COMMUNICATIVE METHOD IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

The paper deals with the main features of communicative approach in English language teaching and the possible problems that may appear. As it is a student focused method, the teacher should re-evaluate his/her position in the class and understand that the traditional class has changed significantly. We bring forward concepts like "time management" or "time consuming", "restricted practice" and "free practice" or "students" performance".

Teaching English as a foreign language has long determined changes in pedagogical methods and continues to do so. The most important aspect is that the focus has shifted from teacher-centred classes to student-centred classes. This aspect has imposed new "rules" and attitudes, especially for the teacher. The modern pedagogy has understood that the class is a balanced two-ways relationship between the one who teaches and the one who learns. Thus, the two parts "negotiate" their importance in the class, in the sense that, for a better learning activity the one who teaches should become more or less dynamic or implicated. He is the one who *knows*, the one who eventually puts things into order and understands the best attitude towards his partner.

It is said that the most important job of the teacher is to create the conditions in which learning can take place. I think we should complete this statement by saying that the teacher has to create the conditions in which *the best learning* can take place. Because we aim at optimal activities in order to obtain the most profitable results. This way, communicative method seems to be an appropriate attitude towards this objective. It deals with classroom interaction as an important pedagogical principle. Nevertheless, this concept of classroom interaction has long time been wrongly taken, as it was identified *only* with teacher-student interaction.

It is very important for the learner to listen to and to speak with the teacher, as the latter is the one who may and can decide whether the required level of accuracy has been achieved. The students always look up at the person teaching them, as a person who has the necessary skills to observe, understand and most important correct the mistakes. But this is not always the best way to learn, especially when it comes to a foreign language. Alongside with *presentation* or *practice* (as part of the lesson approaches) there is the part of *production*.

The student learns a lot from what he hears from the teacher or from a tape, but is more important to become the one who can eventually produce language. One of the problems in teaching a foreign language lies not only in the process of *input*, of providing information – that is uttering the words and explaining their meaning. It is also the problem of *output*, of what the student is capable of uttering.

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Taking into account that the student absorbs the correct picture of the language (or of a certain vocabulary) by listening to the teacher, we may easily fall into the mistake of dominating the lesson to the exclusion of any other participant. Thus, one should constantly acknowledge that by interacting with the teacher, a student is learning to interact with a competent user of the language. Again, if the only conversation practice learners get is one-to-one with the teacher, they will get very little time to speak at all (especially if there is, for example, a 25 people class). An essential lesson that every new teacher needs to learn is that "talking at" the learners does not necessarily mean that learning is taking place; in many cases, teacher talking time is actually time when the learners are not doing very much and are not very involved. So, in order to assure a better acquisition, the teacher should manage talking time as it will become most profitable for the students.

On the other hand students should interact among themselves as much as possible. Whether this is done by the way they are sitting, or especially by the manner in which they communicate one to another, their speaking time should increase compared to that of the teacher. The latter may as well be only a mediator between them, a facilitator of students' language production. One of the most important distinctions that can be drawn here is that between the teacher as a *controller* and the teacher as a *participant*, as these two concepts represent limits of teacher behaviour. A controller stands in front of the class and stands out as the person who governs everything from teaching to the student's possible reactions. He is like a "puppet-master" observing and deciding whether a certain gesture should be made. On the other hand, the participant involves not only communicatively but sometimes even physically in the class, maintaining a low profile in order to allow students to achieve their best from an individual or group task.

When learning English students are *receiving* language – as language is in some way "put into" the students (whether they want to receive it or not). But this is not enough: the teacher also needs to provide opportunities for the students to activate this knowledge and to "produce" language. Controller teachers should know when and how long they need to allow students to talk because language production implies rehearsing whilst receiving feedback (from the teacher or from the students). So, it is clearly that there is a great need for communicative *output* from the students and also of a feedback. If teachers forget to "get out" from controller position, the students can no longer practice language therefore their talking skills may suffer greatly. When talking about *input* one should notice that "finely-tuned *input*" is often "the focus of the presentation of new language where repetition, teacher correction, discussion and/ or discovery techniques are frequently used to promote cognitive strategies. […] During the presentation stage teachers tend to act as controllers, both selecting the language the students are to use and asking for the accurate reproduction of new language items. They will want to correct the mistakes they hear and see at this stage fairly rigorously – in marked contrast to the kind of correction that is generally offered in practice and communicative activities. [2, p.41]"

In order to get the best results in a student-centred class one should make sure that he gets to them, that he can get their attention. An important reason why learners may not successfully follow activity instructions (or understand teacher's explanations of something) is that they didn't actually hear them, perhaps because they weren't fully paying attention when they were given. Sometimes, as the teacher invests energy in finding the best way to give the

