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Sometimes I Can’t Help Myself

Communicative Language Teaching in the Primary Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Although the ‘communicative approach’ has been at the forefront of second language teaching for the last 25 years or so, we have constantly been refining our understanding of what the term actually means. Discussions about communicative language teaching have invariably led to debate about the respective roles of teachers and learners in the ‘communicative classroom’ and about the roles played by grammar and error correction. There have been many opinions about how the communicative approach should translate into classroom practice. Here are just a few examples:

• Johnson (1982) and Prabhu (1987) claim that learning is promoted by activities in which learners are required to carry out meaningful tasks.

• For Richards and Rodgers (1986), learning is promoted by activities that involve communication.

• Nunan (1987) discusses classroom-based research that found that while the lessons he observed ostensibly focused on functional language use, he found little genuine communication either between the teacher and learners or amongst the learners themselves.

• Schulz’s (1996) study with tertiary teachers teaching a range of languages found that their views about aspects of communicative language teaching, such as grammar teaching or error correction, varied widely — a finding replicated in Mangubhai et al. (1998) who looked at primary language teachers.

• Thompson (1996) discusses some of the misconceptions about communicative language teaching, the role of grammar, the misconception that communicative language teaching relates to teaching speaking only, or at a greater level of specificity, that ‘pair work’ means ‘role play’.

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These findings ought not to surprise us as we begin to look at the complex interplay of factors that determine how teachers teach languages. As Woods (1996: 184) puts it:

...the teacher's beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge play an important role in how the teacher interprets events relating to teaching (both in preparation for the teaching and in the classroom), and thus affect the teaching decisions that are ultimately made.

The classroom context is always a dynamic one that is constantly changing. It is a context where decisions about what to teach and how to teach it are often made quite spontaneously. If teachers are to teach flexibly they must make constant adjustments to what they have already planned. Underpinning all of this, of course, are their beliefs and assumptions about how learning takes place and the knowledge on which these beliefs and assumptions are based.

There are some things that we, as educators, may not be able to change easily, but we can all develop our knowledge base so that our beliefs and assumptions about language teaching grow and approximate more and more the current state of understanding about just what the communicative approach is. Table 1 lists some of the current characteristics of the approach. These have been gleaned from various sources, e.g. Whitley (1993), Savignon (1991), and Nunan (1987).

To what extent does this table summarise the approach of language teachers today who believe that they are 'teaching communicatively'? The project described below gathered information about the beliefs and assumptions of a small group of primary language teachers. It is hoped that this information might act as a basis for future inservice initiatives designed to develop a more comprehensive understanding about communicative language teaching.

THE PROJECT

This paper deals with part of a project set up to investigate the assumptions and beliefs about communicative language teaching of a group of primary language teachers in the Darling Downs Region of Queensland. The project was conducted in three phases:

1. A questionnaire was sent out to all primary language teachers in the region (the response rate was 78%).

2. Six randomly-chosen teachers (Teachers A–F) were asked if they would agree to be interviewed.
3. The same six teachers were asked if we might videotape one of their lessons. They were asked to present 'their best communicative language lesson' for this purpose.

The six teachers taught six different languages and came from urban as well as rural schools, and State as well as private schools. Of the six, two were native speakers of the language they taught. They were all experienced teachers ranging in age from their late twenties to late fifties. This paper reports on the second phase only of the project, i.e. the interview phase.

- There is an emphasis on language use rather than language knowledge.
- Attention is given to fluency and appropriateness as well as to structural correctness. Interpersonal rather than intrapersonal interactions are promoted.
- Group and pair work are effective learning modes. These modes are most effectively employed in small classes.
- Authentic materials are used.
- For the development of communicative ability there needs to be an integration of form-focused exercises with meaning-focused experience.
- There is an emphasis on tasks that encourage the negotiation of meaning between learners and between learners and teachers with the goal of making input comprehensible to participants.
- The teacher oscillates between the roles of facilitator and director/transmitter.
- The teacher sets an environment that is interactive and not excessively formal.
- There is a commitment to using the target language as a medium of classroom communication.
- The teaching method is learner-centred.
- The teaching method is geared not only to competence but also to the expectations of those participating in the learning process.
- Learners seem to focus best on grammar when it relates to their communicative needs and experiences.
- There is an emphasis on successful communication, especially that which involves risk-taking.
- There is an emphasis on learner autonomy and choice of language, topic, and so on.
- A communicative classroom seeks to promote interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning — implying that learners are active.
- Context is important in interpreting the meaning of a text (oral or written).

