Can the Communicative Approach be Appropriate to Language Teaching?

Annabel Bhamani Kajornboon
Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

Abstract

This paper is a reflective piece. Most ELT teachers are very devoted to their students, but most of the time they find themselves weary from teaching. Most teachers want to help and to improve their students' English; however, they are not sure how to do it. Hence, this paper explores some of the possibilities through the communicative approach. It makes an attempt to explain what this approach is and how it can be applied to the classroom; it looks both at its advantages and disadvantages.

The communicative approach has several meanings to ELT teachers. My first impression of the communicative approach is just communication. That is, let the students talk freely. Teachers do not have to make any corrections. This idea startled me. Then a friend of mine told me the reason for not making corrections. She said that the aim of this approach is to encourage students to talk and to ignore their errors or mistakes. As teachers, we have to encourage our students not to be afraid of English and we have to build up their confidence. Hence, corrections should not be made.

My first impression of this approach not only stunned me but also confused me. This is because students can make many terrible errors; the idea of permitting students to communicate without corrections shocked me. It became more frightening when I was not able to understand what the students were saying to each other or to me. In contrast, they appeared to understand each other, as they were laughing and having a good time conversing during the role-play or group work.

I thought that if this type of teaching continued, it would not be beneficial to either the students or to me. Once the students have left the classroom they could only be conversing with each other and understanding each other. Hence, I would have only succeeded in teaching conversation among classroom peers. This could be a new course with a new number entitled--speaking and being understood only among peers. It would not have achieved the goal of communication or the ability to communicate with foreigners. This would mean that my students would not be able to communicate in the "real world," or outside the classroom.

This is why I was not ready to accept or use the communicative approach in my classes. However, after hearing more about the communicative approach and how helpful it could be to English language teaching, I decided to do more research.

What I learned about the communicative approach is quite different from what I had originally thought it was. Communicative language teaching is not the teaching of specific techniques or procedures, such as role-play, pair or group work. I was using a specific technique. The students were talking, but they were not communicating. They were making sentences. The sentences were usually correct in form but the sentences could not be used in different situations, such as making a request, asking for directions, narrating or describing an event and so on. The sentences had no value outside the classroom because the students were not communicating. Hedge stated (2000) "The communicative movement in ELT encompasses all modes of language use. It has, as one of its bases, a concept of what it means to know a language and to be able to put that knowledge to use in communicating with people in a variety of settings and situations" (p. 45).

Broadly speaking, the communicative approach can be divided into four categories. They include linguistic competence, pragmatic or sociolinlguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Let's take a closer look at each of them.

Linguistic or grammatical competence considers the correct use of rules. It is the mastery of the language code. This includes spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical structure, sentence structure and linguistic semantics. Accuracy

and form are its primary objectives. Classroom teaching seeks to promote linguistic competence.

Example 1:
Pot found in garden near Big Ben.

Most of my students upon hearing or reading this sentence would think that pot is a cooking utensil not something that people smoke too get "high." The students may know that Big Ben is a huge clock in London and think that people have been cooking near Big Ben. On the contrary, the British police had discovered illegal plants in the garden. The sentence is grammatically correct. As mentioned earlier, students need to have an understanding of linguistic competence. The above example is the lack of understanding of the vocabulary or lexical knowledge.

Next comes pragmatic competence, sometimes known as illocutionary intent. This composes of the knowledge to select appropriate spoken or written messages in the social context in which they are produced. Appropriate social conventions need to be known, such as status, role, attitude, purpose, or degree of formality.

Example 2:
a. *Would you please open the window?*
b. *Please open the window.*
c. *Open the window!*

If one of my students said the last sentence to me, I would be offended. It would be considered impolite. Sentences *a*, *b* and *c* are well-formed sentences. However, sentence *c* is inappropriate if speaking to an elder. "Thus, one element of pragmatic competence is knowing how to perform a particular function or express an intention clearly" (Hedge, 2000, p. 49).

Illocutionary intent can be demonstrated by the example below (Widdowson, 1986, p. 223):

Example 3:

The door is open.

