The Communicative Approach: The Reality

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Introduction

The communicative approach has been a popular method in language teaching. The shift in emphasis from developing linguistic competence to communicative competence has brought about sophisticated changes in syllabus design. There have also been drastic changes in teaching methods, with the monotonous drilling exercises being replaced by a wide variety of stimulating and innovative course materials. Pair work, jigsaw puzzles, information gap, simulation, group work and the like have become the catchword of the modern language teacher. However, many language teachers still view the approach with skepticism and apprehension. Learner-centredness and grammar teaching, for example, are the two areas that many language teachers find difficult to deal with in the implementation of the approach.

Learner-centredness

One of the major attractions of the communicative approach is its emphasis on learner-centredness (Murray, 1983). Learners within the communicative paradigm of language learning "are seen not so much as full-time linguistic objects at whom language teaching is aimed, but rather as human individuals whose personal dignity and integrity, and the complexity of whose ideas, thoughts, needs, and sentiments, should be respected" (Medgyes, 1986, p. 109). Clarke (1991) points out that the learner's affective, cognitive and linguistic needs should be considered when drawing up the content of a syllabus. His proposal of the Negotiated Syllabus is based on the principle that the learner should be allowed to take part fully in the selection of content materials, assessment procedures, styles, as well as method of learning and so on. Although the strong version of such a model may not seem viable, Clarke (1991) suggests that it is possible to introduce a negotiated element within the framework of an externally imposed syllabus, particularly in a communicative classroom in which there is much room for variation of activities to suit learners' needs.

Learners should be assigned an active and contributory role within the communicative framework of learning. Breen and Candlin (1980, p. 110) describe the learner as a negotiator whose learning is mediated "by the self, the learning process, and the

object of learning." In order to make teaching more relevant for learners, needs analyses should be conducted as a basis for syllabus design (Munby, 1978). Learners' schemata are also a valuable resource that can be capitalized on to enrich classroom experience (Clarke, 1991). The communicative approach requires learners to take greater initiative in their learning, becoming active agents in the process.

The Teaching of Grammar

There is always the tendency for language teachers to discard the teaching of grammar. However, it is not a necessity to totally omit grammar-oriented instruction. There are attempts to conduct the teaching of form through meaning-oriented activities. Dickens and Woods (1988) present tasks which contain grammatical problems to learners who are required to solve them cooperatively with their peers. Fotos and Ellis (1991) develop a task-based approach to facilitate communication about grammar in order to develop explicit knowledge of L2 grammar and provide opportunities for information-focused interaction. One of the advantages of this approach is that grammar tasks can be used in both a teacher-fronted lesson and small group activities which provide opportunities for interaction.

Thompson (1996) favours a more self-initiated approach on learning grammar through communicative activities. Instead of teachers going through grammar, students are encouraged to discover grammar by themselves. Thompson (1996) suggests a retrospective approach in which teachers first introduce the new language in a meaningful context to students who are then helped to understand the usage and meaning before their attention is drawn to analyzing the grammatical structures used to bring out the message, through discussing and working out rules under the guidance of the teacher.

Apart from conducting communicative activities, there are times when language input will need to be provided for students. Harmer (1983) distinguished two types of input: roughly-tuned input, referring to language at a level which is a little higher than that of the learner, and fine-tuned input, including language items specifically chosen for conscious learning. A language lesson may consist of three components: input (both fine-tuned and roughly-tuned), practice output, and communication output. Provision of input might involve formal instruction of pre-selected grammatical items. It might be less communicative in nature because a certain language has to be practised. Situating at the other end of the communicative continuum, the communication output consists of activities that focus on using language as a means of communication. Students are encouraged to use whatever language is available to express themselves in the process of developing communicative competence.

Littlewood (1981) deals with grammar in the communicative approach using precommunicative activities in which teachers provide opportunities for students to prac-

tise the new grammatical structure taught. The purpose of such activities is to equip students with the knowledge of the form without the pressure of applying it for communicative purposes. It is only when students have mastered the specific elements of grammar that communicative activities will be introduced to them. The focus is on integrating the precommunicative knowledge with existing language skills to bring about communication. This is similar to Hubbard, Jones, Thornton, and Wheeler's (1983) controlled and free practice: the former concentrating on giving intensive practice on the new structure, with the production of the language being heavily controlled by the teacher to minimize errors, and the latter emphasising the free production of the language quite independent of the teacher.

