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Communicative Language Teaching

Introduction

The Communicative Approach emerged in the early 1970s as a result of the work of the Council of Europe experts (Al-Mutawa and Kailani, 1989). However, it can be traced to the work of Chomsky in the 1960s, when he advanced the two notions of 'competence' and 'performance' as a reaction against the prevalent audio-lingual method and its views. These two concepts were developed later on by Hymes, into a 'communicative competence' which refers to the psychological, cultural and social rules which discipline the use of speech (Hedge, 2000).

Hymes, as a sociolinguist, was concerned with the social and cultural knowledge which speakers need in order to understand and use linguistic forms. His view, therefore, encompassed not only knowledge but also ability to put that knowledge into use in communication. Dimensions of communicative competence which are identified in the literature include: linguistic or grammatical competence, sociolinguistic or pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence (Richards & Rogers, 1986; and Hedge, 2000), and fluency (Hedge, 2000).

Communicative Language Teaching is best considered as an approach rather than a method (Richards & Rogers, 1986). Within methodology a distinction is often made between methods and approaches, in which methods are held to be fixed teaching systems with prescribed techniques and practices, whereas approaches represent language teaching philosophies that can be interpreted and applied in a variety of different ways in the classroom (Rogers, 2001).

Approach, design and procedure

The theory of language teaching underlying the Communicative Approach is holistic rather than behavioristic. It starts from a theory of language as communication (Richards & Rogers, 1986) which implies knowledge of the grammatical system as well as performance. In other words, such competence includes both the usage and use of the language (Widdowson, 1984).

Unlike the audiolingual method, the Communicative Approach gives priority to the semantic content of language learning. That is, learners learn the grammatical form through meaning not the other way around. Thus, "learning activities are selected according to how well they engage the learner in meaningful and authentic language use (rather than merely mechanical practice of language patterns)" (Richards & Rogers, 1986: 72).

Since the primary aim of the approach is to prepare learners for meaningful communication, errors are tolerated. The range of exercise types and activities compatible with a communicative approach is unlimited. Moreover, it is not assumed in this approach that the teacher is the center of all classroom activities (Al-Mutawa and Kailani, 1989). In other words, the communicative methodology is a learner-centered approach to language learning. This, however, does not lead to the conclusion that there is no role played by the teacher in this approach. To the contrary, a highly competent and imaginative teacher is a major requirement for the successful application of the approach. Therefore, a teacher's and learner's motivation and positive attitude are crucial for effective teaching and learning.

Points of criticism

1) The communicative approach focuses on the use of language in everyday situations, or the functional aspects of language, and less on the formal structures. However, critics believe that there needs to be some sort of "bridge" between the two in order for effective language learning.

2) The approach relies extensively on the functional-notational syllabus which places heavy demands on the learners.

3) The various categories of language functions are overlapping and not systematically graded like the structures of the language.

4) A major premise underlying this approach is its emphasis on learners' needs and interests. This implies that every teacher should modify the syllabus to correspond with the needs of the learners.

5) The approach gives priority to meanings and rules of use rather than to grammar and rules of structure. The latter are taught by means of functions and notions. Such concentration on language behavior may result in negative consequences in the sense that important structures and rules would be left out.

6) The requirements are difficult: availability of a classroom that can allow for group work activities and for teaching aids and materials.

Communicative Language Teaching in the Saudi Context

The problem with this kind of language teaching is that it is an approach; not a method. The difference between an approach and a method is explained above; methods are fixed teaching systems whereas approaches form the theory and leave the teaching system to the creativity and innovation of the teacher. This fact, although may be regarded as advantageous by imaginative teachers, creates a problem in the Saudi context. Frankly speaking, imaginative teachers are at scarce in the Arab world in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular. Teachers in such contexts opt for clearly designed material and procedures for they do not prefer to shoulder the burdens of looking on their own for ways and techniques of teaching, if they have the ability to do so.

Moreover, whether we are examining lower or higher education schools in Saudi Arabia, we find that the structure of such schools is not designed for group work which is a major requirement of this method. That is, they are not acquainted with aids or facilities through which the application of such an approach would be successful. Teachers would end up paying from their own pockets preparing classes for the application of this approach. Moreover, administrative aspects are also involved such as loading classes with large numbers of students; a fact that would kill any effort towards language teaching in general, let alone applying this approach.

Even if we assume that we have highly qualified teachers with 100% creativity, and that our schools are modernized as to cope with new horizons in teaching, it is difficult to assume that Saudi students are ready to take part in the learning

process. All they have been used to since decades is spoon-feeding, and their imaginative and creative thinking is "temporarily out of service." This not only applies to secondary or intermediate level students, but also to university students, and sometimes even to graduate students. Unless the learner realizes the importance of his/her role in the process of learning, this approach, along with many approaches to teaching, could never be applied. The responsibility does not lie on the learners but on the primitive teaching styles which have not changed for decades.

Conclusion

Although the Communicative Approach to language teaching is one of the latest, yet it is too ambitious and the requirements for its success are difficult. This should not lead to a complete distrust of this approach, but rather to more efforts drawing its guidelines and blueprints. Again, it is suggested that it becomes part of the whole framework of language teaching which incorporates different approaches and methods, making use of the advantages of each and avoiding the disadvantages. This again requires very sophisticated syllabuses, materials and teaching aids, and, above all, competent and experienced teachers.

References

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