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instruction, he may overlook the necessity of getting students' attention before the instruction is even given. If the students are chattering, or not paying attention, nevertheless how well the instruction is given, it will have little chances of fulfilment. That is why the teacher should take into account few tips in order to really focus the activity upon students. First of all he has to make eye-contact as much and with as many students as possible. Then the teacher might have established a gesture that means he wants to talk (for example holding the hand up or even a word). Personally, I do the next thing: make eye-contact and then wait, maintaining the eye-contact. I do not move and do not say a word. I do not look impatient or anxious. I just keep moving my eyes around the room from person to person. Eventually the students will understand that attention is required and from that point I can give my instruction.

It is very important for the teacher to know what his role in the class is, especially in pair or group activities. "Immediately after you have given the instruction for a task and students start doing it, there is often an immediate need to check to make sure that students are doing the activity that you asked them to do and have understood the basic instructions and the mechanics of the activity. You could do this by quietly and relatively inconspicuous wandering around the room, listening in briefly to snatches from many groups and assuring yourself that students are doing what they are supposed to. We could call this monitoring to check the mechanics." [1, p. 93]

In most activities, the aim is that the learners get to work on their own as much as possible; to speak fluently with the least interference from the teacher. The presence of the teacher may sometimes be perceived as interference. Let us explain: if the teacher is "too present", then the student will look to him for guidance, correction or vocabulary help, whereas it might be more useful for them to struggle a little and learn to make use of their own resources. Thus, the teacher's behaviour may vary from monitoring discreetly to vanishing completely form the activity. Yet, in some tasks, especially in those in which the students need advice, input or support, the teacher may become more implicated in the activity and his role gets more and more active. In these cases the best options for a teacher are to monitor actively or to participate.

To monitor discreetly means to maintain a certain presence of yourself as a teacher in the classroom, but not to offer help or to interfere every time something seems wrong. The students should know that the teacher is there, but that he will not interrupt them. The teacher is there watching and listening carefully, but unless there is a significant problem or mistake he need not to intervene. This way, the students will not feel tempted to report every time to the teacher and they will do the task themselves, producing and using language as much as possible. Even if they ask for the teacher's help, he should do this swiftly and effectively and then return to the monitoring position.

Nevertheless, there are cases when the teacher risks to impose his presence too much by helping the learners and thus to diminish the work that is supposed to be done. "Sometimes the best option for you is to vanish, i.e. get out of the immediate eyeshot. You could go into a corner of the room and sit quietly. […] You need to keep a small percentage of attention on the room, in order to know when the activity is reaching an end or a crisis point, but otherwise restrain yourself from doing too much. Relax and stop being a teacher for a while. In a few specific cases, you might want to emphasise the point that students need to work without your

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help, and in such cases even leaving the room for a few minutes may be an option." [1, p. 94] There is also the case when, if the teacher leaves the room for a few minutes, the students – as they are involved in solving the task – may not even notice his absence.

Monitoring actively is more visible for students and allows them to be more aware of the teacher's presence and of the possibility of asking help from him. A teacher who is actively monitoring will be walking around, viewing and listening in to many different groups and frequently offering spontaneous advice and corrections, as well as responding to requests and questions from students. This method may easily change into participation when the teacher sits down and joins a group (temporarily or for the whole task). He may be part of that group, but, at the same time offering help, ideas or even asking questions.

The communicative method resorts to different techniques of teaching students. On one hand there is the part of restricted practice, and on the other hand is that of free practice. When talking about restricted task, we aim at exercises (written or oral) which focus on certain language topics or grammar problems. For example, we can use a written exercise of the "fill in the blanks" type in order for the students to learn new vocabulary or new grammatical items. At the same time, an oral exercise may have as the main target the words used in a certain communicational situation (e.g. booking a room in a hotel or taking part in an interview for a certain job or position in a company). These types of activities tend to be easier than free practice, as they limit the students' options to certain topics. When it comes to free practice one should understand the capacity of the learner to make up a discourse and to sustain logical statements. Generally, this is a communicative activity which demands from the student the capacity of dialogue, of responding and asking questions. It comes as a general truth that for a communicative purpose, this method is more appropriate than those asking students to only solve exercises with fixed pattern and in which imagination and the capacity of speaking is not challenged, therefore, not improved.

Challenging speaking abilities – both fluency and accuracy – is eventually the aim of communicative method as it focuses on student and on the student's linguistic needs, meeting clear-cut objectives set by the trainer after the student's needs analysis.

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