Case Studies

From interactions with the student teachers of English in the B. A. TESL programme in the authors' institution, the authors observed that the student teachers were not confident in conducting lessons based on the communicative approach. One of their major problems was that they felt that they were not learner-centred enough in their teaching because they had to conform to guidelines set for them by the school during their practicum and there was little room for variation both in teaching methods and materials. Another worry was that they thought that their teaching was not communicative because they had to do a great deal of teaching rather than carrying out activities and games when presenting grammatical structures.

The following case studies are taken from journal entries written by teachers-in-training during their practicum in the B. A. TESL programme. The extracts are quite representative of their mentality towards implementing the communicative approach. They generally had reservations on how teaching can be learner-centred when there were restrictions from schools, and how the teaching of grammar can be incorporated into the approach. The case studies are outlined below and analyses presented to clarify the misconceptions which are rather prevalent among newer practitioners of the communicative approach.

Case Analysis 1: Teacher-Dominated Lessons

The following journal entry was made by a teacher-in-training who taught a Form Two class (of 36 students) in an English-medium secondary school.

> Before the lesson, I was prepared to "accept" the fact that the students' standard was rather poor. However, I did not realise that the situation could be that bad. I tried to give instructions in English but the students complained that I spoke too fast and used too many difficult words. I reflected on myself, moderated the speech rate, and tried to use more simple English. However, I noticed that some of the

students were just too talkative. They did not pay attention at all and chatted with their neighbors. I felt so annoyed.

Originally, I did not intend to conduct a teacher-dominated lesson as a traditional teacher would do. I planned to elicit answers from the students. I also expected that they would read the text by themselves and do the exercise in the coursework. However, when I gave them time to read the text, many of them just kept on talking with one another. Their voices were even louder than mine! Some students slept throughout the lesson; I had to wake them up by knocking on their desks. I was totally upset and did not know what to do. I tried to encourage the students to guess the meaning of the difficult vocabulary items. But most of them did not respond to me. Even the smarter students did not answer my questions.

I was too nervous and frightened. As a result, I had to change my lesson into a teacher-dominated one. I gave the students less time to do the silent reading. I also told them to write answers to the comprehension questions. The students seemed to be able to follow my instructions at last. Most of them wrote correct answers on their books. However, the teacher-student interaction was very limited. I did most of the talking and I explained everything. It was not a communicative lesson.

Analysis

The above case highlights a typical phenomenon of a conventional language classroom: non-participation. This may be due to the students' generally low proficiency in English, their naughtiness, or both. Obviously, the teacher-in-training was very frustrated during and after the lesson. He was upset because the lesson was teacher-dominated. He did most of the talking and provided full explanations. The teacher-student interaction was limited.

The reaction of the teacher-in-training reveals some misconceptions about the communicative approach. He might believe that a communicative lesson is one in which students do everything fairly independent of the teacher and talk a lot in order to interact with others. In fact, a teacher-fronted lesson is acceptable when the class does not cooperate. If students are incapable of working independently, the teacher needs to provide more guidance and talk more before giving them a free hand. Where interaction is concerned, the students in this case were able to complete the comprehension exercise, indicating understanding and thus successful interaction between the students and the writer of the text.

The teacher-in-training might believe that a lesson is made communicative only if students have a larger share than the teacher in classroom interaction and that the role of the teacher is solely to facilitate students' free performance. Students indeed should participate in order to learn. Nevertheless, the teacher needs to adapt himself flexibly to the classroom situation by playing different roles: instructor, facilitator, advisor, consultant, and the like. He should first ensure that students understand and know how to work out the task before retreating to the role of a facilitator. In this case, teacher input is indispensable. In other words, the communicative nature of a lesson should not be strictly judged by the ratio of teacher talk and student talk in the lesson. Rather, it depends on the objective of the lesson and the real needs of the classroom. In the present case, despite the apparently teacher-dominated scenario, the lesson is learner-oriented in the sense that the teacher slowed down and used simple English in response to students' complaints. Such an act was clearly made to meet the learners' needs. Additionally, the lesson was effective in view of students' comprehension of instruction and completion of task toward the latter part of the session.

