The Communicative Approach : Evolving Involvement – Promises and Problems

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Abstract

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching has undergone a paradigm shift with the advent of the "Communicative Approach". This approach, recognizing the failure of previous methods that concentrated on the teaching of grammatical rules, often at the expense of ignoring speaking and listening skills, called upon educators to involve their students more in the ELT classroom. It challenged teachers to design activities where the teacher would speak less and the students would speak more. It was the beginning of the search for the student-centered classroom. This article describes the growing pains within the field of ELT in search of that elusive combination of grammar and speaking (process vs. product) and teacher vs. student-centered classrooms. It examines the EFL environment that led to the introduction of the Communicative Approach, and how that approach produced more questions about EFL methodology that had to be answered by subsequent communicative-based language methods that would follow.

Whether it is "Teaching English as a Second Language" (TESL) or "Teaching English as a Foreign Language" (TEFL), teaching English to non-native speakers has always been an educational challenge in search of a methodology. The search for the best method has been made more problematical by the inability of communication scientists to determine whether a second language is acquired or learned in the same manner as the native language, and by a debate as to whether grammar or language production should be the focus of classroom teaching - accuracy vs. fluency.

Schools and teachers, however, must provide their students with one or another approach (or a combination) and then create an ESL program around that. For years, the weakest of the four English language skills has been speaking and listening, so educators have gravitated toward those methodologies that stress greater student involvement in the classroom.

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One of the problems in the recent past has not been the lack of approaches to choose from, but the sometimes-overwhelming number of methods available. The choices for any prospective educational institution run the gamut from teaching structural grammar, using textbooks and the lecture approach, to no grammar, no textbooks and encouraging students to do nearly all of the speaking.

The lecture method is a teaching approach that has proven useful in fields such as history, biology, math, etc. Applied to language teaching, however, this is referred to as, "Talk TO' speaking. It is teacher centered, is concerned with covering content, and the students do very little speaking. At the far end of the student-involvement spectrum, the lecture method offers little or no student involvement. Studies show that such an approach "may be useful as it provides students with information and with language input, but to develop the skill of speaking in the second language, we need not just to be 'talking TO' students but also 'talking WITH'" students (Arnold, 2003). "Talking WITH' requires students to actively participate in the learning process, rather than passively receiving information. The lecture approach, therefore, should not be used in language classrooms, "where students are expected to do more than listen (and even then, there are better approaches to teaching listening), and especially not when they are expected to truly interact, in ways that are often not found in a course book." (Frank & Rinvolucri, 1991:6)

The lecture approach is similar to pouring information into the heads of students. The teacher talks. Student's heads are empty vessels. This is also sometimes referred to as the "banking approach" to education, first described by Friere (1970). Grammar, for example, has been taught this way for years. "According to this view, education is an act of depositing, " in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat'."

Learning to speak another language, however, has less to do with banking than it does with a hands-on activity, such as learning how to play the piano. Students can't learn to play the piano from reading a book or someone telling them how to do it. To learn how to play, they actually "have to sit down and play the piano". Similarly, they can't learn to speak from someone telling them how (the banking method), from reading a book or doing written exercises. To learn to speak, they actually "have to speak".

Lest one think that the decision by educators not to use this approach would be obvious, it is important to note that this method is the "traditional" Grammar Translation (GT)

approach, a method through which most teachers learned their English, and the one in which a majority of teachers feel the most comfortable. Almost all governmental tests that determine language proficiency remain primarily grammar tests. Grammar, not speaking and listening are the keys to a students passing these tests, and teachers are pressured to prepare their students for these highly critical ultimate tests of language competency. "In Japan, grammar teaching is associated with Grammar Translation. Introduced to Japan in the late 1800's, GT has survived many attempts to replace it with modern pedagogic methods. Although the Ministry of Education is attempting to change this practice, Grammar-Translation remains the principal method of language instruction to this day by Japanese English teachers." (Doyle 1994, Hadley 1997)

Thus, in many countries, although educators are aware that there are other methodologies that are more student-centered, and may result in greater speaking and language skills, the methodology may be at the expense of memorizing and drilling in grammar rules, and place the students at a disadvantage when it comes time to competing on state level language proficiency tests. "While secondary level teachers of English might be keen to employ contemporary communicative teaching methodology in their classrooms, they also have to ensure that their students acquire the necessary linguistic 'facts' to be able to answer the grammar-based multiple choice examinations which are universally prescribed, but which tend to be unrelated to the development of spoken English abilities. The result is that students in general arrive at a university or their new place of work with undeveloped oral skills and with a debilitating awareness of this fact, which impedes motivation or further improvement." (Lee, 1991:342)

