

COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH, STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES USED IN TRAINING SPEAKING SKILLS OF STUDENTS NON-LINGUISTS

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Oral communication is typified as an activity involving two (or more) people in which the participants are both hearers and speakers having to react to what they hear and make their contributions at high speed. Each participant has an intention or set of intentions - goals that he wants to achieve in the interaction. Each participant has to be able to interpret what is said to him, which he cannot predict exactly either in terms of form or in terms of meaning, and reply with what language he has at his disposal in a way that takes account of what has just been said and which reflects his own intentions at this point in the interaction.

It is sometimes said that a structural approach, when it is orally based, with plenty of classroom activity, succeeds in doing this. It does not. It is important not to confuse plenty of student talk with learning to communicate. They are not synonymous. A communicative approach to speaking emphasises the use of language above the level of the sentence. Structural approaches, on the other hand, are concerned with the production of grammatically accurate sentences.

Structural dialogues lack communicative intent and you cannot identify what communicative operations the learner can engage in as a result of practice. The result of purely structural practice is the ability to produce a range of usages, but not the ability to use forms appropriately.

In performance terms, this results in students who over-use reporting verbs when they find themselves in real communicative situations. Thus you hear students saying, 'I suggest' or 'I promise' instead of 'Why don't you . . .?' or 'I'll do it' which are more appropriate in the circumstances.

The communicative approach on the other hand makes sure that the interactions which take place in the classroom are replications of, or necessary prerequisites for, a communicative operation. The focus changes from the accurate production of isolated utterances to the fluent selection of appropriate utterances in communication. The learner is now concerned with using language, not English usages. In order to do this, learners take on roles and interact with other learners who also have roles. What they say is determined by the role they have, their communicative intentions and the contribution of the other learners. The range of communicative models (two, three or more people involved) will reflect the learners'

needs. The role of the teacher changes, too. Instead of being the person who provides prompts that trigger utterances of a certain structure from the students, the teacher now sets up the conditions for communication to take place. Hence, the teacher will actually assume roles to model the language for the learners, or act as someone for the learners to communicate with. The teacher also has to be able to set up the conditions for students to practise communicative operations themselves.

There is nothing particularly mysterious about the process of teaching speaking on a communicative basis. It consists of the same stages as learning any language skill: Setting objectives-Presentation-Practice-Transfer

Only, in the case of teaching for communication, there is a difference in type of language item and the type of activities. So we may have the following: Setting objectives-Presentation (the target operation, language appropriate to this operation)-Practice (repetition of the language drilling key syntax and phonology)-Transfer (role-play, introducing information gap, feedback, etc)

Here the presentation phase presents a whole language operation in context, from which the students or the teacher may take out the key items. In the practice phase, these are drilled and the main features of syntax and phonology are focussed on. The transfer phase consists of putting to use the language items in situations that are analogous to that of the presentation phase. For this role-plays and games are the chief strategies and it is here, perhaps, that the biggest difference exists between a structural and a communicative methodology. The difference is not only one of strategy, although the strategy is crucial as a means of achieving the objective. There is also the difference of criteria on which success is judged. As the objective is successful communication, how well this takes place is not a function of grammatical accuracy alone. Indeed it is possible for successful communication to occur with a poor command of syntax. Syntax is only one of several related aspects of performance that contribute to communication. To take an example: suppose you are working with beginner students. You have detected a need on their part - they often want to ask for things. A good, neutral way of doing this is to use the form 'Could I have...?' As soon as you add what is being asked for, you encounter the problem of definite and indefinite articles and also the use of 'some'. Now the question is whether this matters. I do not think it does. The crucial aspect of performance is whether the student uses an appropriate form to ask for things. Hence, if a student says 'Could I have spoon, please?', gets it and says 'Thank you', with reasonable intonation, communication has been successful. It does not matter at this stage whether the articles and 'some' are handled correctly.