Table 1. Some of the characteristics of communicative language teaching (based on Nunan 1987, Savignon 1991 and Whitley 1993).
Teachers' understanding of the communicative approach

One of the interview questions asked teachers about their understanding of the term ‘communicative language teaching’. Their responses indicated that they all believed they were teaching communicatively when they used activities that required learners (and the teacher) to use the target language. Some also mentioned that they tried to use the target language when giving instructions, while two suggested that teaching communicatively meant taking the language out of the textbook and giving it meaning so that learners could see how it functioned. One teacher claimed that in the primary context communicative language teaching meant teaching practical survival skills and focusing on listening and speaking. In fact, all six teachers saw the communicative approach as focusing at primary level on listening and speaking skills, but some also set their learners written activities in order to make language learning more like other subjects and thus ‘lend it legitimacy’ as a school subject.

Group and pair work

The interview data suggest that the teachers interviewed hold the view that pair and group work provide greater opportunities for using the target language in the classroom. But they also mention a number of constraints that prevent such grouping, viz. class size, the culture of the school, the level of discipline within the school, and the classroom management style of the regular classroom teacher. Each of these factors can have either an inhibiting or a facilitative effect upon the teacher’s ability to organise learning in smaller groups:

[I] teach differently at different schools. I wouldn’t survive otherwise... Some schools are disciplined; some [that have a] ‘small school feel’ make it easier to manage. Then it is easier to do more things with the children. (Teacher C)

Discipline problems are seen to be exacerbated by group work or games. To counter this, some of the teachers also pursue a more traditional approach in which all learners are involved in the same activity, thus giving the teacher greater control:

[It’s] extremely difficult in some schools. [My approach is] much less communicative... more writing... directed, structural things... fewer games — class won’t settle down with games... children get too excited. (Teacher C)

[Games, board games, etc.] are good in small groups. I tend to use them only in the smaller groups. Again, it is because of [the difficulty of] control. (Teacher A)

The size of the class can also be a factor influencing whether one does group work or not because it can sometimes lead to undisciplined behav-
Primary language teachers in Queensland tend to be itinerant. They are thus limited to a resource collection that has to be not only portable but also suited to a variety of multilevel class groupings. Nor are they able to do any prior preparation in the classroom itself when the room is occupied by the regular classroom teacher. In such circumstances time spent on organising the classroom and later returning it to its former setting can be perceived as wasteful. (The usual weekly time allocation for language programs in Queensland is 90 minutes, which translates into two 45-minute or three 30-minute lessons per week.) Teacher A remarked that it would be wonderful if a permanent space were made available for the language teacher so that the classroom could be set up prior to the lesson.

**Error correction and accuracy**

While the data from the questionnaire suggested that teachers believed that they should correct all errors from the very beginning of language learning, the interview data show a more pragmatic approach to error correction. Teachers make judgements about the seriousness of an error:

> Generally, I will correct if it is a small mistake. I say ‘yes’ and repeat it correctly. When it is something that affects everybody and that everybody will learn from, then I point it out: ‘Listen carefully, let’s get it correct.’ At other times I overlook [errors] because the main thing has been achieved. (Teacher C)

Equally, judgements about whether to correct an error or not are made on the basis of whether the primary focus of the activity is communication:

> I am in a dilemma. If a learner can communicate, language does not have to be always correct. Sometimes I can’t help myself. If they mispronounce, I will jump in. (Teacher A)

Teachers A and C are both aware of the need to achieve a balance between fluency and accuracy. In a sense, this sums up one of the central dilemmas of communicative language teaching and its main goal of communicative competence, viz. the balance between accuracy and fluency as part of the total classroom program. There is also, however, an ambivalence about which of the two should be the focus of a lesson:

> Some get a bit more adventurous and want to branch out, but they immediately make mistakes because they don’t know the grammar ... but they want to be original. (Teacher B)

**Teaching grammar**

Views about teaching grammar vary amongst the six teachers. None of them, however, considers teaching grammar a strong feature of a primary...
language program, believing it more appropriately introduced and studied at secondary level. They are also aware that the teaching of grammar can be a dry activity that may do little to increase learners' motivation for learning a language:

Children must enjoy it so you can't burden them with grammar. But there are pitfalls in this method — you can teach patterns but some key relationships are necessary. I teach some basics myself [masculine/feminine, endings, etc.]. I explain as I go along. You can cover a lot but it [the level/amount of grammar taught] is just an introduction.

Group work, especially games, provides a situation in which to use the language over and over. Games are very good; [they are] not just a fun thing — it is one of the most constructive ways of learning the speech patterns. (Teacher B)

Teacher F mentions learners' limited background in English grammar as a problem when she is dealing with grammatical explanations for a structure in the target language. She also finds herself in a dilemma because her own inclination is to teach grammar, but she feels that the communicative approach de-emphasises the direct teaching of grammar. She acknowledges that she does try to explain grammar at times but feels guilty when she does so.