Since the "Talk TO" method fell out of favor, many educators would say now that they have abandoned the lecture approach, and have embraced an alternative teaching method, especially one of the variations belonging to the seemingly all-inclusive and popular "Communicative Approach". To illustrate the difficulties educators have with selecting the best ELT approach, under the over-arching umbrella of just the "Communicative Approach", there can be found, among others: the "Natural or Direct Approach" (Sauveur, 1860, and developed by Krashen 1982, and Krashen & Terrell, 1983); "Total Physical Response" (Asher, 1965); the "Silent Way (Gattegno, 1976); the "Present, Practice, Produce (PPP) Method" (Spratt, 1985); "Task Based Learning" (Allwright 1981, 1990, and Prabhu, 1997); "Suggestopaedia (Lozanov, 1997); the "Lexical Approach" (Lewis, 1993); "Learner-Based Teaching" (Campbell & Kryszewska, 1992); "Engage Study, Activate" (Harmer, 1998); the "Material Free Approach" (Underhill, 2001); (Lowe, 2002), and "Dogme ELT" (Thornbury, 2001).

"Communicative Language Teaching" (CLT), once seen as the ultimate solution, has come under increasing attack, as many of it's basic assumptions concerning "teacher talk", student-centeredness, and its de-emphasis on grammar have been questioned. Critics state that the CLT "umbrella" covers so many approaches that it has often become the platform for " . . . unprincipled eclecticism, varying from teacher to teacher" Jennings and Doyle (1996: 169). The failure to clearly define what CLT is and is not has allowed for a wide range of approaches (PPP/ Task-based Learning, Notional-Functional, Silent Way, etc.) to be called "communicative" (Shortall, 1996:31). Each of the methods seems to have its own "take" on the importance of grammar teaching, many tending to reduce or reject the explicit teaching of grammar. Skehan, a critic of some Communicative Approach strategies, states that this trend in CLT to focus on verbal fluency over formal accuracy " . . . runs the risk of learners becoming confined to the strategic solutions they develop, without sufficient focus for structural change or accuracy." (1996:30)

Much of the criticism stems from the degree of emphasis placed on two aspects of "Communication Competence", "a term used by Campbell and Wales (1970) and Hymes (1972) to refer to: the relationship and interaction between the native speaker's grammatical competence (or knowledge of the rules of the language) and Socio-linguistic Competence (or knowledge of the rules of language use). It is distinguished from communicative performance (Power, 2003) which is the realization of these competences in actual speech in real situations." The debate over the preeminence of production or process is a more than 150-years old.

From medieval times through the 1860s' tutors were commonplace, and schools that were teaching Greek and Latin were using the "Classical" method of analytically dissecting the language into sets of grammatical rules. Students had to know the rules of the language before learning to speak it, and the primary means of doing so, were through extensive translation exercises. Neither teacher nor student spoke regularly in the second language. A few scholars, including Sauveur, proposed a "Natural" approach to language teaching. In the 1860's, Sauveur's Boston language school classes concentrated on intensive oral interaction in the target language, employing questions as a way of presenting and eliciting language. By 1884, German psychologist F. Franke agreed with the Sauveur approach and wrote that, "a language could be best taught by using it actively in the classroom. Rather than translation, he advocated a "Direct Method" of spontaneous use of the foreign language. From what the students produced, grammar rules could be elicited. Teachers replaced textbooks, and classroom instruction was conducted exclusively in the target language." The "Natural" and "Direct" methods were in direct contrast to the way

classical languages were being taught. Colleges and universities neither had sufficient numbers of native speakers to converse completely in the second language, there was no time in the curriculum to teach time-intensive speaking skills, and there was certainly no need for an educated person to be able to speak Latin or Greek; only to be able to read it and write it. Academically based critics, part of a Reform Movement, claimed "Natural" methods lacked any basis in linguistic theory, and dismissed the users of such methods as "enlightened amateurs". By the 1920's, the "Natural" and "Direct" methods had been discredited by the academic community, who advocated the use of texts, drills, translations and a emphasis on structural grammar as the basis for language teaching (Leudescher, 2005).

