

ORAL COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH :

A change in classroom management

By : Alice Kawauchi

What would help make a successful teaching for our Japanese students enrolled in various levels of English conversation classes? Today, the instructors impose their own views of the learners' needs and aspirations. However, another approach would be to gather specific information of :

- who the learners are
- what they bring to class
- why they have signed up for the course
- what expectations they have from the course.

Once the instructors have established the above, they have a two-fold task. First, they have to answer for the specific needs of the group as a whole. This is relatively easy task to accomplish if the group is homogeneous enough in terms of interests, occupation, age, educational background, linguistic level, etc. However, this is not the case in most classes. Since the future needs of the learners cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty and because of the lack of self motivation of the learners, motivation must be created or encouraged by the instructors alone.

Along with the needs of the group, instructors also have to see

to it that the individual desires are given due attention. The group is usually considered as one nameless population in a classroom, but in reality, the learners are of various individuals. Certainly personal differences in motivation, at times, age, linguistic level, intelligence, etc., should not be disregarded. In other words, the communicative instructors must cope with problems arising from logical discussions between group coherence and group differences.

Frequently, the instructors will relate the content of the lesson to the learners own lives and encourage the learners to bring their own background knowledge to the discussion. By and large, the learners fall into two distinct groups. The first group of learners are those who are eager to develop their mastery of the English language in oral communication. The second group of learners fall into the group intensively listening to the instructors, but will not attempt to reply to questions directed to them, or try to have any interaction with the instructors or even with their fellow classmates in English Conversation classes. Very frequently, these quiet learners are quite active speakers amongst themselves in their native language. They are fearful of the number of clarification requests and comprehension checks the instructors inevitably make when there is any kind of interaction between the two.

This is all because the communicative approach instructors are simultaneously paying attention to meaning and form used by the learners. The communicative approach instructors' role is to listen carefully not only to what the learners are saying and transferring information to the listeners, but also how the learners are expressing themselves linguistically. This methodology of conducting English Con-

versation classes is not understood by the learners. In previous teaching methods, instructors were not required to listen closely to WHAT the learners had to say but to HOW they said it. That is, WHAT LINGUISTIC means the message was uttered.

For instance, in the audio lingual method, the instructors conducted the classes without worrying about the content of the 'conversation' or 'utterance' What took place in these classes was practicing a certain key word or phrase through drilling, known as the 'mimic-memory' (mim-mem) technique. Automatically, after a lengthy period of aural-oral practice or drill, the instructors would ask the students follow-up questions to elicit from them answers that incorporated the drilled sentences. The students uttered a practiced sentence almost in a robotic manner. In many cases, the learners knew HOW to answer but little realized WHAT was meant by the drilled sentence. In other words, the learners did not understand the use of the drilled language. This is because the question had not been asked in order to elicit information but only to make certain the members of the class could adequately use the practiced structure in response to a given question.

The responsibility of the audio-lingual instructors' job was easier than the communicative instructors'. The former had only to check the correctness of the practiced material. However, in the latter instructors' case, they have to consider the learners' production of meaning and form.

Before the advent of the communicative approach English instructors were subject teachers much like the math or history teachers. Their job was to input knowledge ABOUT the English language as well as to develop the knowledge OF the English language as effec-

tively as they could.

The communicative approach instructors have a very different task. In a communicative approach classroom there is interaction, much like the idea of the instructors and learners as collaborators; like the instructors who give out all the knowledge as quickly as possible and then both the instructors and learners spend the rest of the class time using the knowledge to learn new things; like the idea of a very rigorous work when the instructors get very tired as well as the learners; like the idea of the learners finding themselves doing a wide range of activities in the classroom and investing themselves to acquire different knowledge.

One of the chief dogma of the communicative approach is that the foreign language can be learned only in REAL communicative situations, where REAL messages are exchanged. Since there is no true communication without a person wanting to say or find out something, instructors have to create appropriate conditions for such needs to arise and get expressed. They have to initiate and stimulate activities whereby the learners can participate their whole selves, i. e., they must comprehend WHAT the speaker said and follow this up with the appropriate reply -- not with a pat answer that was drilled/memorized a few minutes ago. When the learners are communicating through the communicative approach method, the instructors must also monitor the give and take between learners to ensure that the speakers are truly relaying meaning through the use of proper form.

