COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This article is dedicated to provide reader with necessary theoretical background when we defined the key concepts and supported them with references to leading research authorities in the field. The introduction of the term communicative competence briefly commented on possible difficulties which speakers of foreign language may encounter in communication and that brought us to summarizing reasons for why it is important to develop communicative competence in language learners.

Keywords

Communication, competence, communicative, language, foreign, method, teacher, classroom management.

Communication is a way of interaction between people during which an exchange of something new takes place. This is one of the reasons why it might be difficult for L2 speakers to communicate in their second language. Apparently, in order to hold a conversation, it is necessary to react to what has been said by the other speaker. The problem is, if there is always something new in communication, it is impossible to predict its content and therefore difficult to prepare for it. Jane Revell, the author of Teaching Techniques for Communicative English, believes that "It is this element of unexpectedness and unpredictability which makes communication what it is, and for which it is so hard to prepare the student by conventional teaching methods." (Revell, 2013, p.1) An approach which is based on an effort to prepare pupils or students for genuine lifelike communication is what we call communicative approach to language teaching. The beginning of communicative approach lies in the early 1970s and is connected to so-called 'communicative movement' in foreign language teaching during which communicative ability was set as the main goal of foreign language learning and implications of this goal were explored and described more than they had been before. Unlike traditional language-centered methods communicative approach opens new perspectives on language teaching and is rather learner-centered. Widdowson says that it is impossible "...to suppose that a knowledge of how sentences are put to use in communication follows automatically from a knowledge

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of how sentences are composed and what signification they have as linguistic units." (Widdowson in Brumfit & Johnson, 1987, p.119) For teachers it implies that language cannot be treated only as a set of structures (grammar, vocabulary) but it is also necessary to be interested in how to use the structures in communication. As Little wood puts it, "... it is not enough to teach learners how to manipulate the structures of the foreign language. They must also develop strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in real situations and real time." (Little wood, 1990, p. x) As communicative approach is the current mainstream method of language teaching, there are numerous books and studies that comment on it, explore it and define it. In attempt to summarize the main principles Brown defines communicative language teaching through the following four characteristics. "1. Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.

2. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.

3. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learner meaningfully engaged in language use.

4. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language,

productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts." (Brown, 2000, p. 266-267) The existence of new approach requiring different types of in-class activities also implied new roles for a teacher. In Breen and Candlin a teacher is seen "first, as an organizer of resources and as a resource himself, second as a guide within the classroom procedures and activities" who is supposed to enrich the class with "appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities." (Breen and Candlin, 1980, p.99) Richards and Rodgers added three more roles, namely need analyst, counselor and group process manager. The main responsibility of a teacher as need analyst is to determine his or her learners' needs connected with language learning and respond to them in a suitable way. In the role of counselor a teacher is expected to be a model and example of "an effective communicator seeking to maximize the meshing of speaker intention and hearer interpretation, through the use of paraphrase, confirmation, and feedback." (Richards and Rodgers, 1991, p. 78) As the group process manager a teacher is supposed to reduce teacher-centred

classroom management and establish the classroom as a setting for communication during which he or she monitors and encourages.