It is more important to have a crack at using the right form and intonation. This is a justified view, but it has led communicative teaching to be accused of paying too little attention to grammatical accuracy. The charge is unfair, and

neglects the relevance and effect of other considerations which come into play when language is being used to communicate. It might well be argued that grammatical accuracy has received too much attention hitherto and that too little attention has been given to rules for use.

It now remains to look in more detail at some of the strategies needed for teaching speaking in a communicative way.

In the case of teaching speaking communicatively, the teacher's job is to put across what operation the students are going to learn. This can be as simple as telling the students that the lesson is on asking for and giving advice. Just tell them. For a fairly abstract operation such as giving advice, an approach of this kind may be the best. But there are many operations, and therefore many ways of conveying objectives. For one such as apologising and forgiving, it may be possible to show what the objective is by showing the students a cartoon strip, for example, that depicts somebody spilling coffee over someone in a cafe. In this case you invite the students to try to say what would be said in the circumstances.

In this way you make clear what is to be learnt, and, assuming the students do not know what to say - if they do, teach something else they now know they have a learning problem. (They must also need to know the language, of course.) Another approach is to use the cartoon strip with speech balloons, which convey the whole learning load to the student, just at a glance. In practice, a combination of illustration, problem setting and explanation may be used to make one's objectives clear. Telling the students explicitly what they are going to learn has been criticised as involving too much reliance on metalanguage, but this is far more defensible than the structural equivalent: saying, for example, that they are going to learn the present continuous tense. 'Giving advice', for example, is something that anyone can grasp the meaning of, with the use of a dictionary if necessary. The cartoon methods have the virtue of carrying a good deal of contextual information as well as indicating what is to be learnt. It provides the link, so important in communicative teaching, between the language used and the culture. Consideration of visual means of making your objectives clear leads one naturally to a consideration of contextualisation in a communicative context.

Contextualisation is the means by which the meaning of a language item is made clear. Structural approaches used two broad categories of contextualisation to do this - one unsuccessful, the other successful. The unsuccessful one puts the item in a context but does not incorporate into the context any details that really clarify the meaning of the item. For example, the item is put in a story and used over and over again, so that students become familiar with the form, but not with the idea it expresses. The more successful type of contextualisation exemplifies the new item and, by means of clues in the context, demonstrates what it means. Whatever type of contextualisation is used in a structural approach, however, the

concern is to convey the ideational content of the form, not its use. To contextualise communicatively, however, you have to do more than convey this level of meaning. Indeed, from a communicative point of view, an item only takes on meaning as a result of the total context in which it is used and an item without context in this sense cannot properly be said to have meaning at all. It must therefore be made clear to the students, as a general observation about how language works, that what you say takes on its meaning as a result of the context, where context is taken to mean a constellation of factors, such as who the speakers are, their relationship to one another, what they are trying to do, what has just been said, where they are, and so on, in addition to the ideational content of what they are saying. Hence, a question form ('Is that your coat on the floor?') may be an order (to pick it up), or 'I beg your pardon' may be an indication that you are insulted or offended. A form may function in various ways, and the meaning of a 'sentence' may change according to the way it is said and when.

If students have been informed about, and convinced of, the importance of (a) learning communicative operations, and (b) the effect on meaning of the constellation of factors alluded to above, then they can be expected to appreciate and look out for information of this kind. Such information may already have been given to the students at the stage when objectives were set, if, for example, cartoons or other visuals were used. If this has not been done, then the students have to know who the language they are going to learn is appropriate for and under what conditions. So language is contextualised in terms of who is speaking to whom, where and why.

After new language items have been presented to the students, it is essential that they practise the language in a variety of ways and really learn to use what they have been taught.

Maximise student-talking

Pairwork and groupwork

Students practise the new language item in two's or three's, the teacher at a distance ready to assist as necessary. This provides an almost natural situation for exchanges such as questions and answers, suggestions and reactions, opinions and arguments, etc.