In other words, in the communicative approach classroom, learners' *real-like* conversations take place which cover a wide range of human knowledge and experience. Also, the learners are viewed as human

individuals who possess personal dignity and integrity as well as having ideas, thoughts, needs and sentiments. These aspects should be respected when learners are genuinely interested in their classmates. In order for learners to perform real communication, there must be some kind of 'gap' (information or opinion) which the learners seek to gather as they are talking to each other. When this takes place, the learners as well as instructors are open to all participants' classroom interactions. In such an environment, the instructors' role has changed from that of previous instructors' role. The communicative instructors' role is to see that the learning takes place. Therefore, they take the 'back-seat' role. That is to say, as conductors, they relax their control of the class; as facilitators, they make gentle corrections; as organizers, they set up activities and then step aside; as participants, they stay in the background; as resource, they offer help, but only when requested (Harmer 1983).

In the communicative approach, the instructors are aware that success of the learners' learning process is to a large extent dependent on the instructors' ability to withdraw. To withdraw means to step aside or reduce their talking time during class time. This is difficult to do for no longer are the instructors in the limelight. Yet, the result of doing this will usually show a rapid speaking development of the learners. The activity must be done by the learners working by themselves rather than with the instructors. This means the instructors are not involved in correcting what the learners say. The instructors' role is to assess the learners' ability based primarily on whether they have achieved their communicative purpose, not necessarily whether the language used was grammatically correct. This new

concept of instructors' role is easier for the instructors to perform: for the most part, the learners have a difficult time in adjusting to this new instructors' role for all through their formal school life, the teachers were the dominant 'actors' in the classroom.

The role has not only changed for the instructors in the communicative approach classroom. Now, the spotlight is on the learners. The communicative instructors are in a way like supporting actors in a play, i. e., they have hardly any words to say, yet are necessary in order to have the drama in the classroom come to life.

Of course, this withdrawal is only with regard to the instructors' talking time in the classroom. The control of the classroom remains in the hands of the instructors. Stevick (1980) suggests that there must be a way "which will allow the teacher to keep nearly 100 per cent of the 'control,' while at the same time, the learners are exercising nearly 100 percent of the initiative."

Communicative teaching offers a chance for learner/learner interaction independent of the instructors. This technique provides the learners to determine what they want to say. This is unfamiliar teaching methodology for most junior and senior high school teachers and students alike. In the lower schools, most classrooms are conducted on the audio-lingual method where the language teaching emphasis is placed on repetition, teacher control and grammar translation. Too often, students have spent years and years in the classroom sitting and listening, occasionally taking a few notes, sometimes listening very intently to somebody reading something from a book, perhaps every once in a while answering questions asked by the instructors. There is not enough variety of activities in most classrooms -- such as

helping learners discuss about tangible things or having them teach other learners.

A conversation classroom can be revolutionized when instructors distinguish between just giving stored knowledge to learners and helping them take on the responsibility of reaching into the stored knowledge and discover ways to use it in a variety of ways.

In many English Conversation classrooms, the most significant uses of language are by the instructors. The instructors set up the task, select the topics and problems for class discussion, specify the procedures, explain the information, provide the definitions, ask the questions, and even tell the learners why the material is important to them. Perhaps the instructors are doing too much for the students. The result is that the instructors improve their own learning and language at the expense of the learners.

The instructors should examine their classrooms as a language learning environment. The primary aim of the communicative teaching method is to develop the learners' ability to communicate through active face to face interaction. The instructors need to ask how much opportunity the learners have to talk using varied logical functions, for varied purposes and consequences, and for varied audiences. For example, how often in the past weeks or months have learners used their own language (as opposed to recalling the language of the textbook) to explain, interpret, describe, define, give an opinion, infer, speculate, predict, paraphrase, summarize, compare or entertain? In many English Conversation classrooms, the most significant uses of language are performed by the instructors. It must be emphasized that the human communication taking place in the classroom between

learners provide classroom experiences which involve transferring or using the learned language into acquired language and at the same time provide good opportunities for good human relationship development. In other words, it is not enough to know, learners must learn to DO. This is the basic principle behind the CLL methodology (La Forge 1977).

In the communicative approach, the learners have the opportunity to use the language :

- for a purpose, so that mistakes do matter
- to express their own feelings, emotions, fears, etc., not what someone else tells them.

