

# Morpheme Analysis and the Communicative ELICOS Classroom

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*This paper suggests that undue focus is often given to some communicative aspects of Communicative Language Teaching in ELICOS classrooms at the expense of language teaching which cultivates an understanding of how the target language operates to enable communication to take place. It argues that an understanding of the behaviour of English morphemes is important for ELICOS students' development of communicative competence, and that such an understanding can effectively be fostered within a communicatively oriented classroom.*

## **Introduction**

Accepted practices in ESL teaching methodology seem to come and go more quickly than is the case with respect to the teaching of most other subjects. One reason for this almost certainly has to do with changing perspectives on both the nature of language and on the processes involved in language acquisition. An exception in this respect is probably Chomsky's enduring insight concerning humans' innate capacity for language acquisition - the 'language faculty' as 'a component of the mind/brain, part of the human biological endowment' (Chomsky 1988:60) - which (both implicitly and explicitly) provided a theoretical framework for the development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) practices.

While himself concerned primarily with language in its most idealised state, Chomsky in passing nonetheless raises some issues which are relevant to the ELICOS classroom. He points out, for example - with specific reference to Universal Grammar (see below) and L1 acquisition - that 'teaching should not be compared to filling a bottle with water but rather to helping a flower to grow in its own way' (1988:135); but with respect to adults' second language learning that, due to biological considerations, 'you simply cannot teach a language to an adult the way a child learns a language' (1988:179).

The CLT approach to ESL teaching has been succinctly glossed as 'a general approach to language teaching which concentrates on the use of language as communication rather than on the control of grammatical structures' (Odlin 1994:319). It is possible to argue, however, that in many ELICOS classrooms, teaching 'which concentrates on the use of language as communication' frequently all but eclipses teaching which focuses on 'the control of grammatical structures'. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly why this is the case, as the textbooks and readers of the kind many of today's practising ELICOS teachers would

have been exposed to during their initial training (e.g. Littlewood 1981, 1984; Stern 1983, etc; but cf. also texts such as Yalden 1987) were careful to note the relationship between linguistic competence and communicative competence.

For whatever reason, however, teaching focussing on meanings to be communicated, often at the expense of teaching which develops an awareness of how the communication of such meanings is made possible in the target language, now frequently tends to dominate intermediate- and advanced-level ELICOS classrooms. Perhaps it is time to re-examine some of Chomsky's theoretical insights with an eye to operationalising them within the ELICOS classroom.

### ***Universal Grammar and the importance of language analysis teaching techniques***

Chomsky (e.g. 1981, 1986), as part of what has become known as Universal Grammar, argues that languages are governed by universal 'principles' and that individual languages feature different settings for specific variables, or 'parameters'. Assuming we accept (and it is difficult not to) that processes of Universal Grammar are fundamental to L1 acquisition, as far as preferred ESL teaching methodologies go there are two clear options. If we believe that the learning of a second language is a different thing altogether from the acquisition of a first language (a 'weak' interpretation of UG theory) and so requires quite different learning/acquisition skills, we would probably favour teaching strategies which relied heavily on grammar-explanation techniques. If, on the other hand, we believe that UG operates as powerfully in learning a second language as it does in the acquisition of a first (a 'strong' interpretation of UG theory) we would favour teaching strategies focussing almost exclusively on functions and meanings to be communicated.

There is, however, a third alternative: that processes of Universal Grammar operate in the learning of a second language but not to the same extent as in the acquisition of a first. If we believe *this* to be the case (and it is difficult to rule the possibility out completely, especially given the recognition of analytic learning strategies amongst mature-age students; cf. Cook 1996:100-102), then teaching strategies involving *both* grammar-explanation techniques *and* communicative strategies would seem to be an optimum teaching method.

In fact, even accepting that the 'learning' of English as a second language and the 'learning' of other subjects are qualitatively quite different, it is sometimes very difficult to understand why the focus of ESL learners' studies - English itself - is so frequently marginalised. To manufacture a (perhaps extreme) analogy, it would be a very deficient engineering course indeed that did not (at least at some point) strip down a machine to show how it worked and an equally deficient biology course that did not (at some point) examine the physical structure of the plants or animals which form the focus of the study of biology. It is perhaps legitimate to argue, then, that any ELICOS course could be seen to be equally deficient if (at least at some point) it did not similarly give students the opportunity to examine the