Although it is impossible to generalize due to every teacher's personal uniqueness, his or her teaching techniques, pupils with various needs and many other aspects, there are some phenomena appearing throughout English classes. One of them being that it is hardly ever possible to find two or more pupils in a class whose knowledge, abilities or skills are on the same level. These differences are reflected in several areas of pupils' school lives, including communication. Even while using mother tongue, speakers show various degrees of fluency and differ in other aspects of speech. According to Thornbury , the differences between speakers are even more noticeable when it comes to speaking in another language and the inevitable lack of fluency makes pupils feel frustrated, embarrassed or anxious. Tsui claims that many learners perceive language learning not only as a process of acquiring linguistic rules or participating in communication activities but as a process in which they are "constantly putting themselves in a vulnerable position of having their own self-concept undermined and subjecting themselves to negative evaluations." (Tsui in Bailey, 1996, p. 155) Hedge suggests that these negative feelings learners may have can be eliminated by a teacher as she is convinced that teachers "have both the power and the responsibility to counter the development of anxiety by building self-confidence through positive early experiences, through providing reassuring feedback, and through promoting self-perception of developing proficiency." (Hedge, 2000, p. 21) It implies that a teacher is responsible for creating positive and encouraging learning environment in which the learners would feel as much comfortable as possible and which would help them reduce their anxiety. Thornbury believes that one of possible ways how to eliminate learners'reluctance to speak is to help them avoid speaking failure which would make them feel frustrated. What he sees as a problem and the main reason of speaking failure is a lack of opportunities for practice. He claims that in spite of the fact that the most of contemporary methodologies are communication-oriented, "speaking activities are often simply ways of rehearsing pre-selected grammar items or functional expressions." (Thornbury, 2005, p. 28) This means that even though speaking is said to be a priority, it is usually used as a means of practising grammar and speaking as a skill itself is hardly ever practised. Very often the only opportunity for pupils to experience lifelike interactive communication is during the chat stage at the beginning or end of a lesson. Thornbury is convinced that "It is this lack of genuine speaking opportunities which accounts for many students' feeling that, however much grammar and vocabulary they know, they are insufficiently prepared for speaking in the world beyond the classroom." (ibid, p.28) This shows the importance of incorporating communicative activities into

lesson plans and giving pupils as much chance to practise their speaking skills as possible to make them more confident and ready to use the language in real life situations. When it comes to communication, we may notice that much as it is natural for people to communicate, for many it is related to their mother tongue only. The reason is that the vocabulary, grammar, discourse or syntactic structures of L2 are rarely as established as they are in L1. Although sharing similarities in terms of stages of mental processing, L2 speaking and L1 speaking can differ in many ways. As for the stages of mental processing, Thornbury says that "Like L1 speakers, L2 speakers also produce speech through a process of conceptualizing, then formulating, and finally articulating, during which time they are also self-monitoring. At the same time, they will be attending to their interlocutors, adjusting their message accordingly, and negotiating the management of conversational turns." (Thornbury, 2005, p. 28)

Even though the stages of mental processing involved are the same for L1 and L2 and the skills of speaking should therefore be transferable, it is not necessarily the case. The process is often complicated by the above mentioned difference between L1 and L2, which is, to what extent the grammar, vocabulary, etc. of L2 is established. The problem does not have to be a lack of knowledge but the fact that the knowledge has not been successfully processed or has not been accessed for a longer period of time and therefore is unavailable for a speaker to use. (Thornbury, 2005) Very often speakers also tend to formulate their thoughts in L1 and then try to translate them to L2. Not only is it time-consuming, but also it has a negative impact on fluency. This is caused by word-for-word translation and speakers' effort to avoid making mistakes, which makes the self-monitoring stage longer than it should be. American researcher, Stephen Krashen, calls such people "monitor over users." (Krashen in Thornbury, 2005, p. 29) Obviously, not all L2 speakers try to cope with their communication difficulties in this way. Some other common strategies are: using many words to describe something which can be expressed by fewer or even one word, creating non-existent words, using vague expressions (e.g. stuff, thing), repetition of structures, occasional usage of words from mother tongue, using gestures, adjusting the message or using paraphrase. Little wood believes that a second language learner who is skilled in using appropriate communication strategies "may communicate more effectively than learners who are considerably more advanced in purely linguistic terms." (Little wood, 1996, p. 86-87)

Although these strategies may help speakers eliminate their uncertainty and be more or less successful in everyday communication, some researchers are afraid of their long-term effect. "While they may provide learners with an initial conversational 'foothold', they may also lead to the premature closing down of the

learner's developing language system (or interlanguage) - a process that is sometimes called fossilization." (Thornbury 2005, p. 30) Based on the information presented in this chapter it is obvious that second language learners are exposed to a considerable amount of disruptive influence of either internal or external origin which makes their learning very difficult and demanding. Learners are influenced especially by speech anxiety, lack of genuine speaking opportunities or inability to access acquired language knowledge which leads to the necessity of applying communication strategies. As for some implications this may have for language teachers, it seems necessary to create a positive learning environment, to provide the learners with as much opportunities for spoken interaction as possible and to help them gradually develop their communicative competence so that they feel more self-confident.

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