EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS ADJUSTED TO CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEMANDS: THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract: *This paper is an argument for the recommended approach to foreign language acquisition in the current socio-economic context. It unfolds a short presentation of the communicative approach to second language teaching. A basic principle underlying all communicative approaches is the fact that learners must learn not only to make grammatically correct statements, but they also have to develop other skills to apply the language effectively in either studying or working environments. A comparison between traditional and communicative approaches is then drawn to demonstrate the suitability of the proposed approach, followed by exemplifications of communicative activities. The roles of teachers and learners are also presented, as well as the part played by factors such as motivation, materials and environment in the classroom management involved in communicative language teaching.*

Keywords: *communicative approach, second language teaching, classroom management, studying or working environments*
JEL Classification: *I21, I25, I29*

Introduction

The socio-economic context we are confronted with is continually changing and, as a natural consequence, the expectations of the working environment follow suit. In the light of this, this article goes through the characteristics of the communicative approach which appears to be the best method of preparation so that potential employees should become assets to their companies. As D.B

Edwards (2019) notices, community participation varies from one type of society to another, from one mindset to another. Nevertheless, the recommended approach to second language acquisition with a view to applying it to real life situations has proved to be the communicative one, as clearly surfaces from its comparison to the traditional one.

1. General Considerations

1.1 Communicative Competence

The American linguist Noam Chomsky (1965) made a distinction very similar to the one made by Ferdinand de Saussure (between 'langue' and 'parole') as early as 1916. Chomsky's distinction was between 'competence'- that is a speaker's intuitive knowledge of rules (grammatical rules) of his native language- and 'performance'– what he actually produces by applying those rules (the actual use of language in concrete situations). Theories of communicative competence imply that teachers must do more than just supply the learners with a number of language structures to manipulate.

1.2. Communicative theory and practice

A great deal has been written in the last few years about the theory and practice of the communicative language teaching. However, a basic principle underlying all communicative approaches is that learners must learn not only to make grammatically correct, propositional statements about the experiential world, but must also develop the ability to use language to get things done. These two aspects of language are captured in the distinction between the propositional and illocutionary (or functional) function of language (Widdowson 2001). It was recognised that being able to create grammatically correct structures in language did not necessarily enable the learner to use the language to carry out various real real-world tasks.

According to Howatt, there is a strong and a weak version of communicative language teaching:

> The weak version which has become more or less standard practice in the last ten years, stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider programme of language teaching. (Howatt 1984, 279). The strong version of communicative language teaching, however, sees language ability as being developed through activities which actually simulate target performance. In other words, class

time should be spent not on language drills or controlled practice leading to wards communicative language use, but in activities which require learners to do in class what they will have to do outside.

Table 1. survey of communicative language teaching the distinction between traditional and communicative approaches:

	Traditional approaches	*Communicative approaches*
1. Focus in learning	Focus is on the language as a structured system of grammatical patterns	Focus is on communication.
2. How language items are selected?	This is done on linguistic criteria alone.	This is done on the basis of what language items the learner needs to know in order to get things done.
3. How language items are sequenced?	This is determined on linguistic grounds.	This is determined on other grounds, with the emphasis on content, meaning and interest.
4. Degree of coverage:	The aim is to cover the 'whole picture' of language structure by systematic linear progression.	The aim is to cover, in any particular phase, only what the learner needs and sees as important.
5. View of language:	A language is seen as a unified entity with fixed grammatical patterns and a core of basic words.	The variety of language is accepted and seen as determined by the character of particular communicative contexts.
6. Type of language used:	Tends to be formal and bookish.	Genuine everyday language is emphasised.
7. What is regarded as a criterion of success:	Aim is to have students produce formally correct sentences.	Aim is to have students communicative effectively and in a manner appropriate to the context they are working in.
8. Which language skills are emphasised:	Reading and writing.	Spoken interactions are regarded as at least as important as reading and writing.
9. Teacher/student roles	Tends to be teacher-centred.	Is student-centred.
10. Attitude to errors:	Incorrect utterances are seen as deviations from the norms of standard grammar.	Partially correct and incomplete utterances are seen as such rather than just 'wrong'.
11. Similarity/Dissimilarity to natural language learning	Reverses the natural language learning process by concentrating on the form of utterances rather than on the content.	Resembles the natural language learning process in that the content of the utterances is emphasised rather than the form.

Source: (Nunan 2001), processed by author

2. Communicative activities

2.1 General considerations

In *Communicative Language Teaching – An Introduction*, William Littlewood distinguishes between pre-communicative and communicative activities.

By the former, he means that the learner is not engaged in activities where his main purpose is to communicate meanings effectively to a partner, but only to produce certain language forms in an acceptable way.

