TEACHING COMMUNICATIVE GRAMMAR AT THE DISCOURSE LEVEL

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Communicative grammar is based on the communicative approach to the teaching of second/foreign languages. Language structures must not be taught in isolation but integrated to the four skills of language: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In this way a structure is practiced orally and in written form. Grammatical patterns must not only be learned at the utterance level but at the discourse level; the main objective focuses on the development of communicative grammatical competence, which is understood as the ability to use and understand a structure in a variety of situations spontaneously. The approach calls for a certain balance between pre-communicative and communicative activities: the first prepare the learner to handle the language rules for actual communication and the latter enable him to use the structures in real communication. The students must not only do drills and pre-communicative exercises in class, but they must interact and communicate with other speakers when they use the patterns they are studying. Classes are planned in a way that the students use the structures naturally and not artificially, and they require time and practice to internalize those patterns by using a process in which grammatical structures are recycled with more complex variations.

Regarding the teaching of grammar, what has been done lately in second/foreign language classes is a presentation of grammatical patterns, followed by some drilling and structural exercises with little or no communicative application of those patterns in context. Actually past approaches have dealt mainly with the achievement of linguistic knowledge, one important aspect of language but not necessarily the only one. The mastery of the sound system and structural patterns of language, which is

called linguistic competence, was the aim. Therefore, communication was assigned a second place. It was not considered important to be taught during the process. This element was set aside in order to be developed by students on their own.

The communicative approach goes beyond the presentation and development of linguistic structures as the only means of developing the communicative ability. This linguistic structure enables students to give form to their ideas, intentions and concepts. But it is not given top priority as other structural approaches do.

There are other important elements that contribute to the establishment of a communicative act. They are classified as functions (intention or purpose), notions (of place, time, space, dimension, etc.), as well as the topic, the situation, the communicative and the interactive aspect. Thus, functions or illocutionary acts, imply a communicative purpose, "what people want to do or what they want to accomplish through speech" (Finocchiaro, p.13). Notions are "meaning elements which may be expressed through nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives, or adverbs" (Finocchiaro, p.14), what Wilkins has called "semantico-grammatical categories" (Johnson, p.35). These categories are abstract concepts that are generally realized linguistically (for example, the notion of location is manifested in prepositions: "besides", "in front of", "on the right", etc). The other aspects provide the social framework where participants of a communicative act interact.

The teacher must provide communicative practice for students to achieve non-linguistic goals such as asking for permission to do something, getting someone to do something, giving excuses, asking for help, etc. Learning activities must demand achievement of a particular task other than mere manipulation of language rules. This approach is based on the development of the ability to use language in real-life situations more than on manipulation of linguistic structures, which do not enable speakers to interact naturally in a real communicative act. "Grammatical form is taught not as an end itself, but as a means of carrying out communicative intent" (Salimbene, p.50).

This language aspect which gives meaning to communication is known as language use, opposed to what The Audio-Lingual Approach claimed as the ultimate goal of learning, usage. These two aspects are

what Widdowson (Brumfit and Johnson, p.118) has called "Value" and "Signification". He says that many teachers and language teaching specialists believe that it is not necessary to teach "value". For them, teaching "Signification" provides learners with the essentials of language, and they also affirm that it is a simple and easy task to use "value" when we need to communicate. However, for students to use the language rules in real communication, these rules would have to be practiced in context in order to be integrated to the communicative competence.

Moreover, to really ensure communication in the class students have to accomplish the two main components of discourse: *cohesion* and *coherence*. "When people produce a sentence in the course of a normal communicative activity they simultaneously do two things. They express a proposition of one kind or another and at the same time in expressing that proposition they perform some kind of illocutionary act" (Widdowson, p.22). First each sentence or utterance has its own separate meaning, a semantic meaning. This individual meaning is what is called propositional meaning. The appropriate link of one proposition with another is known as *cohesion*, or propositional development. *Coherence* is achieved by the relationship of the illocutionary acts, or functions, that those propositions convey.

When these two elements are present in a genuine exchange by two or more participants, we can talk about discourse of some sort. And when one deals with discourse, one is dealing with authentic communication. This takes us to what the communicative approach aims at, communicative competence which involves "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting - that is, in a spontaneous transaction involving two or more other speakers" (Savignon, p.1). Learners must be able to interact with people in a natural way, to respond appropriately, to participate or interrupt when he is expected to do so, to initiate or close a conversation, to use the appropriate register according to the context, in fact, to interpret and produce genuine discourse.

For a broader understanding of the concept communicative competence, let us examine Savignon's definition (1987, p. 16-17):
...the ability to negotiate meaning, to successfully combine a knowledge of linguistic and socio-linguistic rules in communicative interactions...Communicative competence...has to do with much more than sentence-level grammatical competence; it has to do with social interaction...with real speaker-listeners who interpret, express, and negotiate meaning in many, many different settings...The term applies to both oral and written communication, in academic as well as non-academic settings.

