The Organic Approach To Communication: Natural Language For The ESL Classroom
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This article is about self-directed learning in the language classroom and more specifically, in the English as a second language classroom. This article is about mainstreaming English as a second language (ESL) students. This article is about students becoming active participants in society. This article is about the teacher relinquishing the role of "fact giver and know-it-all" and, instead, becoming a coach (Sizer, 1983) in the classroom. This article is about group learning. This article is about trusting students to come up with their own responses and activities. This article is about fostering natural communication and student talk in the language classroom.

Above all, the article is about me and my experiences in using what is called the "Organic Approach to Communication" in the English as second language classroom (Chandler, 1984). The word *organic* implies growing, multiplying by dividing (as in a cell) and further dividing, natural growth as in natural conversation. I am interested in providing a natural conversation environment in the classroom for the language student. And this is about what has worked for me.

Problem Solving Role
for Student

The Organic Approach (also referred to as the Total Participation Approach to ESL because of its focus on intention on the part of the participant) emphasizes problem solving roles for students--in a group

setting, in order to feed one another. The group thus becomes a self-sufficient and complete "organ." It is an outgrowth of learning strategies of the SPECTRA School of Design in Flint Hill, VA, a weekend school founded by a practicing architect who sought to contribute, using his own profession, towards bridging the gap between academia and the world of work (Chandler, 1983). At SPECTRA students of all ages utilize a hands-on approach to learning and communicating, with the experience revolving around the planning and constructing of a group building project. The project becomes the purpose and the reason to communicate.

Creation of a Project
from Nothing
by the Student

Whether applied directly to the ESL classroom, or to the training of teachers for such a classroom, the same principle applies--students working together on a group project which is originally conceived of by themselves, not by the teacher. Herein lies the key to motivation--the creation of the project "from nothing," by the students with group agreement on not only the project but on working together toward its completion. To accomplish their goal, students "create from nothing" activities which naturally require speaking, reading, and writing. The end product is not as important as the process itself and the unpredictable, natural communication which occurs along the way is the essence of the approach.

As an example, during one weekend course, students (both native speakers of English and non-native) decided to build a raft for an existing pond. It took approximately one third of the weekend to arrive at a group decision to do the raft, but in the process of deciding, of discussing, of debating, of agreeing, of disagreeing, the communication was vibrant. Students knew they had to base their decision for choice of project on what was at hand--not only existing expertise, but building materials, equipment, etc. that were on the premises. Thus students quickly assessed their own and each other's skills. As they found themselves in need of additional skills, students sought out the teacher or other resources to obtain those skills, in sharp contrast to the teacher attempting the nearly impossible task of assessing the needs of students.

Class Materials=
What is at Hand

That no outside materials are required in the Organic Approach, not even special textbooks, is an important factor for teachers as well as administrators. Communication is what language learning is all about, and in this approach it begins with what is at hand. It is highly humanistic, with students expressing their feelings about what is happening at the moment, in a non-competitive, cooperative environment. It allows for the natural sharing of different backgrounds and skills, and with its focus on the project decided upon and carried out by all of the students, it is effective for the multi-level as well as the mainstream classroom.

Language Used to Get
Something Done

Once students have accepted responsibility for project choice, they become deeply involved in communicating for a purpose, to accompish what has become their goal. Given this responsibility, students begin where they are, not where someone else (the teacher) thinks they might be. They also recognize the contribution of each within the group, a concept which could carry over to the greater society and their own active participation or involvement in it (Dewey, 1916). By not "giving" them answers, by not giving them ideas for the project, by not telling them how to accomplish it, the teacher does "give" students space to gain confidence in initiating and carrying through and in their own ability to do so. This is not to say that the teacher's role is diminished; on the contrary, all of his skills, knowledge, and experience are utilized in providing a very strict structure within which the student creates.

Teacher Training Application

A second example of this approach utilized in an ESL setting but this time in teacher training, occurred in a more traditional school setting, a Georgetown University graduate ESL/EFL methods course which I taught in the summer of 1984. Participants decided as a group to produce, over the length of the course, a manual on current ESL methodology. The group was no more homogeneous than what you find in your own classrooms. There were elementary, high school, adult eductation, and university teachers (from both here and abroad). Most had been, or were currently, practicing teachers in ESL/EFL or bilingual education, but one was an undergraduate and one taught at a school for the deaf, using sign language. Four of the fifteen had non-native English speaking origins. One, a Korean, had difficulty being understood but possessed the highest writing skills of the entire class. Although most were graduate students, there

was a tremendous range of writing skills and of background in ESL methods or materials.

Multi-level Mainstreaming

With this varied background, teacher participants had an opportunity to experience for themselves a multi-level classroom as they worked together on a group project and contributed to one another's growth. They were constantly communicating in a problem-solving, creative environment, not only through agreement but also, perhaps even more meaningfully, through disagreement. When they disagreed on a class policy suggestion, this opened the door for more information, for they were allowed to discuss options and alternatives and they came up with an alternative syllabus to accomplish their goal.

So far, the most resistance to this humanistic, group-oriented approach has come, not from the younger student population or from the ESL adult population, but from teacher participants who were accustomed to working alone (individually) and/or who respond very positively to a highly teacher-directed classroom. This particular population seems to see the teacher as a fact giver or information giver, in contrast to a coach (Sizer, 1984). The student-directed classroom that Della-Dora and Blanchard speak of in Moving Toward Self-Directed Learning (ASCD 1979) appears to be the most frustrating to them, at least in the beginning.

Self-Directed Learning

Della-Dora and Blanchard (1979:4) speak of eleven classroom behaviors which can be observed in a student who is making significant progress toward self-directed learning. These behaviors themselves have communicative implications (reading, writing, speaking) for the English as a second language classroom; students wanting to take increased responsibility for their own learning; willing and capable of learning from and with others; participating in diagnosing, prescribing, and evaluating their own progress; developing individual and group plans for achieving their goals; being capable of reporting what they have learned in a variety of ways; knowing when and how to ask for help or directions from others.

The Student Creates:
The Teacher Resists Overplanning

Those who follow Paulo Freire's philosophy will quickly recognize the role of the teacher in the Organic Approach to Communication as one of learning along with students, onen of providing not only the structure but the space to invent, learn, create, and do. The most exciting phenomena for me in any of these experiences has been the originality springing from the participants themselves. In the beginning I had difficulty departing from my traditional "teacher role." I even wanted to hand out a list of projects from which to choose. Accustomed to "over-planning" myself, I constantly had to refrain from assuming that role. The temptation still exists but to a much lesser degree. (To nurture my own ego, I sometimes let myself plan and plan and plan on paper the night before and then throw away all the planning, less I force my own creativity on my students. This very act, without exception, has been especially nurturing to my own growth, for I watch with excitement the next day as students create entirely differenct solutions to their problems than what I had provided would be "right."

The Organic Approach to Communication is intended to create an environment in which the student may realize his potential by his own imagination and effort. The teacher provides the space; the student creates his world within that space. Communication, here, is used as a tool to create.

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