

# Reflections

This section presents contemporary commentary  
on articles previously published in *English Teaching Forum*.

# Teaching Communication: Back to the 60s

BY ADRIAN PALMER

How do I write a preface to an article I published in 1971? This is a question I struggled with because I was writing that article (in Ann Arbor, Michigan) in the 1960s, a period, to my mind, of some of the most memorable political, social, and educational changes of the century. Should I compare what I wrote to other articles of the era? Analyze its strengths and weaknesses? Update it “as best I can”? Praise it to the stars? I actually decided on none of the above because there was not enough space for most of them, and the last option seemed, perhaps, overly self-serving. So, what I’d like to do is to drift back to those inspiring times and reflect on some events that prompted me to write the article in the first place.

In the early 1960s, I taught ESL at the University of Michigan’s English Language Institute for several years using the Lado-Fries materials. I was initially a strong believer in the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) and fully believed that my students were learning to speak English under my tutelage. However, I then had the opportunity to *study* both Spanish and Thai at the University of Michigan via this very same method. Both of these courses were faithful to the ALM and expertly taught. Convinced that these ALM courses would help me learn to speak these languages, I embraced the instruction and was probably one of the best students in the two classes. However, my faith was shaken by two

events. One day, after one year of studying Spanish, I met some students from Venezuela with whom I wanted to communicate in Spanish. However, to my disappointment, not a single word of Spanish came to mind. I couldn’t interact with them in any way. The very few Spanish expressions that I did recall came directly out of the pattern practice drills and had nothing to do with what I wanted to say.

Thinking that this might have been an anomaly, I enrolled in an audio-lingual Thai course so that I could learn to speak Thai with a number of Thai friends I had made. Again, after one year in which I was the best student in the class, I found that I was unable to use Thai in any real-life communicative situation.

The following year, probably because I was such a good *student* of Thai (if not necessarily a speaker of the language), I was offered a job teaching first-year Thai at the University of Michigan. The way in which linguistics majors, such as me, taught “exotic” languages like Thai was to rely on our linguistic knowledge of the language that we had learned in class, our knowledge of language teaching that we had acquired as teachers of English in the English Language Institute, and our work with native speakers who led students through the requisite drills, which were generally decontextualized and noncommunicative.

Fortunately, before I started to teach Thai I came upon the *American University Association Thai Course*, written by J. Marvin Brown in Thailand, a course that attempted to address one of the issues with which I was concerned: namely, the need for contextualization. Language was presented and drilled in situations that were relevant to the students' target language use needs. However, a persistent voice in my head kept telling me that the expertly constructed pattern drills, no matter how situationally appropriate they might be, would still not give students the ability to actually come up with the language to communicate in real-life situations. Consequently, I began trying to address the second issue: the need for real communication in the classroom. I started providing short communication opportunities for the students, helping them draw upon their life experiences to say something they actually wanted to say and receive the kind of responses to their language use that they would get in real-life situations.

At this time, though I used the term “communicative” to characterize these activities, I had no sophisticated definition of the term. However, I did know that the classroom activities that I came up with did not feel anything like the classroom activities that I had experienced as a student. As luck would have it, after teaching and using Thai “communicatively” (i.e., I had to use Thai communicatively to interact with the students in the communicative activities), I found that I was actually able to use a bit of Thai to talk with my Thai friends in Ann Arbor. Moreover, I followed the lives of several of my students who ended up going to Thailand to conduct research, and I was encouraged to find their ability to use Thai quite remarkable. This was my first experience of success with going from classroom language to real-life language use, and I wrote up my account of the experience in the article reprinted below.

After I had written “Communication Practice vs. Pattern Practice,” I found that others such as Wilga Rivers (whom I actually met for the first time in Thailand), Christina Paulston, and Mary Bruder (with whom I had the privilege of working after I returned from my stint in Thailand), Mary Ann Christison (whom I ended up marrying!), and a host of others had come to essentially the same realization—that we had to provide opportunities for students to communicate in the classroom. Apparently the time was right for a paradigm shift from the ALM to Communicative Language Teaching. These authors and others who followed made distinctions I hadn't thought of and provided refined definitions of communicative language use, as well as a variety of types of communicative activities for language instruction. These definitions continue to provide me with a conceptual framework for understanding some of the many options that have emerged for communicative instruction in the language classroom.

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