> Through pre-communicative activities, the teacher isolates specific elements of knowledge or skill which compose communicative ability, and provides the learner with opportunities to practise them separately. The learners are thus being trained on the part-skills of communication rather than practising the total skill to be acquired. (…)
> These aim above all to provide learners with a fluent command of the linguistic system, without actually requiring them to use this system for communicative purposes. Accordingly, the learners' main purpose is to produce language which is acceptable (i.e. sufficiently accurate or appropriate) rather than to communicate meanings effectively. (Littlewood 1981, p. 85).

In such a case, students are generally prompted to use these forms by the teacher's instructions (such as in a drill). As an alternative, the teacher may design the activity so as to provide an opportunity for learners to produce language that they have recently learned (for example through open or cued dialogues). 'accordingly, the learner's focus was on *language forms to be learnt* than on *meanings to be communicated'*. (Littlewood 1981, p. 16).

These activities can be subcategorised as 'quasi-communicative', because they take account of communicative as well as structural facts about language, in contrast with purely structural activities such as performing mechanical drills or learning verb paradigms.

Nevertheless, this balance of focus between language forms and meanings is a matter of degree, not an all-or-nothing affair.

As far as communicative activities are concerned, their purpose is to allow the learners to use the linguistic repertoire they have learnt in order to communicate specific meanings for specific purposes. (Littlewood, 1981, p. 17).

> *In* communicative *activities, the learner has to activate and integrate his pre-communicative knowledge and skills, in order to use them for the communication of meanings. He is therefore now engaged in practising the total skill of communication.* (Littlewood, 1981, p. 86).

Here again, Littlewood distinguishes two subcategories, depending on the degree of importance attached to social as well as functional meaning.

> In what we have called 'functional communicative', the learner is placed in a situation where he must perform a task by communicating as best he can, with whatever resources available. The criterion for success is practical: how effectively the task is performed. In 'social communicative activities', on the other hand, the learner is also encouraged to take account of the social context in which communication takes place. He is required to go beyond what is necessary for simply 'getting meanings across', in order to develop greater social acceptability in the language he uses. In the first instance, this may simply mean greater grammatical accuracy; later, it may also involve producing speech which is socially appropriate to specific situations and relationships. (Littlewood 1981, p. 86).

2.2 Exemplifications of communicative activities in Littlewood

Reconstructing story-sequences

A picture-strip story (without dialogue) is cut up into its separate pictures. One picture is handed to each member of a group. Without seeing each other's pictures, the learners in the group must decide on the original sequence and reconstruct the story.

There are two levels of language in this activity. The first is the language needed for description and narration. The teacher can exercise some control at this level, through the content of the pictures he selects. The second level is the language needed for discussion. This level is less predictable. However, the teacher can still exercise some control over the general level of difficulty, since this will depend in part on how clearly the pictures signal their original sequence. For example, if one picture shows the sun rising and the others show it overhead, this offers the learners obvious clues to their original sequence. On the other hand, learners may only be able to reconstruct the sequence of some humorous cartoon stories if they understand a subtle point of humour.

The last type of functional communication activity dispenses completely with the need to share information. Learners now have access to all the relevant facts. The stimulus for communication comes from the need to discuss and evaluate these facts, in pairs or groups, in order to solve a problem or reach a decision.

Problem-solving activities need not be based only on everyday situations that arise inside or outside the classroom. The teacher may also present more unusual situations, in order to stimulate the learners' ingenuity.

The communicative activities in chapter 4 of the book follow a general pattern of development. As we progress through the chapter:

– The interaction becomes less controlled by artificial conventions. The activities come to bear greater resemblance to communication situations that the learners might encounter outside the classroom.
– The meanings that learners need to express become less predictable. The teacher therefore has less chance of equipping them with the specific language items that they will need. Also, the learners must draw on a wider range of skills and strategies in order to get new meanings across.
– There is a gradual increase in the range of communicative functions that is likely to occur. Learners also need to develop greater skills for managing the interaction, e.g. signalling disagreement or interrupting without offence.
– There is increasing opportunity for learners to express their own individuality in discussion.

In other words, learners must gradually become more creative with the language they have acquired. This means that in general, as learners become more competent, the teacher will use a greater proportion of the later activity-types. This is not a firm rule, however. First, as we have seen, the level of difficulty can be adjusted *within* each activity-type. Second, the teacher may sometimes place learners in a situation that makes especially heavy demands on their communicative skills, in order to compel them to explore the full potential of their repertoire and develop strategies to compensate for their weaknesses.