Case Analysis 2: Presenting a Grammar Structure

The following two journal entries were made by two different teachers-in-training who taught at Form Two level. One of them (Teacher-in-training A) taught in an English-medium school, while the other (Teacher-in-Training B) taught in a Chinese-medium one. They described how they taught the use of gerunds after prepositions to a class of forty.

> **By Teacher-in-training A:** The students got bored by my teacher-centred presentation of the use of prepositions. Unfortunately, I was not able to think of any new and interesting ideas or any games and activities to motivate them. If lecturing is not the best and most appropriate way, then in what other ways should we present a grammar structure to such a big class? Notice that some of the grammar forms such as "interested in" or "good at" should be memorized. If students hear these expressions a few more times as pointed out by the I believe they will remember them better. However, students may not be aware of these expressions if the teacher does not highlight them.

> **By Teacher-in-training B**: Today, I had two single lessons. I planned to have a presentation on the use of gerund after preposition in the first period and practice and consolidation in the second period. When I entered the classroom, the students were all very tired. Perhaps they were bored by the previous lesson. But I was confident of waking them up because I had brought photos of some famous people including Roberto Baggio

(a famous soccer player), Michael Chang (a famous tennis player), Aaron Kwok (a famous singer) and Jackie Chan (a famous film star).

Obviously, when I showed them the photos, they were all awakened and eager to have a close look at them. Actually, I showed them the photos because I wanted to motivate them and, what's more, to elicit sentences like "Roberto Baggio is good at playing football," "Aaron Kowk is good at singing and dancing," "Michael Chang succeeded in winning the last tennis tournament" and "Jacky Chan succeeded in getting an award for his film."

I drew some simple pictures to give more examples. The students seemed to enjoy my ugly drawings because they laughed a lot. But I did not mind so long as I achieved my purpose—drawing their attention. I tried to explain the structure a few more times but, as predicted, quite a number of students could not catch up. So I used Cantonese to make a summary of the target structure. But I still insist on using English to teach English, unless it is really necessary to use the mother tongue. I was happy that the students could finally identify the "verb," "adjective," "preposition," and "verb-ing" in the various examples. Most of them could give me suitable verbs and adjectives to describe each picture and construct sentences with the target structure.

As there were a few minutes left after my presentation, I started chatting with the students. In the previous lessons, I did not have the chance to talk with them. Thus, this was the first time we chatted. They were all very interested in my height and brothers' and sisters' height. So funny!

Analysis

The above case started with the worries of Teacher-in-training A when he had to present grammar structures. He was bothered by the idea of "lecturing," giving a great deal of teacher-talk input in the presentation. Yet he could not think of a better and more communicative way of presenting these grammar structures. The reaction of this teacher-in-training unveils a dual myth about the communicative approach: Teacher talk is inherently boring and only student-oriented activities or games promote communication.

In fact, teacher input is essential in the presentation stage of a lesson. Providing a great deal of teacher input does not necessarily mean being boring or teacher-centred, and consequently making the lesson not communicative. In fact, both Teacher-in-training A and Teacher-in-training B were in charge of the class as they gave "lengthy" teacher talk. Yet Teacher B's presentation was more effective than Teacher A's in that

Teacher B brought to the classroom pictures of people his students knew, thus sustaining their interest. He made sentences which involved these famous names and the target construction. His attempts at using realia (i.e. pictures) and appealing to students' personal knowledge (i.e., that of some public figures) enlivened the presentation. It created an interesting, meaningful, and relevant context for the introduction of the target structure. The students responded enthusiastically to the teacher's questions. This is evidence of the interactive nature of the presentation.

While Teacher-in-training B presented and explained the target structures to the students, the students were at the same time expected to remember these structures well. Teacher B's explanation was contextualized, making it easier to process and retain the information about the target structure.