Fifty years later, the "Presentation, Practice and Produce" (PPP) Method seemed to be what both teachers and students were looking for: less emphasis on grammar, greater opportunities for students to speak in the classroom, more speaking by students and eventually what became known as the Communicative Approach. While many may differ in what is CLT, it seems that the common denominator is that the students do most of the talking, and the teacher provides them with every opportunity possible to "produce" language of their own. The PPP method was attractive at first, but more and more educators and researchers searching for a method that would create language users who were both fluent and accurate in English, found PPP had only whetted their appetites. It was a breakaway method from the recent past, and a catalyst for many methods to come, but seemed flawed in too many areas to eventually adopt as a single method.

During the PRESENTATION phase, the teacher presented new language, which was usually some new pattern that the students would be using later. The subject could be a new verb tense, use of adjectives, how to pronounce a certain sound, etc. At a time when teachers were looking to shift toward more student-centered classrooms, however, the "presentation" phase of PPP allowed only limited interaction with the students. Teachers still did most of the talking, sometimes as much as 90%, since they had a pattern to explain before the students could practice. PPP, at this stage, sounded like a scaled-back version of the old, passive, teacher-centered "Lecture Method".

In the PRACTICE phase of PPP, the new language pattern was identified and repeated by the students, with some minor changes to the pattern. Teachers were still doing a lot of the talking - perhaps as much as 50% -- unless the students were doing pair work or in a language laboratory. When not modeling the pattern, the teachers were directing practice, controlling and correcting, and usually stopping class to making comments or lecture again, after students responded to questions or to dialogue prompts - all using student speaking time Whether

modeling or controlling, the classroom activities still revolved around the teacher and had little or nothing to do with the students' abilities to come up with language rules of their own, in order to create their own set of similar patterns.

The third phase was PRODUCTION. Here, students attempted to use the new language; adapting the patterns they'd learned to new situations. The teacher were supposed to be less involved, as the students were using the new language patterns. Researchers, however, reported that in this phase that students would, "without one-on-one supervision, take a task and not produce the target language during the free practice stage, because they found they were able to use their existing language resources to complete the task. Others would often produce the language but overuse the target structure so that it sounded completely unnatural."(Frost, 2005) Retainability was reportedly low, as well. One study concluded that, "Students can give the impression that they are comfortable with the new language as they are producing it accurately in the class. Often though a few lessons later, students will either not be able to produce the language correctly or won't even produce it at all." (Frost, 2005)

Oddly enough, the simplicity of the PPP method and the ease with which teachers could introduce small pieces of language learning into lesson, not only made the PPP Method attractive to teachers, but it provided researchers with their greatest sources of criticism. Beginning teachers found the method easy to use, because they were comfortable with any method in which they were the ones speaking and where they almost completely controlled language-learning activities in the classroom (Frost, 2005). PPP was also attractive to teachers because it taught student one pattern at a time, which meshed very well with the existing grammar-based books produced at the time.

Teachers, however, found that as they were teaching one pattern, students were forgetting or not integrating other patterns that they had learned previously. The focus of the lesson, usually taught in one-hour blocks, was on one pattern and that was all. If something else was to be taught, it was normally taught in the same way, with the pattern being explained by the teacher, practiced and then repeated by students. Course books, presenting a little of everything for everyone, included a variety of language learning points in one lesson, with no integration of various patterns learned even in that lesson. Long and Robinson (1998:16), found that, "of the scores of detailed studies of naturalistic and classroom language learning reported over the past 30 years, none suggest, for example, that presentation of discrete points of grammar one at a time bears any resemblance except an accidental one to either the order or the manner in which naturalistic or classroom acquirers learn those items."

Despite its shortcomings, "Presentation, Practice and Produce" is still widely used, if not in its entirety, then part of classroom instruction that incorporates it along with other approaches. PPP's legacy to the field of EFL teaching methodology may be the fact that it re-opened the door to a communicative approach to teaching. Student centeredness was finally being recognized as an important part of any successful learning program directed at developing speaking and listening skills first, rather giving primacy to the learning of grammar.

In addition, PPP opened the floodgates to nearly all the great EFL debates that would surface in the next two decades: how students learn a language (L1 vs. L2), process vs. product, the role of grammar in the classroom, teacher roles, the reliance on material and content in ESL, how educators design a language curriculum, and how educators can assess language competency. It ushered in a New Age, where the "involvement" of all aspects of ESL learning were questioned, especially those centering on the roles of teachers and students in the language classroom.

(Next: the explosion of methods designed to involve students in ESL activities, and the increasing dilemma faced by educators in selecting the right ESL approach.)

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