Conversation or discussion sessions (as one of the most important communicative activities)

The conversation session is sometimes regarded as a source of relief from more 'serious' language work. This should not prevent us from recognising the important functions it can perform in helping to develop communicative ability. For example:

– It opens up a rich stimulus for communicative interaction, namely the varied experiences, interests and opinions of the learners. These may be complemented by written or visual materials which bring further aspects of the outside world into the classroom.
– It thus provides a context for a wide range of communicative functions and domains of meaning. in addition, learners must practice the skills

required for managing longer sessions of social interaction, such as introducing a new topic, turn-taking or sustaining the conversation through difficult periods.

– It provides learners with opportunities to express their own personality and experience through the foreign language. It also gives them the valuable experience in using the language as a means of handling their own social relationships.

Teachers sometimes allow the teacher-learner relationship to dominate the conversation session so strongly that it produces a typical pedagogical form of interaction: the teacher always initiates, the learner only responds. This greatly limits the communicative functions that learners need to use and the interactional skills they need to practise. If the conversation session is to perform its proper role as social interaction activity, the teacher must perform as 'co-communicator' rather than 'director'. He may guide and stimulate, but not take away the learners' responsibility as equal participants in the interaction. He must also restrain any urge to intervene at every hesitation or false start. These are inevitable when learners are seeking ways of expressing meanings which they may never before have encountered in the foreign language.

The dangers of excessive teacher domination may often be reduced by introducing more informal seating arrangements. When the teacher faces the whole class, his position reinforces his authority as 'knower'. A more informal layout, for example in a circle, can help greatly to reinforce the learners' equality as co-communicators. The teacher may also decide to divide a class into independent groups, as in the problem –solving activities. He must then provide materials or instructions that are capable of sustaining the interaction without his presence. For example, he may require each group to formulate its opinions on a number of concrete points, before reporting back to the whole class for a period of 'plenary' discussion.

3. The teacher's role in communicative activities

Littlewood (1981) assumes that the teacher has no direct role in communication:

> – If learners find themselves unable to cope with the demands of a situation, the teacher can offer advice or provide necessary language items if pupils cannot agree on any point, he can resolve the disagreement. In other words, he is available as a source of guidance and help. His presence in this capacity may be an important psychological support for many learners, especially for those who are slow to develop independence.

> – While learners are performing, the teacher can monitor their strengths and weaknesses. Even though he may not intervene at the time, he can use weaknesses as signs of learning needs which he must cater for later, probably through more controlled, pre-communicative activities, such as those discussed in chapter 2. In this way, he can maintain a constant link between pre-communicative and communicative activities in the course, each type reinforcing and providing input to the other.
> – There may be occasions when the teacher decides to exercise a more immediate influence over the languages used. Most obviously, he may need to discourage learners from resorting to their mother tongue in moments of difficulty. He may also decide that a particular error is so important that he must correct it at once, to prevent it from becoming fixed in the learners' speech. (Littlewood 1981, p. 19).
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> An initial step towards enabling richer patterns of communication to develop is to reduce the conventions that restrict the co-operation (and therefore the interaction) between learners. (Littlewood 1981, p. 29).

4. The learner's role in communicative activities

In many of the communicative activities, the teacher creates a situation and sets an activity in motion, but it is the learners themselves who are responsible for conducting the interaction to its conclusion. Often, there will be several groups or pairs performing simultaneously, without the teacher's continuous supervision. For many groups of learners, the responsibility will be unfamiliar at first too sudden a transition to undirected activity may therefore create difficulties and tensions which could undermine their confidence, both in themselves and in the teaching methods being used. The teacher needs to bear this factor in mind and be prepared to wean learners gradually from dependence on his own control (to create a bridge between controlled and uncontrolled language use).

Many of the activities in the fourth section of *Communicative Language teaching* provide the teacher with a convenient bridge between pre-communicative and communicative language use: learners are engaged in communicating meanings for a purpose, but they are not yet made to dispense entirely with the 'structural crutches ' provided by the teacher. Looking at it from the other direction: learners can be made to practise specific linguistic forms, but move one step further in their ability to use these forms for communicative purposes.

An important price paid for these advantages is that the interaction is still tightly controlled by artificial conventions and consists largely of rigid question-and-answer sequences.

5. Motivation

The learners' ultimate objective is to take part in communication with others. Their motivation to learn is more likely to be sustained if they can see how their classroom learning is related to this objective and helps them to achieve it with increasing success.

Also, most learners' prior conception of language is as a means of communication rather than as a structural system. Their learning is more likely to make sense to them if it can build on this conception rather than contradict it.

Language learning takes place inside the learner and, as teachers know to their frequent frustration, many aspects of it are beyond their pedagogical control.

Communicative activity provides opportunities for positive personal relationships to develop among learners and between learners and teacher. These relationships can help to 'humanise' the classroom and to create an environment that supports the individual in his effort to learn.

