

A COMMUNICATE VIEW OF ENGLISH TEACHING

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What does it mean to take a communicative view of language and teaching? This leads to an examination of language from different views.

The structural view of language concentrates on the grammatical system, describing ways in which linguistic items can be combined. It explains the operations for producing different sentences and describes the word-order rules. Linguistic knowledge, linguistic facts and operations make up a student's linguistic competence and enable him to produce new sentences to match the meanings that he wishes to express.

The structural view of language has not been in any way superseded by the functional view. However, it is not sufficient on its own to explain how language is used as a means of communication. For example, the sentence "Why don't you close the door?" might be used for a number of communicative purposes, such as asking a question, making a suggestion, or issuing an order. In other words, whereas the sentence structure is stable and straightforward, its communicative function is variable and depends on specific situational and social factors. Communication is a two-sided process. When we speak, we are constantly estimating the hearer's knowledge and assumptions, in order to select language that will be interpreted in accordance with our intended meaning. The most efficient communicator in a foreign language is not always the person who is best in manipulating its structure. It is oftenn the person who is most skilled in controlling the complete situation involving himself and his hearer, taking into account what knowledge is already shared between them, and selecting means which will communicate his message effectively.

Another important factor determining the speaker's choice of language is his interpretation of the social situation in which communication is taking place: language carries not only functional meaning, it also carries social meaning. To a large extent it is a question how a speaker can conform to linguistic conventions without being obtrusive. He can choose a socially appropriate speech as far as his repertoire permits. For example, a student may say "Shut the door, will you?" to his classmate, but to a stranger on a train it would be more appropriate to say "Excuse me, would you mind closing the door?" To use the formal version with a classmate, or the informal version with a stranger, would be equally likely to cause offence.

One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more fully communicative view.

The communicative view opens a wider perspective on language learning. In particular it makes us more strongly aware that it is not enough to teach students how to use 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. We must therefore provide students with ample opportunities to use the language themselves for communicative purposes. We must also remember that we are ultimately concerned with developing the students' ability to take part in the process of communicating through language rather than with their perfect mastery of individual structures.

The communicative English teaching is characterized by two kinds of activities: pre-communicative and communicative. In pre-communicative activities we make use of structure practice, open and cued dialogues, to relate language to specific meanings, and to relate language to social context. The structure practice and dialogues help to bridge the gap between linguistic and communicative competence. Pre-communicative activities will train students in the »part-skills« of communication: enabling them to acquire linguistic forms and relate them to communicative function, nonlinguistic reality and social context and to develop a moderate degree of independence in using the language he has learned.

While pre-communicative activities focus more on English forms to be learned than on meanings to be communicated, activities that are communicative enable students to use the linguistic knowledge they learned in order to communicate specific meanings for specific purposes. Communicative activities consist of two main categories: functional communicative activities and social interactive activities. These activities provide »whole-task« practice, improve motivation, allow natural learning, and create a context which supports learning.

The activities are student centered. It is the students themselves who are responsible for conducting the interaction to its conclusion. Often there will be several groups, or pairs, performing simultaneously, without teacher's continuous supervision. The teacher can monitor their strength and weaknesses. If students find themselves unable to cope with the demands of a situation, the teacher can offer advice or provide necessary language items, or the teacher may find an error is so important that he must correct it at once to prevent it from becoming fixed in the student speech.

In China, more and more teachers of English realize that some principles of Communicative English Teaching are applicable in facilitating students' communicative competence, which is the goal of English teaching and learning. The communicative approach is discussed and tried in the classrooms. What's more, some applicable principles of Communicative Language Teaching are adopted in the plan of the course syllabus. An example is A NEW ENGLISH COURSE, a coursebook for English majors compiled by Li Guanyi and published by Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press.

A NEW ENGLISH COURSE is a set of 4 coursebooks, comprising Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4. Each level consists of a Student Book (SB), a Work

book (WB), a Teacher's Book (TB) and cassette tapes. According to the Preface in SB, this coursebook was conceived and produced following not one ELT principle, but rather a number of ELT principles. It has preserved what has been found useful and effective in China's English language teaching methodology, while at the same time it adopted some applicable principles of communicative language teaching.

Apart from common written exercises that appear in the coursebooks for Integrated English, this set of coursebooks provides large space for pre-communicative and communicative activities. The first two levels, which are for first-year students, emphasize the linguistic skills of listening and speaking, with due attention to the skills of reading and writing. In each unit pre-communicative activities are provided: structure practice, cued dialogues to achieve spontaneity and flexibility in language usage, and a full length dialogue (Dialogue 1) to contextualize the language materials, so that the language practice will result in a meaningful use of English. Communicative activities are offered in different forms. Role plays are designed with information related to Dialogue 1. The course designers have also taken into account the importance of teaching language functions. They have presented in context a number of most commonly used language functions. Besides, there are Interactive Activities for students to make free use of the language materials they have learned to tell their own experiences and to express their personal views.

Level 3 and Level 4 mainly facilitate student's reading and writing skills, but also pay attention to listening and speaking. Though each unit is text-based, with detailed guided writing practices and other written exercises, Role play and Interactive Activities are still designed together with information related to texts. Students are expected to talk freely, with the information provided, and the language forms they have learned so as to be able to solve problems they may meet with in actual communication. Thus reading and writing and communicative activities will facilitate acquisition of both linguistic and communicative competences.

This coursebook shows that China's English language teaching is moving toward current views on methodology, and in the teaching and the learning of English. The use of the language is emphasized. Teaching English is not only teaching a set of linguistic forms, but also helping students to use English to communicate with. Students should not be studying English as an institution recorded in grammars and dictionaries. They should be trained to a highly personal experience of English.

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