Teacher and learner roles
The interview data do not mention the teacher as an authority figure in the class. Instead, there is an acknowledgment that 'teachers are not the fount of all knowledge' (Teacher A), while Teacher F comments that there is a 'flattening of status difference' between teachers and learners in education generally, not just in the language classroom. The teachers interviewed see their role as:

- providing a rich target language context
- using the target language as a medium of instruction
- providing a range of materials and events in order to create a setting and stimulus for interaction among various individuals and groups:
  - Show that people out there are using [the target language] on a day-to-day basis... and that language does have a real function. (Teacher A)
  - [I LINK language with life because] human activities [are the same] even though the language is different. (Teacher E)

The teachers interviewed displayed a clear understanding of the role of today's language teacher and at the same time acknowledged the type of skills they would need to be able to fulfil this role satisfactorily. In order to attain this role they believe they need the following:
• a high proficiency in the target language and confidence in using it
• general teaching skills and experience
• management and organisational skills
• technology skills.

In addition, they suggest that their role as language teachers requires particular personality types and teaching styles, viz.:

• general self-confidence
• a tendency for extroversion rather than self-consciousness
• a readiness to ‘perform’ in class.

The teachers interviewed also believe that language teachers in general need to be interested in and enthusiastic about the target language and its culture(s) if they are to motivate their learners:

_Teachers should have the feeling that they love the language and the culture. [They should] want to teach, not have to teach. [They] should never ask, ‘Why am I teaching this?’ Learners need motivation and teachers should have motivation too._

_(Teacher E)_

**SUMMARY**

**Teachers’ understanding of the communicative approach**

When asked to describe what they considered to be the essence of the communicative approach, the general response of the teachers interviewed in this project was that the defining characteristic of communicative language teaching was ‘using the language’, although they believe that the extent to which this can occur is influenced by learners’ age, interests, and previous experience with the target language. However, subsequent questioning suggests that what these teachers do when they ‘teach communicatively’ is quite often not a reflection of the characteristics of communicative teaching as summarised in Table 1.

**Group and pair work**

The way the teachers organise their classes and the manner in which they choose language learning activities often depends on conditions that are beyond their control, e.g. the facilities available in individual schools, the way that learners are grouped, the school’s student management policy, and the school community’s attitude towards language learning. Their approach is also affected by their own experience and their adjustment to their itinerant role, which includes not only resourcing and negotiating their regular programs but also special events. It is these constraints that determine the extent to which some of the teachers organise learning activities around group work or pair work (even though they all acknowledge
that group and pair work provide learners with opportunities for communicative language use).

**Teaching grammar**
The teachers involved in the project are all well aware that overtly teaching grammar at primary level can be demotivating for learners. However, one of them did observe that some games are, in fact, ‘pattern practice in disguise’.

**Teacher and learner roles**
The teachers view their role as providing learners with opportunities to be exposed to and to interact in and with the target language. The range of skills and personal qualities needed to fulfil this role are sometimes tested by their being itinerant.

The role of learners, on the other hand, seems to have remained unspecified by this group of teachers, apart from the fact that learners ought to be interacting more actively in the target language.

**Accuracy and fluency**
With regard to the question of error correction and accuracy, the teachers interviewed are aware of the need to achieve a balance between accuracy and fluency in the classroom. Not all of them seemed to have reached a happy medium. It might be argued that at the early stages of language learning, most activities are based on formulaic language, so the focus is more often on accuracy. This line of argument, however, can lead to the same situation that was apparent in some earlier approaches to language learning, namely that learners must ‘learn the language’ first before they can put it to functional use. It is worth noting that many teachers have moved away from this concept of ‘mastery of the target language as an unapplied system’, as Wilkins (1976) put it, to using the target language for communication in even the very early stages of second language learning.

One wonders to what extent teachers have been made aware of the issues and choices involved in focusing on accuracy vis-a-vis focusing on fluency. It is certainly not a case of either/or; it is more a case of aiming for fluency but also edging learners towards greater accuracy, in what Swain (1985) has called ‘comprehensible output’.

**CONCLUSION**

Effective language teachers will always bring a principled and eclectic approach to any teaching context. Inservice programs should encourage all language teachers to adopt such an approach by integrating presentations on program content and classroom management with an exploration of the related aspects of appropriate theoretical frameworks. Such an inservice model could enhance teachers’ confidence in evaluating, adopting, and

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adapting demonstrated ideas, activities, and materials.

This project has simply scratched the surface of language teachers' beliefs about and understanding of communicative language teaching, about what the goals of a language program should be, and how they might best be attained. Teachers' actions can only be fully understood in the light of the crucial knowledge and understanding they bring to a particular learning context. The next step is the development of inservice programs that will challenge and inform their knowledge and understanding of current second language learning theory and lead them to adopt a teaching approach that will support learners in their main goal of achieving communicative competence in the target language.

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