Towards the end of the lesson, Teacher-in-training B had a chat with the class. Although the few minutes' talk was not directly related to the focus of the lesson, it was an opportunity to interact with students, build up a close relationship, and practically fill up the remaining time gap of the session. Most important of all, such a conversation was essentially a language practice. Like the earlier interactive presentation, this can be taken as an evidence of effective communication.

It should be clear in these remarks that the communicative approach does not require lots of student talk and games, which, though, are some of the major activities in a communicative classroom. The goals of a communicative classroom can, and sometimes have to, be achieved by engaging in lots of teacher talk, particularly in the initial (presentation) stages of a lesson. If interesting materials are used in the teacher talk, comprehension and teacher-student interaction may result.

Conclusions

It is true that at the macro-level of teaching, there are always broad guidelines that need to be conformed to within a particular educational context. However, at the micro-level of teaching in the classroom, there are plenty of opportunities for learner-centredness because the types of activities that can be used in the communicative approach are numerous. Adopting a learner-centred approach does not merely mean to allow students to choose randomly whatever they want to learn in class.

Within each lesson, it is possible to sustain students' interest by using stimulating teaching methods such as singing songs and playing games to facilitate learning. Teacher-in-training B in Case Analysis 2 made use of 'ugly' drawings to make students laugh in order to arouse their motivation. Using students' background knowledge on famous singers and football players to attract their attention was also a powerful technique to enhance learning. The use of realia such as photographs about these famous

people who were familiar to students to introduce a particular sentence structure was an attempt to achieve learner-centredness in his teaching.

Knowing that students had difficulty in understanding English, the Teacher-in-training in Case Analysis 1 adjusted the speed of the conversation to allow students to follow the instructions better. Teacher-in-training B in Case Analysis 2 even switched briefly to Cantonese, which was the students' mother tongue, to explain the target structure to ensure maximum understanding of what was taught.

It may be seen that the teachers-in-training were constantly making changes in their teaching methods and coming up with appropriate strategies to help students learn more effectively. These attempts were evidence of the teachers-in-training being learner-centred in their teaching. Hence, learner-centredness encompasses a broader concept to refer to all efforts made in the adjustments and modifications in teaching to meet the needs of the students rather than merely to allow students to select whatever they wish to learn.

With respect to the teaching of grammar, the teachers-in-training generally thought that it had to be done with plenty of games and pair work activities in order to be communicative. As a matter of fact, grammar can be taught quite effectively through formal instruction. Littlewood's (1981) pre-communicative activities and Hubbard *et al.'s* (1983) controlled practice are examples of this. Since it is sometimes necessary to formally provide students with language input, especially in the provision of fine-tuned input, it is inevitable that a significant amount of teacher talk will result. There is no reason why "lecturing" cannot be part of a communicative lesson.

Furthermore, the teaching of grammar can have a great deal of variations in teaching methods. The task-based approach (Fotos & Ellis, 1991) to integrate grammar-focused and meaning-oriented activities can be conducted both in teacher-fronted and small-group settings. Thompson's (1996) retrospective approach in teaching grammar is also appealing. Hence, "lecturing" is not the only way to present grammar, as understood by Teacher-in-training A in Case Analysis 2, although it is one of the most popular ways to do it. In a communicative lesson, it is still possible to incorporate traditional stages of presentation, practice and production.

Many student teachers complain that learner-centredness can only be achieved in conditions where the teacher-student ratio is low and where there is no effort to include the formal teaching of grammar in the syllabus. This is true if learner-centredness has the narrow definition of allowing students to choose what they wish to learn and teaching solely through activities. With the arguments raised in the preceding discussion, it is seen that learner-centredness in large classes and the formal teaching of grammar in a communicative lesson might still be possible but, to do it effectively, teachers must be

flexible in their teaching and sensitive to the needs of students. In dealing with grammar, they need to learn new skills to integrate the teaching of form and meaning in order to make learning more interesting. At the same time, traditional teacher explanation can also be exploited quite effectively in the teaching of grammar.

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