Information gaps and the jigsaw principle

An effective way of stimulating the talking is to issue materials with slight differences for each student. The teacher can just stand back and watch the students finding out what's different or missing. Here's an example which shows that it can happen in real life. A and B are trying to arrange a meeting but it isn't easy, judging by their diaries:

	A	B
Mon	Dentist	Free
Tue	Free	Visit to Birmingham
Wed	Afternoon visit	Dentist 11 am
Thur	10.30 Meting	Free
Fri	Meting at 2.30	Meeting all morning

The Pyramid

This refers to the class interaction multiplying from two's to four's and so on. Once the pair come to an agreement or complete their inquiry, they go on to check with the pair next to them, the class thus working in quartets. Various changes and challenges in the materials then move them to explore in eight's and then in sixteen's, until eventually the whole class is involved each with everyone.

Find two people in a crowd with something in common

Here, the situation is like a market survey, asking people their opinion or personal information. Each student has a slightly different task. The rush to find two people who for example think idealism is more important than materialism could produce twice as many questions as there are people in the class, in less than two minutes, with everyone taking part.

Dialogues

You want your class not only to understand dialogues but also to absorb and reproduce what they contain, whether in terms of acting out or improvisation. If you have a large class, you will need to use dialogues with six or seven characters so that you can involve more students at a time. The following is a suggested sequence, using a recorded dialogue, of how to get your class to act out:

(a) Play the tape as many times as necessary for general comprehension. Ask questions.

(b) Play it line by line, getting the whole class to repeat.

(c) Do the same, getting individuals to repeat.

(d) Get as many students as there are characters in the dialogue *up on their feet*, in front of the class. Give them their roles and get them to repeat line by line.

(e) Give out the script and get each group to act out. Go round checking on pronunciation and realistic role playing.

(f) Take the script away and get students to say what they want, allowing improvisation.

(g) Get everyone to learn a part at home, and then act it out the next day from memory. This is ideal for 'Social English', for structured dialogues, and for four line dialogues.

Chain stories

These are used at intermediate and advanced stages, as they depend on improvisation. You make a statement and the students supply a new sentence.

'There was a knock on the door....'

'He went to the door and opened it.'

'A man with a gun was standing there.'

'He shut the door quickly.'

'The man with the gun fired at the door.'

You can use it for business classes, getting them to outline economic or commercial developments, or the history of their firm.

In this way, chain stories become a stage in general studies. These stages could be:

- 1 Giving and eliciting information where necessary.
- 2 Getting students to recount.
- 3 Discussion.

Visual aids can help here: get objects, photographs or drawings that relate to your general theme.

In class, it is probably best to limit students to one sentence, and get the narrative moving as fast as possible. Correct gently. From time to time, get students to recall everything that has been said so far.

It is a feature of communicative methodology that practice follows quickly upon presentation. It may start with choral repetition by the students of the language presented and then move into individual responses directed by the teacher. The teacher can ask students to repeat a line and give the answer himself. He can then ask individual students to ask the questions and prompt individual answers. When he is sure that students are competent (not necessarily perfect - see above) in handling the language, he can put the students into pairs and ask them to practise the dialogues with each member of the pair taking it in turns to perform the two roles and make appropriate substitutions. It can be seen that, even with material and operations as simple as these, some amount of information gap can be introduced.

Elements of information gap and feedback can be increased by some very simple means, beyond suggesting 'prompts' from which a free choice can be made by the learners. The 'conversation grid' below illustrates a means of offering great freedom, while at the same time making clear to the learner the 'moves' that are open to him during practice. In this case the particular exponents chosen by each speaker are not laid down, but the plan is kept to. The precise content, course and outcome of the conversation can be determined and influenced by either speaker. In this particular case, learners have just practised asking where something is (outdoors in a town) and giving directions. One student has a list of places he/she wants to find and another has a map of a town.

Practice

Have conversations like the ones below.

Note here that the whole operation is being taught and practised. How a student answers the questions affects the outcome of the conversation in terms of what it is appropriate to say. This aspect of feedback is catered for in 'End

conversation' on the grid, because students have to discriminate between what they say if they are helped and what they say if they are not. Clearly this material is intended for pair practice, but could also be used with the teacher taking one part. This activity, using conversation grids, can be adapted for use with groups of three or more.