The sentence can perform a number of different illocutionary acts:

- Invitation: *The door is open. Come on in.*
- Dismissal: *The door is open. Clear off and never darken it again.*
- Request for action: *The door is open. Close it, please.*

Therefore, the above sentence "...would rely on the receiver's cooperation in matching interpretation with intention" (Widdowson, 1986, p. 223).

Third, there is discourse competence. It refers to   "...the ability to combine meanings with unified and acceptable spoken or written texts in different genres" (Maley, 1986, p. 88). Widdowson's (1978, p. 26) example:

Example 4:

Speaker A: What did the rain do?

Speaker B: The crops were destroyed by the rain.

The reply is linguistically correct, but in discourse competence it "does not fit." The sentence, "It destroyed the crops," however, would fit.

Example 5:

Teacher: What did the hurricane do?
Students' responses:
A: The hurricane uprooted the trees.
B: The trees were uprooted.
C: Hundreds of trees were uprooted by the hurricane.
D: It uprooted hundreds of trees.

The responses are grammatically correct and acceptable. However, Students *B* and *C* added new information. As Widdowson (1978) pointed out, it is normally the case in discourse that shared information (about the hurricane) precedes new information (about its effects). "Student *D* uses a reference item, 'It', as a cohesive device to relate the answer to the question and this fits in with the normal pattern of oral discourse. In this way, a unified spoken text is achieved" (Hedge, 2000, p. 51).

The last type is strategic competence. For example, when students are unable to express themselves, they search for another word or means of expression to do so. This may include verbal or non-verbal strategies. Students could use either to help them communicate.

Example 6:

Student : *Every summer we go for a for...,you know, erm... fjorton dagar Um...fourteen days...a for...I mean...*

Native speaker: *Oh, a fortnight.*

Student: *Yes, a fortnight. We go for a fortnight ...*

As Hedge (2000, p. 53) explains "The Swedish student only half remembers the word 'fortnight' and doesn't know the word 'cottage.' In the first instance of 'fortnight' she uses the Swedish word and then gives a literal translation of it, 'fourteen days.' She continues with the paraphrase 'two weeks.' At the same time, she invites cooperation from her listener through the implicit appeal for help in 'you know' and 'I mean.'"

Example 7:

Mom and daughter who provided clothes for 'Titanic' were slain.

Negotiation also has an important part to play in communicative language teaching. Students can negotiate the meaning of the word "slain." Through the process of negotiation, students can ask each other what the word slain means. One of the students who know the meaning of the word could say that the mother and daughter were found dead or killed. Negotiations had taken place among the students. In addition, students can also collaborate; they work together. When interaction takes place among students, they can be less dependent upon their teachers.

Hence, the communicative approach pays attention not only to form but also to usage. This contributes both to fluency and accuracy. Activities then can be developed through the language rather than simply exercises on the language.

Communicative Approach: Factors to be Considered

Before ELT teachers can teach communicatively, first and foremost, they need to know or to understand what communicative teaching is. My understanding of communicative teaching is not what I had thought it to be. This changed when I did more reading about it. Without this knowledge, teachers would not know how, when and where to begin. Teachers need to realize that in communicative language teaching, linguistic competence is an integral part of communicative competence. Once this has been established, teachers can look at the other aspects. Also another important consideration for teachers is the nature of "input" and "intake." Dr. Kieran O'Laughlin (personal communication, July 1, 2000) from the University of Melbourne in a lecture earlier this year made this distinction. Teachers may have given

students sufficient input in class but students may not take in what they have been taught. They are not ready to intake the input. Teachers may be upset at their students at the end of the lesson and not comprehend why the students have not understood anything. In other words, the students have received the input but they have not digested it or they have not been able to take in the information. Students are most likely to acquire the information at their own pace. Similarly, a child, when learning a language, will acquire a language in stages. Hence, students intake the information when they are ready. Teachers need to realize that input is necessary. However, "how" and "what" input to give students are not yet clear.