6. The classroom as a learning environment

The classroom is often called an artificial environment for learning and using a foreign language. If we take as our yardstick for what is 'real' the situations outside the classroom for which learners are being prepared, this is undoubtedly the case. However, we should not forget that the classroom is also a real social context in its own right, where learners and teacher enter into equally real social relationships with each other. It is true that language teaching aims to equip learners for different contexts.

It is undeniable, though, that the artificiality component cannot be fully dismissed within the educational context as formal assessment is still part of the process. As Phyllis Blumberg (2017) notices, educational development goes hand in hand with evaluation, which may place some limitations on communicative approaches to a certain extent.

As Tessa Woodward sensibly emphasizes, both internal and external variables in class structures determine a significant amount of the input employed in setting up teaching activities that are bound to benefit the members of the socio-economic community that is targeted by the foreign language courses in general and in particular. (Woodward 2001, pp. 212-241).

A parallel can be drawn to D.B Edwards' account of the way community influences the strengths and weaknesses of approaching the learning process communicatively, with a view to developing the skills required by various working environments. (Edwards 2019).

7. Using the foreign language for classroom management

7.1 'Teaching English through English'. What exactly does it mean?

Teaching English through English means speaking and using English in the classroom as often as possible (for example when organising teaching activities or chatting to the students socially). In other words, it means establishing English as the main language of communication between the students and the teacher; the students must know that it does not matter if they make mistakes when they are talking, or if they fail to understand every word the teacher says. They must recognise that if they want to be able to use their English at the end of their course. At the early stages it may be difficult both for the teacher and for the students, so a lot of praise and encouragement will be needed and correction of mistakes should be kept to a minimum or the students will lose confidence and give up. Ideally, correction should occur during the presentation and practice stages of the lesson, if they are getting the main teaching point wrong.

Jane Willis (1993), for instance, claims that the main aim of language learning is to *communicate* in that language and if you understand what a student says despite his mistakes, then they have communicated successfully. Encouraged by their success, they will try again, gain more practice, and their mistakes will gradually disappear. Students will not want to practise if they are afraid of making mistakes which result in interruption and corrections then they may never learn how to communicate in English.

She also gives suggestions about how to grade the English items in the classroom environment,

> You can make it easier for your elementary students if you introduce your classroom language slowly. With students who have learnt some English before, it is a good idea to try at first to keep mainly to the vocabulary and structures they have already covered in their previous work. When they have got used to hearing and understanding these, and perhaps using some of them for themselves, you can introduce other useful phrases. You can also introduce items that you will be teaching them soon, so that they will be familiar with the 'new' item when you come to teach it. (Willis 1993, p. xiv).

7.2 Language for classroom management used in the communicative approach

This approach involves exploiting of language learning not only the planned activities, but also the classroom management that revolves around them. The lesson has to be begun and ended, individual activities have to be organised, practical problems arise, and so on. This provides a rich source of communicative needs in the foreign language classroom.

Ruth Wajnryb uses the term *meta-language* to express the language a teacher uses to allow the various classroom processes to happen, that is, the language of organising the classroom. This includes the teacher's explanations, response to questions, instructions, giving of praise, correction, collection of homework, etc.

> While a general aim of the classroom is to minimise teacher talking time (TTT) so as to encourage student talking time (STT), metalanguage itself is an important source of learning because it is genuinely communicative. For example, when a teacher praises a student or asks for another one to be quiet, or sets up a task, the language used is genuinely contextualised, purposeful and communicative, and therefore potentially rich source of input. (Wajnryb, 1992, p. 51).

Many teachers use the learners' mother tongue in this aspect of their work. This may often be a necessary decision, in the interests of organising the lessons clearly and efficiently. However, it also means sacrificing valuable opportunities for well-motivated foreign language use. In addition, it tends to devalue the foreign language as a vehicle for communication: learners see it as allocated to communicatively non-essential domains such as drills or dialogue practice, while the mother tongue remains the appropriate medium for discussing matters of immediate importance. Many learners are likely to remain unconvinced by our attempts to make them accept the foreign language as an effective means of satisfying their communicative needs, if we abandon it ourselves as soon as such needs arise in the immediate classroom situation.

Conclusion

Typical demands in most competitive contemporary working environments do not allow much time for acquiring a new language of communication in case the mother tongue is not the one used at organizational level. It is therefore important to provide learners as soon as possible with the language needed for routine classroom affairs, in order to establish the foreign language

as the medium for organising learning activities. By applying this, second language acquisition time decreases, leading to an alert and efficient pace at which the learning process unfolds. Thus, current requirements seem to be most proficiently fulfilled by employing communicative techniques in the modern process of language acquisition. Bearing on Woodward's claim, we are many times prone to regarding the variables of our classes as constraints in achieving the planning of an efficient lesson. Taking these factors into proper consideration, the key to the communicative approach is to turn all these variables to the advantage of the students themselves with a view to training them properly for their future workplaces.

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