The application of the procedure described above is not confined to beginner or elementary level. Any interaction that is composed of a limited number of easily defined 'moves' may be practised in this way. However, this technique cannot be applied to sustained and extended practice, where even the wide limits set by conversation grids would inhibit the learner's freedom too much. Accordingly, the communicative approach emphasises the importance of games and role-plays as a way of setting limits to activity that are sufficiently well-defined, yet also sufficiently wide, to promote practice in using language freely over longer periods of time.

1. *Telling jokes*

This is difficult in any language, and yet it is an essential part of conversation and personal communication. Although most textbooks have elements of humour, there are few which actually encourage students to produce it themselves.

One obvious approach is to get each student to think of a joke, prepare it for homework, rehearse it by him/herself and then tell it in class. It is essential to ensure fluency and verve, and to emphasise the importance of leading up to the climax with the right stress and intonation. It doesn't matter particularly whether the rest of the class have heard the story before. It is important to give a lot of encouragement and minimise the jeers that result from a bad, or badly told, joke. Let us go through one of the many ways of teaching through jokes:

1. Tell the joke:

There was an Italian living in London. One day, he bought a large melon and walked along Piccadilly with it. A man stopped him. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'but can you tell me the way to Trafalgar Square?'

The Italian spoke good English and he knew where Trafalgar Square was, but he just looked at the man, and he couldn't say anything: His lips moved but no words came out, and a look of pain came over his face.

'What's wrong?' asked the other man.

The Italian suddenly held out the melon and the man took it. 'Ah,' said the Italian, smiling and moving his hands, 'you go straight down there to Leicester Square and then turn right down Charing Cross Road.' Now that his hands were free, he could speak.

1. Ask questions: Where was the Italian? Had he bought an apple? Why did a man stop him? etc. Make sure by the end of your questioning that everybody understands.

2. Take the story in sections. Get a student to set the situation; another to describe the Italian's frustration; another to describe what the Italian did; another to reproduce the Italian's directions; another to say the last line. Work on this in terms of natural narrative style, with dramatic climaxes, and the appropriate stress and intonation.

3. Get students to act out the dialogue. Get a large object for one of them to hold, and get a good mimed representation of the Italian's frustration, and the other man's perplexity.

4. Get students telling the whole story with as much skill as possible.

5. Get the students to write out the story for homework.

6. Several days or weeks later, get students telling the whole story from memory with any improvisation they wish, for revision.

I've deliberately chosen a story which teases one nationality to emphasise that you must be careful with jokes or stories you choose. This might conceivably offend a touchy Italian class. Again, it is unlikely to go down with a group of students in Japan because they probably know little about Italians, anyway, and therefore might not see the point. When preparing beforehand, write out your story in the kind of language that your students understand easily. Fluency is the object here, and if there are a lot of unknown words and concepts, the whole exercise will be slow and sticky and difficult. Divide your story up into natural stages and try to bring in as much dialogue as you can for acting out. Record it on tape if possible.

This is bound to be an artificial exercise, but your students can then apply what they have learnt to produce their own stories with greater confidence. However, don't go on interminably, so that they never want to tell a story in English again. As always, the balance is between methodical teaching and student involvement. This requires systematic preparation beforehand, flexibility in the classroom and lightness of touch.

Talks/lecturettes

These accustom students to giving talks in front of other people. Make sure the subject is one that the speaker knows a lot about. Don't get all your class to prepare lecturettes at the same time, as you will never be able to get through them in the next few periods. Perhaps the best way is to have one student giving a short lecturette every lesson. Make sure they are very short, or they will engulf your timetable. Also use them as a means of teaching remedial English: get other students noting down mistakes while the talk is going on; then discuss them afterwards.

Conversation

Most classes are designed to practise specific speaking or listening skills. However, there should be times when students can express themselves without any aim in mind except general conversation.

This can begin at an early stage with students chatting about their daily programme, or what they did the previous evening, or where they live, or their last holiday. The subject of conversation has to be chosen carefully within the limits of what the students know.