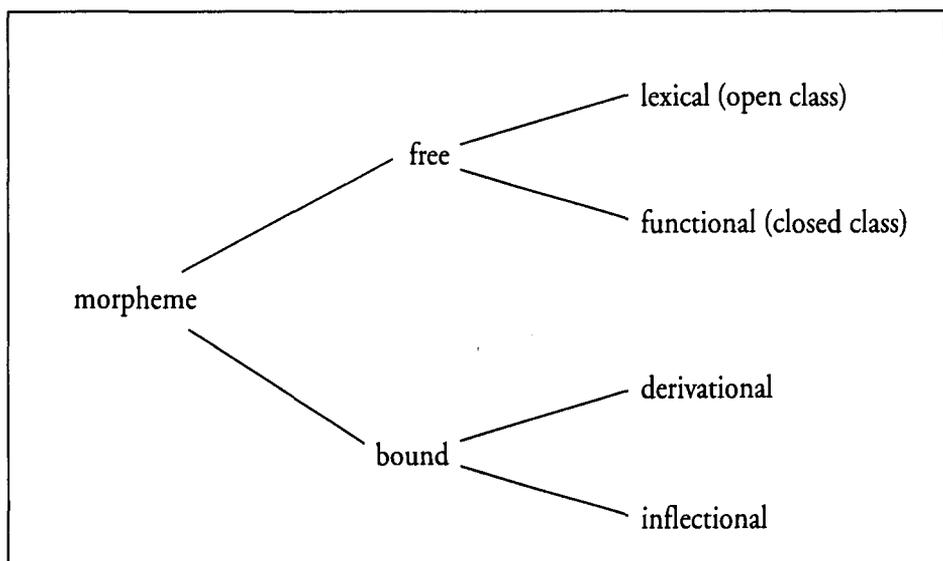
workings and structure of the subject they are studying - the English language - especially when such an approach can effectively be achieved within a communicative framework.

In this respect, an introduction to English morphology can be both stimulating and useful for ELICOS students studying in Australia. It is worth considering, for example, that while (say) a Japanese student would instantly recognise *karaoke* (a loan word in English) as having two interacting parts (*kara* and *oke*), that same student may well not recognise a corresponding relationship between *weather* and *wise* in a sentence such as 'Weatherwise, things are improving'.

### ***Morphemes and morphology***

We probably recall from our introductory linguistics courses that a morpheme can broadly be defined as a minimal grammatical unit that cannot be further analysed; and that morphology is essentially concerned with the structure of words and of word-formation processes. Morphology, then, addresses the issue of how competent speakers of English are able to recognise a two-syllable word such as *carrot* as a single morpheme (rather than the semantic sum of *car* plus *rot*) and single-syllable words such as *cars* and *rots* as each consisting of two morphemes.

The ability to make such judgements hinges on a knowledge of the morphological structure of English, and can be sketched as in Figure 1.



*Figure 1: Morpheme Classification*

As can be seen from Figure 1, morphemes in English can initially be classified as being either 'free' or 'bound'.

Free morphemes can be isolated (in their written forms by white spaces on the page) as 'words' in their own right, but can further be classified as being either 'lexical' morphemes or 'functional' morphemes. Lexical morphemes (an 'open class', so called because the language fairly readily accommodates new entries) include nouns, 'action' verbs, adjectives, adverbs and the like; and functional morphemes (a 'closed class' in that new entries are not readily accommodated) items such as modal verbs, conjunctions, prepositions and pronouns. (This distinction between closed and open classes, of course, accounts for why we are easily able to decode *gyre* and *gimble* as verbs, and *wabe* as a noun in a line of nonsense poetry such as 'Did gyre and gimble in the wabe' (from Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky') but would be able to make no sense of the line at all had similar nonsense words been substituted for *did*, *and*, *in*, and *the*.)

Bound morphemes, in contrast, must be attached to other morphemes. Bound morphemes are traditionally classified as being either 'derivational' or 'inflectional.' Derivational morphemes frequently change the class of a word: *sing* is a verb but becomes a noun when bound to *-er*, as in *singer*; *boy* is a noun but becomes an adjective when bound to *-ish*. (Although this is not always the case: *important* and *unimportant*, for example, are both adjectives but are converse in meaning.) Inflectional morphemes, on the other hand, serve to mark such features as possession ('s or s'), tense (*-ed*, *-ing*, etc.) and to distinguish between comparative (*-er*) and superlative (*-est*) forms of adjectives.

### ***Morphemes and linguistic competence***

A question that might legitimately be asked in relation to morpheme categorisation and sub-categorisation (particularly by teachers who choose consistently to privilege functional communication over grammatical accuracy) could well be: But of what possible practical use could an explicit understanding of morphemes be for ESL students?

The truthful answer to such a question is that for beginning students - and quite apart from the kinds of practical difficulties that would be inherent in attempting to foster such an understanding - probably very little. But for more advanced students, an awareness of the way morphemes function in English is definitely an important step in their development of communicative competence.

Although there are others, the most obvious reason that a knowledge of morphemes is so necessary for ELICOS learners is the frequency with which diverse morpheme groupings appear in everyday English and the rapidity with which they become common currency. Some of these may simply be borrowed from specialist registers, for example *detoxification* (from a scientific register) and *decriminalisation* (from a legal register); but both of these terms are now in wide circulation and are used by non-specialists on talkback radio and in letters to newspapers when addressing the issue of drugs in society. But others - such as *ecotourism* and *telemarketing* (perhaps even *talkback*, as in 'talkback radio', above; and certainly *weatherwise* and other noun plus *-wise* combinations such as *moneywise*) are

coinages that have yet to be fully codified. In either case, though, an ELICOS student (and particularly one without specialist EAP training) would need to have some knowledge of the function of morphemes such as *de-*, *-ation*, *tele-*, *-ism*, *eco-*, and *-ing* if he or she is to make sense of these (and other yet-to-appear) terms.

