

Communicative Approach : Its Features and Application to a Writing Activity

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Abstract

Over the past ten years in Japan, the goal of students in EFL classes has changed from accuracy to fluency and effectiveness. This paper throws light on the reason why the goal has changed and makes clear the features of communicative activities based on the concept of the Communicative Approach to help teachers design their own syllabus and materials. In addition, the author has applied the communicative approach to a writing activity, considering that in this computer age there are new forms of written communication, such as E-mail including exchanging messages and business at home.

Introduction

Until about twenty years ago, the goal of students in speaking skill in English as a foreign language (EFL) was accuracy. But this has changed into fluency and effectiveness in communication. Why has the goal changed? Because educators and researchers have recognized that real communication requires of students not only grammatical or linguistic competence but also three other kinds of competence: sociolinguistic competence which is the ability to produce and understand appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts; discourse competence which is the ability to keep up a coherent conversation with another speaker or reader; and strategic competence which is the skill of conversation, for example, how to open and close the conversation. This idea reflects present day classroom activities. Rather than memorization, repetition, and uncontextualized drills, communicative activities whose aims are the conveyance of information are focused on in classroom activities.

In actual English language teaching (ELT), however, "communicative approach" does not have one single, definite, or evident method, because syllabus designs and teaching materials are decided according to the circumstances and the goal of classes, the needs of learners, learners'

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motivation, and so on. With this reason, the fundamental idea of “communicative approach” is sometimes misunderstood by teachers or is rather obscure.

The aim of this paper is to reconfirm the concept of Communicative Approach and its features to help teachers design their own syllabus and materials, looking back at the historical transition to Communicative Approach. In the last section, the author will describe one attempt at the application of Communicative Approach to a writing activity for university-level students. The reason for this application of Communicative Approach to writing activities is that communication through writing, such as E-mail including exchanging messages and business at home, is likely to be required more and more along with speaking skill, owing to the popularization of computers today.

Transition to the Communicative Approach and its Concept

The movement toward the Communicative Approach could be said to have begun around 1970 (Howatt 273). However, the groundwork of this way of language teaching had been laid in the early sixties at such places as the Nuffield Foundation and the Schools Council. The Nuffield Foundation was the scene of the first program attempting to combine a linguistically organized syllabus with activity methods in classroom. The Schools Council sketched out a sociolinguistic model of language teaching and foreshadowed many of the activity-based techniques later associated with the Communicative Approach. After this pioneering by the Nuffield Foundation and the Schools Council, a new program, the Programme in Linguistics and English Teaching, was being explored. This program looked both into linguistics and into the practical relevance of linguistic studies for classroom materials. Particularly in this program, M. A. K. Halliday's *Cohesion in English* was influential in the designing of teaching materials for advanced learners and for university-level students of English. Halliday's idea is that cohesion consists in relating elements of grammatical structure to their use in discourse.

In 1978, H. G. Widdowson summed up many of the influential ideas of the seventies including Halliday's idea in a book, *Teaching Language as Communication*. He pointed out that foreign students did not have the ability to actually use the language, and to understand its use whether in spoken or written mode. And he developed a distinction between the cohesion of texts as linguistic objects and the coherence of discourse as communication. He also proposed a different type of teaching syllabus in which a learner would have to use English for his particular purposes. For example, some learners would need to communicate in academic situations making use of such acts as discussion, classification, definition and so on. For other learners it would be necessary to communicate in more ordinary situations such as greetings, exchanging information, and so on. The problem of this communicative language teaching is to improve syllabus design, to prepare teaching materials, and to plan other forms of classroom activity in order to meet possible or general purposes that learners have for using English as a second language. For the solution of this problem, he built his course round texts specifically constructed to illustrate

selected communicative acts in use.

After Widdowson's literacy model of discourse, other writers in the applied discourse analysis field, such as Candlin and Sinclair, have adopted an interactive, oracy model of discourse. Thus, the focus shifts away from the language and towards the user, emphasizing the effectiveness with which the communication takes place and the skills which the user can muster in order to maintain and promote it. As a result, the central subject in communicative language teaching has responded to enthusiasm in adopting the communicative activity, which brought learners into closer contact with real English. The main concern of activities is conveying meaningful information and experience in the uses of language.

Most learners or users wanted to improve their practical skill, especially in spoken English. To improve their practical skills, new materials were produced to get learners' interest and attention, containing "information-gap" activities, role-plays, simulations, language games of communication, pair-work activities, authentic listening and reading materials and so on. It did not take much time for these new ideas to spread in countries where EFL (English as a Foreign language) was in demand including Japan, especially in adult teaching, which typically takes place in colleges of further education and in the growing private sector.

At the same time that the Communicative Approach has been becoming a powerful new idea in ELT (English language teaching), the Notional/Functional Approach derived from Van Ek's *Threshold Level* had an influence on designing syllabus and in teaching materials. The Notional/Functional Approach provided a way of exploiting the situational dialogues inherited from the past, by demonstrating that the same function (for example, 'asking for things') occurred in many different situations. The value of "functions" was recognized immediately as a means of organizing classroom activities and materials. By the late seventies, most new courses in English had incorporated a functional dimension to their syllabus design.

Thus, in a broad sense it could be said that the Communicative Approach has adopted the two ideas: the idea of Oral Approach which is derived from M. A. K. Halliday and H.G. Widdowson and has influenced classroom activities, and the idea of the Notional/Functional Approach which has influenced teaching materials. Still now it remains the mainstream in ELT.