Students make both "errors" and "mistakes." It is a part of learning a language. Mistakes can occur and when pointed out students can recognize their mistakes. For example:

Mistake/Error: *The horse run fast. It did not goes past the barn.*

Correction: *The horse runs fast. It did not go past the barn.*

The former sentence is a mistake. Most students at this level know that the verb in third person singular in the present simple tense requires an "-s." However, the latter sentence is most likely an error. Students are applying the first rule to the second sentence while in the second sentence "go" does not require an "-s" or "-es" because of the verb "do." The correction of mistakes and errors is another area of which teachers should be aware, as this is a valuable learning tool.

In addition, students are individuals; they are different. Their mood and emotions vary and so do the teachers. Most students are of mixed ability—some students'

knowledge is better than others. They have different aptitudes and motivation. They also use different learning styles and learning strategies. These are some factors that teachers ought to consider when designing or preparing to teach a communicative lesson.

Then, there is the role of the teachers; teachers have many roles to play. Most of the time, ELT teachers are the authoritative persons and do most of the talking. However, teachers are becoming more aware that there are other roles to play. The other roles include guides or facilitators. Students do the work while teachers can guide their students and facilitate learning to take place. Teachers can also serve as helpers when students ask or need assistance (Hedge, 2000, p. 66). In other words, teachers "...will need to set up tasks and activities in which the learners play the major overt role. It is then their job to monitor these activities and to modify and adjust them as time goes by (Maley,1986, p. 89).

Therefore, when teachers are aware of these roles, they can select the ones that are most appropriate for their lesson.

Besides the teachers' roles, the students' roles also changes. Students cannot remain passive. They will need to become more involved in the activities and are given more responsibilities both inside and outside the classroom.

Next, the atmosphere of the classroom, its size and environment are factors teachers ought to consider when preparing a communicative lesson. As ELT teachers at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI), the faculties or departments provide different class sizes, shapes and desks. This depends upon the faculties and the lay out of each building.

Some classes have microphones, white boards, overhead projectors, movable desks, and air-conditioners. Other classes may be located next to the main street without either an air-conditioner or a microphone. These are some examples of the physical constraints in classrooms. Furthermore, the number of students can vary from 25 to 75 and teachers may not be able to control the number of students in the classroom. So these are additional factors for teachers to take into account while preparing for a communicative lesson.

The material is another important aspect to communicative teaching. The material ought to cover something that the students can do in the target language. For example, if it is a writing class, students can write an application letter to a university asking for an application form. If it is a listening class, students can listen to an interview of a famous vocalist. As for a reading class, students can read an application or a visa form. Thus, material is important, as Johnson and Morrow (1981, p. 61) stated "...a crucial feature of a communicative method will be that it operates with stretches of language above the sentence level, and operates with real language in real situations." Communicative method is concerned with the "whole" rather than "parts" of the language. The lesson should end with students "...being able to see clearly that they can do something which they could not do at the beginning--and that the "something" is communicatively useful (Johnson & Morrow 1981, p. 61).

Materials used could be authentic or commercial if they fit into the concept of communicative language teaching. Most teachers may not have the time to prepare materials. In the course that I teach, a

commercial textbook is used and supplements are provided. There is a bank of material to use. Most of the sheets provided concern linguistic competence. Care has to be given in selection of the material so that it would be appropriate to communicative teaching. In other words, the material can help broaden the student's horizons—culturally as well as socially.

There is a certain amount of risk-taking involved in learning a language. Thai students may be afraid to make mistakes; therefore, teachers can assure their students that making a mistake or an error is all right. It is part of the learning process. I think that communicative language teaching is useful. As Widdowson (1978, p. 19) stated, "Knowing a language is often taken to mean having a knowledge of correct usage but this knowledge is of little utility on its own: it has to be complemented by a knowledge of appropriate use." I agree with his statement. I think that both form and use are important. As an ELT teacher, I would like to see my students able to use the language that they have learned also in a communicative way.

The Author

Associate Professor Annabel Bhamani Kajornboon has been teaching English at CULI for over 15 years. She has a wide variety of interests. In ELT her interest is using video in Language teaching. During her study in English and Scotland she received training in this area.

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