### ***Using morphemes as a focus for classroom activities***

The challenge for ELICOS teachers, then, is to provide a stimulating environment within which such knowledge can develop; and providing such an environment can be a lot more fun (and a lot less difficult) than it might sound.

Below are some suggestions for activities which have proved to be successful with intermediate and advanced students. They are essentially of the stand-alone variety and can easily be incorporated into the ELICOS syllabus as supplementary activities. Each activity should take about 15 to 30 minutes of class time, and some follow-up tasks are also suggested.

#### ***Activity #1***

Using an appropriate method (word cards are particularly suitable) provide the student groups with a word set such as:

*unwell unsound unzip unreal undo untie unsure unhook*

Ask the students to think specifically about how the prefix *un-* is functioning in each of the words. Tell them that there are two distinct *un* prefixes at work, and ask them (on the basis of *un* classification) to try to divide the words into two groups and to be prepared to explain their reasons (as part of a class plenary session) for making the decisions they do.

*Note:* Intermediate students will almost certainly recognise that one application of *un-*, in this word set, attaches to adjectives (e.g., *unwell*) and the other to verbs (e.g. *undo*). Advanced students might also distinguish the negating *un-* (as in *unwell*, *unsure* etc.) from the reversing *un-* (as in *undo*, *unhook* etc.) (If it doesn't come up during the discussion, it might also be worth pointing out that when an item can be used either as a noun or a verb (e.g. *tie*, *hook*) it functions as a verb when *un-* is prefixed - as in a coinage such as *ungarage* which, however non-standard, is meaningful in the context of an utterance such as 'I'll ungarage the car and drive you home'. This can provide a useful link to the follow-up activities.)

*Follow up:* Ask each group of students to make (without recourse to dictionaries) a list of twenty words beginning with *un* and use these as a starting point for discussions. If, for example, a word such as *uniform* (*uni* plus *form*) appears, this could provide a useful avenue to morphemes such as *mono-* (as in *monolingual* etc.), *bi-* (as in *biannual* etc.); while if bound morphemes surface in items such as *unused*, *unwashed*, *uneaten* etc., this could well generate a discussion focussing on why *unuse*, *unwash*, and *uneat* are not similarly accepted.

#### ***Activity #2***

Prepare lists (or use word cards) of a number of commonly occurring bound morphemes (e.g., *pre-*, *inter-*, *tele-*, *retro-*, *multi-*, *non-*, *in-*; *-ous*, *-ic*, *-oid*, *-ive*, *-ish*, *-en*, *-ise*, *-ate*, etc.). Give them to the student groups and ask them, by supplying roots and stems (and without

using a dictionary), to build as many words as possible within a given time. Perhaps points could be awarded to each group based on the number of bound morphemes used (e.g., *think* plus *-ing* might score fewer points than *unthinkingly*). More interesting, however, are activities based on the acceptability (or otherwise) of the words that appear. Which would be acceptable to an average English speaker? Which would not? Why?

*Follow up:* Using some of the more unusual morpheme combinations that occur, ask the student groups to interview homestay families, friends etc. to gauge their reactions to these combinations and report back to the class. Which 'words' were intelligible to the informants? Which were not? What reasons did the informants have for making the judgements they did?

### **Activity #3**

Using frequently occurring bound morphemes, coin a number of words (the more imaginative and outrageous the better) and write them on the board. Ask student groups to work out a definition for each.

Some possible examples here might be:

- (i) *antibeerology*
- (ii) *teleheroistic*
- (iii) *biscuitise*

- and possible definitions:

- (i) Noun: opposition to the study of beer
- (ii) Adj: quality of being brave from a distance
- (iii) Verb: to make into a biscuit or into something resembling a biscuit

*Follow up:* Ask the student groups (perhaps using cards similar to those for the above activity) to coin words of their own. If these words were ever to be codified, precisely how would they be defined in a dictionary?

## **Conclusion**

When Communicative Language Teaching ignores language teaching which demonstrates the structural organisation of the target language, much of its value in the ELICOS classroom can be lost.

There are two principal reasons for this: in the first place, while ELICOS students have ample opportunity to practise their communicative skills in the world outside the classroom (in fact, they rarely have any other option than to do just this), it is only within the classroom that they can reasonably expect to be offered explanations of how the target language functions; and in the second, linguistic competence (which includes an explicit understanding of how the target language functions) is an inseparable and integral component of communicative competence.

What has been argued in this paper, then, is that an understanding of morphological processes in English is a vital element in ELICOS students' development of linguistic (and, therefore, communicative) competence; and further, that such an understanding can easily be promoted in the ELICOS classroom by using classroom activities similar to those more often associated with teaching aimed at developing other aspects of communicative competence.

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