.g. simplifying the message), compensatory strategies (e.g. paraphrasing, word coinage), and interactional strategies (e.g. asking for help).

Teaching negotiation of meaning involves raising awareness of these strategies and providing opportunities for learners to practise them. Tasks such as information gap activities, collaborative problem-solving and peer interaction are especially effective. Encouraging learners to tolerate ambiguity and use circumlocution can enhance their confidence and fluency.

Negotiation of meaning aligns closely with the CEFR's view of the language learner as a social agent who must mobilise resources to accomplish communicative goals. It also supports the development of learner autonomy, as students become more capable of managing their own communication.

## 6. Conclusion

This unit has examined how communication functions as the core of language teaching and learning. From understanding the basic components of communication to analysing the diverse functions of language and the complexities of its use, we have highlighted the theoretical and practical implications of a communicative approach in the EFL classroom.

Jakobson, Halliday and Hymes, among others, have laid the groundwork for understanding language as action and interaction. Their insights are reflected in modern curricula and in the CEFR's emphasis on communicative competence. Negotiation of meaning and the ability to use language appropriately in varied contexts are essential objectives in English language instruction.

Practically, this means designing classroom experiences that involve authentic communication, promote strategic use of language and reflect the functional diversity of language. Teachers must foster not only linguistic knowledge but also pragmatic awareness and interactional skills.

These principles are enshrined in the current Spanish education system through the Organic Law 3/2020, known as LOMLOE, and the Order ECD/1172/2022, comprising the Aragonese Curriculum for Secondary Education, which define language learning as a competence-based, inclusive and contextualised endeavour. By focusing on the communicative process, EFL teachers empower students to engage meaningfully with the world through language.