At intermediate stages, it should be possible to discuss themes. Suggest these and get the class to do the same. Then decide on the one which interests most of them. Preferably, get them to prepare an outline for homework in note form, putting forward the arguments in favour and against, and finally a summary of views. You correct it and when you give it back you engender a discussion.

In this way, you involve them by making them work out their views, so you can encourage argument during the discussion.

At other times, you may find that discussions need no preparation and that they spring up spontaneously. Try to take advantage of this. Remember that you probably teach most when your students really want to say something in English. So adapt your timetable, as long as the subject interests most of the class, but don't get carried away.

In any discussion, your role is normally that of a stimulator. Don't regard these periods simply as opportunities to express views of your own. Throw in ideas if there is a long lull, or you feel that a new idea will provoke more discussion. Make sure that everyone speaks, by asking questions, or by steering the discussion towards people who haven't said anything.

Discussions can be provoked in many ways: by reading a passage, or book, or story, and then discussing it; by going to see a film as a class and then talking about it afterwards; by interpolating the reading of newspapers with discussions on news items; by getting students to deliver lecturettes and then going over what they have said. Very often the best themes are personal but common to everyone: early schooldays, first memories, illness, accidents, friendship; or for adults: first jobs, last exams, criticisms of school/university, ambition, etc.

Insistent correction can hinder expression. However, it is possible to correct almost as an aside. Otherwise, note flagrant mistakes and go over them afterwards.

Don't forget to integrate discussion with other forms of study. Follow up with a composition on the same theme if you feel that your class are still interested in the subject. Or teach relevant vocabulary or idiom before or after, prompting with it, if necessary, during the discussion. Because students need this new language they will absorb it more readily.

Role playing and improvisation

Acting out dialogue has already been mentioned. Acting in language learning is valuable because we are all, perhaps, actors when speaking another language; because it accustoms students to perform in front of others, which is what they have to do outside the classroom; because it helps them to overcome the nervousness which this entails; because it gets them speaking expressively in a situation, and thus makes them more aware of stress and intonation in speech;

because it involves everyone, as those in the 'audience' want to see how their fellow students will perform, conscious that they too will soon be on 'stage' themselves.

It is also possible that we learn a language best when we approach it indirectly. A child does not concentrate on vocabulary, structure, and idiom, but on what it wants, and language emerges as an indirect product of this. In the same way, students concentrating on a role, with movements and stage 'business', will often produce more natural language than those with purely linguistic objectives.

Some teachers feel that acting out is impractical with shy students. In fact, people are often reluctant to speak a foreign language because they are afraid of making a fool of themselves. When acting, however, they can shield their own personalities with the role they are playing.

The real value of acting out is as a first stage towards improvisation, as a memorised dialogue is of doubtful value except on formalised occasions, such as introductions, asking for things in a shop, polite refusals, etc.

In role playing, you have three elements: what the characters want, who they are, and their moods or attitudes at the time. These elements are then affected by how the situation develops.

In this paper I have tried to show how the communicative approach to teaching speaking can be organised to teach whole operations. It has to provide input in the form of language appropriate for the operation, carefully contextualised with regard to the roles of the speakers, their attitudes, ages and intentions. Practice takes the form of rapid transfer to further applications of the target operation, thereby putting language to use as soon as possible. Role-plays and games are important because they present learners with the opportunity to practise speaking under conditions that are as close as possible to those of normal communication, involving information gap, choice and feedback. The criterion for success is how well the learner can perform the target operations, responding to information gap and feedback, given the language he or she has at his disposal. From a communicative point of view, using language well is not a simple question of grammaticality, but one of overall appropriacy and acceptability.

How far instruction can proceed entirely on communicative lines is a matter of intense debate. One thing appears certain: it is only by using language under the conditions which a communicative approach tries to create and in the way this approach advocates that one can develop, as a learner, one's ability to use language outside the institution where it is being learnt. Any approach which does not recognise the insights of the communicative approach and incorporate them into instruction misrepresents to the learner what the ultimate task in learning a language is.