Features of the Communicative Approach

The primary goal of many methods based on Aural-Oral Approach, Comprehension Approach, Natural Approach and Cognitive Code Approach, such as the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, Community Language Learning, the Total Physical Response Method, the Natural Method and so on, is to communicate using the target language; this goal is the same as that of Communicative Approach. However, most of these methods emphasize the acquisition of linguistic structures or vocabulary. Although it is certain that structures and vocabulary are important, in the Communicative Approach knowing the rules of language usage may be even more important. Knowing the rules of language usage is related to

functions, such as arguing, persuading, or promising, within a social context. That is, a speaker needs to choose expressions based not only on his intention and the level of his emotion but also on when, where, and who he is talking to. Besides knowing the rules of language usage, negotiating or interaction between speakers and listeners, or readers and writers is another requisite factor in Communicative Approach, because true communication is purposeful. To accomplish his purpose, the sender (speaker or writer) needs to negotiate meaning to apply his knowledge and to interact to make the meaning clear. Through negotiating meaning and interacting, feedback is given to the sender as to whether the receiver understands what the sender has said or not. Then, if necessary, the speaker or writer can revise what he has said and try to communicate in line with his intended meaning.

The following are the key words or prerequisites to design such communicative activities.

(1) Information gap

Information gap exists when a speaker or a listener knows something that a partner does not. For example, when a teacher asks students “What is this? ” holding a pen in his hand and students answer, “It is a pen,” there is no communication because both the teacher and the students know the thing the teacher has in his hand. This exchange is not really communicative.

(2) Choice

There is not only one way to say something in real communication. The speaker has a choice of what and how he will say it. If students are controlled in what they say just in order to practice some forms and content, real communication does not occur.

(3) Feedback

True communication is purposeful. In order to evaluate whether a speaker’s purpose has been achieved or not, an opportunity of feedback needs to be provided for the speaker. Conventional question and answer drill or practice does not promote the assessment of whether the speaker’s question is promptly understood or not.

(4) “Authentic” materials

“Authentic” materials play an important role in communicative activities because it is desirable to give students an opportunity to develop strategies to use language as it is actually used by native speakers. Controlled materials according to students’ level limit the students’ spontaneous utterance.

(5) Meet students’ needs

When students feel an interest and a necessity in communicating, their spontaneous utterance will be spurred. To prepare such a circumstance in a class, teachers should recognize the students’ needs and interests.

(6) Student-centered classroom

At the same time as students’ needs are being fulfilled in class activities, a student-centered circumstance is also essential to promote real communication. Communicators

should be students. They learn to communicate by communicating through negotiating and interacting.

The key words and prerequisites mentioned above do not exist in isolation. They are intricately interrelated to each other or to one another. Because the teachers' role is to be managers who prepare a circumstance or establish situations to promote communication, while students' role is to be active communicators, the teacher should combine the features of the Communicative Approach or the prerequisites mentioned above to design his own class considering the circumstance or condition of his class.

Application of Communicative Approach to writing activities

Communicative Approach works not only in oral communicative activities but also in written ones as long as interaction occurs between a writer and a reader. The difference between oral and written is that the writer does not receive feedback from the reader immediately in writing activities. Based on these features of writing activities and of the communicative activities mentioned above, we may consider how to carry on writing activities with a Communicative Approach.

A student, for example, can write for himself something like a diary or journal to help a reader understand about the writer. When the writer receives the reply or reaction from the reader, he/she can get a feedback and revise it if necessary. This is interaction and negotiation between the writer and the reader. A topic is chosen according to a student's interest. This leads to the student-centered activity. Besides, the writer can choose his own way of expression, how he will write, because in this activity the emphasis is not on learning a particular structure, grammatical points, or vocabulary. If a writer writes on a topic which the reader does not know yet, such a writing would attract the reader. This is the merit of information gap. Since the reader is indispensable in this activity, the writer should write with the reader's perspective in mind.

The following is an illustration of one such activity named "exchange journal." In this activity, some journal notebooks are handed out in each group consisting of about four students in a class at the university-level. One of the students in each group writes at home about himself or a topic that he is interested in now, then hands it over to the next student in the group at the next class. The next student who receives the journal reads it and replies to it at home. Then, he writes his journal on the same notebook and hands it back to the first student at the next class. The first student, then, has an opportunity to read the reply of the second student and can feedback what he wrote and see whether what he wrote had been understood by the second student or not, and hands it over to the third student. In this way, the journal notebook will be back to the first person in a month and this circulation can be continued if time allows. If teachers give some comments on each journal, it will further encourage the students to write.

Rules of this activity are (1) not to correct local errors, which are errors that affect single elements in a sentence (for example, errors in the use of inflections or grammatical functors) in writing, (2) to write one page at least, and (3) to reply to the journal with more than half a page. Local errors in writing are tolerated, because the main concern in this activity is to convey the content of the idea or information. If the meaning is not clear or understandable, a reader can ask about it in his reply. This gives the writer the opportunity to feedback his own writing. The obligation of writing one page at least and replying with more than half a page is to get students to deepen and accelerate their idea and to think of effective organization.

This "journal exchange" activity is just one example which the author designed. Many other activities can be considered according to the circumstances of the class.

Conclusion

As a first step to improve English as a means of communication for Japanese students, the Communicative Approach has been successful. It is unquestionable that the Communicative Approach is very effective in the promotion of students' ability, especially speaking skill, to convey information or to encourage their output in classes. However, this does not mean that they may speak 'Japanized' English. It is desirable that they speak and write proper English at the proper places. Overemphasis on communication must make students ignore their sense of respect, affinity, and courtesy in the classes. So, as a second step structural or grammatical practices should be incorporated in these communicative activities. Grammatical knowledge is also important to convey the information properly, especially in communication through writing. This does not mean that traditional grammar teaching isolated from actual communication should be revived. The point of teaching grammar in the Communicative Approach is that the students should learn how to use their grammatical knowledge in their real communication, not only in isolated sentences. I hope that teachers will teach grammar inductively on the basis of communicative activities in their classes.

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