Even though the speaking is forced on the learners, they must feel a real need to communicate. The aim of the communicative teaching method is to develop the learners' ability to communicate through active face to face interaction. In this interaction, the learners must concentrate on WHAT they are saying, not HOW they say it. They must have some 'message' or 'information' they want to get across or receive. The activity must involve the learners to use a variety of language, not just one specific language form. They should feel free to improvise, use whatever resources they choose. The choice of what language to be used rests with the learners. For the Japanese learners to do the above is very difficult since they have never been placed in such a position where they are the main stars -- not the instructors as in previous learning situations.

Communicative competence has to do with much more than sentence-level grammatical competence. It has to do with social interaction. Communicative competence has to do with REAL speaker/listener

who understand, express and negotiate meaning in many situations. Communication is primarily a negotiation between speaker and listener. This is quite true in the multitude of interpersonal transactions that take place daily. In the attempt to understand the speaker, to put his utterance into context by asking who is speaking, why, when, how, etc., the listener is able to reply. Once meaning is taken into account, negotiation and interpretation appear to be the essence of communication. Thus, communication is always a two-way street.

In the communicative approach classroom, this means the involvement of learners in a dynamic and interactive communicative practice. Second language acquisition research has documented the importance of communication practice in the development of communicative competence. Lesson practice should be what the learners MUST do. In other words, the English they use should involve the learners in both physical as well as psychological way, in an intellectual way. The communication should involve the learners in the experience of language as a network of relations between people, things and events.

This, of course, requires movement, interaction and communication. The class time should be spent in communicative activities, activities where the focus is on meaning rather than on form. However, the communicative activities should involve the learners' attention in paying attention to form, accuracy, pronunciation, intonation, etc. during the experience of communication. The learners should also become aware of the options, the choices they can make among the possibilities. When these options and choices are made automatically, then the learners are on their way in acquiring the second language for meaning and use -- to communicate facts, ideas, feelings, requests,

questions, warnings, etc. The instructors' role is to teach/train the learners to use the English language as a living language. English is a living language, not a dead language like Latin.

As the learners are performing in the communicative activity, there should be supportive social setting. That is to say, the learners help each other and exchange information as suggested in the communication language learning approach emphasized by La Forge and others who practice the CLL method. The end result is the learners have acquired knowledge. Krashen (1977) describes a second language learners' performance is through 'acquisition' and 'learned.' 'Acquisition' is a result of a process of creative use of the language by the learners and thus they have internalized the rules of the second language subconsciously. In acquired knowledge, learners are able to have spontaneous conversation using acquired knowledge of language use, whereas in 'learnt' knowledge, language is used for written examination.

Man communicates because he needs to feel he is a part of the human family, the human society. And, language is a tool to get a basic function accomplished. Instructors and learners must accept the idea that the classroom is a small community, and by emphasizing this fact, the interaction taking place here does have legitimacy for concentrated, energetic, enjoyable experience that will bear fruit sometime later in the 'outside' world.

References

- HARMER, J. 1983. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. London: Longman.
- KRASHEN, S. 1977. *The Monitor Model for Adult Second Language*. N. Y. : Regents Publishing Co.
- La FORGE, P. 1/1977. *Community Language Learning An : Experiment in Japan*. Washington, D. C. : English Teaching Forum.
- LITTLEWOOD, W. 1981. *Communicative Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MEDGYES, P. 1986. *Queries from a Communicative Teacher*. ELT Journal, Vol. 40/2 4/1986. London: Oxford University Press.
- MOSKOWITZ, G. 1987. *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Classroom*. Rowley, MA. : Newbury House.
- O' NEIL, R. 1/1982. *Why use Textbooks*. ELT Journal, Vol. 36/2. 1/1982. London: Oxford University Press.
- PALMER, H. 1938. *A Grammar of English Words*. London: Longman.
- RIVERS, W. M. 1968. *Teaching Foreign Language Skills*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press.
- SAVIGNON, S. 10/1987. *What's What in Communicative Language Teaching*. Washington, D. C. : English Teaching Forum.
- STEVICK, E. W. 1976. *Memory, Meaning and Method*. Rowley, MA. : Newbury House.
1980. *Teaching Languages : A Way and Ways*. Rowley, MA. : Newbury House.