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Furthermore, learning activities must respond to what a student needs to communicate at a certain moment. They should not be intended to force students to communicate their ideas grammatically correct, setting aside his intention or communicative purpose. "The use of a language is the objective, and the mastery of the formal patterns, or usage, of that language is a means to achieve this objective" (Carrol, p.7). What is important is what one is going to say, not how to say it. That is why rules about language must not be taught in isolation, but they must be integrated with language use. Besides, we must prevent language from becoming a subject of theoretical study: language is acquired only through constant conversational practice in situations similar to real life.

In communicative language teaching, interaction is an essential component. When speakers communicate, they have to interact in order to transmit information and thus achieve a purpose. When interacting, the interlocutors have to accomplish a task in order to really carry out a communicative act. And in this exchange of ideas and intentions, they have to cooperate with one another to construct an on-going, coherent piece of discourse. In other words, they have to negotiate their purposes in such a way that one speaker's participation corresponds to the participation of another. In this way they achieve communication. Therefore, any communicative activity must account for these important components of communicative learning.

The learning activities in any language class are divided in two categories: communicative and pre-communicative activities. The first are tasks based on the principles underlying the process of communication. They are specially designed to convey an intention or purpose and to simulate natural, real-life contexts where native speakers interact spontaneously. Communicative interaction between two or more speakers is paramount; the participants must get immediate feedback. Moreover, these activities call for opportunities to negotiate meanings appropriately. When doing this, students interact communicatively by encouraging cooperative relationships among them (Larsen-Freeman, p.132). In other words, these activities have to provide possibilities for the learner to "work with language at the discourse or suprasentencial (above the sentence) level. They must learn about cohesion and coherence, those properties of language which bind the sentences together" (Larsen-Freeman, p.129). The aim of these activities is the development of the ability to use the language as a whole, and not only the manipulation of the separate components of it.

In addition, many of these activities present a communicative social context, a situation, where learners can interact appropriately. And students should be given opportunities to express their own ideas and opinions. When doing this, they have to think of the target language as a vehicle for communication, not just the object of study (Larsen-Freeman, p.128). Some other activities of this type also present an information gap where unknown information is conveyed, and some doubt is present. When communicating, a speaker has a choice not only about what to say, but also how to say it (Larsen-Freeman, p.130). "The concept of conveying information involves, as many linguists have testified, a notion of doubt...and doubt implies the existence of alternatives - where choice, selection or discrimination is called for." (Cherry, p.168, quoted in Litllewood, pp.150-152). All this means that in an act of communication, the receiver must not know the information that the sender is going to transmit to him. This information must be new for one of the partners. According to Keith Johnson, "we can only say that we are transmitting information to someone if he doesn't know it yet" (Johnson, pp.150-151)

Among these activities are discussions, role-plays, games, performances, questions that require spontaneous interaction, stated situations, spontaneous conversations and any other activity that includes interaction.

The previous characteristics are mostly applied to oral activities. For the listening skill students have to listen to oral material with a purpose: they have to listen in order to carry out a specific illocutionary act, which makes the listening task communicative. On the other hand, listening activities that do not require that the student listens to accomplish a task while listening are not included in this category. Pre-listening and post-listening activities are communicative if they convey an intention. For example, students should listen to an excerpt for later on writing about it, completing a chart, answering questions, discussing, and so on.

Likewise, when a reading activity is considered communicative, it must involve a purpose or intention to be carried out. Students have to read with a purpose in mind; so that they can perform some task later. Reading activities sometimes require some discussion or problem solving, which also makes this written elicitation communicative.

Similarly for writing activities to be communicative, students have to communicate their own ideas coherently and cohesively (in discourse).

They may be given the topic, but they might be allowed to express their opinions and select the way they would like to communicate them. Also they use the grammar and vocabulary according to their needs, although some suggestions may be given with regard to the topic, the grammar, vocabulary and the task itself. Also they have to carry out a purpose or communicative intent when communicating in writing. Many times they are asked to write reports, post cards, letters, paragraphs or compositions, descriptions, dialogues as well as to complete forms, to answer questions, to give advice, to make up advertisements, schedules, guides, shopping lists, menus, and so on.

On the contrary, the pre-communicative activities are designed for learners to practice specific parts of discourse, not discourse as a whole. They prepare the ground for actual spontaneous communication. They "aim to equip the learner with some of the skills required for communication, without actually requiring him to perform communicative acts" (Litllewood, p.8). These activities are mainly controlled tasks to help students manipulate particular grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation or any other aspect that requires detailed practice without actually accomplishing an illocutionary act. Their focus is "more on language forms to be learnt than on meanings to be communicated" (Litllewood, p.16). "It is not that the students are not aware of meaning, but that they do not need it to perform this type of activities, and that many of them are likely to focus only on the structural transformations they have to make" (Litllewood, p.9).

Moreover, these activities do not present any exchange of unknown information and no doubt with respect to choices. The only element of doubt is when a speaker is given two or more choices, such as in a multiple-choice exercise, for him to select one. But in this case, both partners know the alternatives beforehand. "It is the absence of this element of doubt in much language teaching which makes it non-communicative (Cherry, p.168, quoted in Litllewood, p.152).

Among these activities, we can find, matching, blank filling, question and answer exercises dealing with known information, comprehension questions that require repeating information heard or read, exercises dealing with separate words or sounds, sentence formation, dialogues, drills and any other transformational exercise. These activities have characterized other more traditional approaches. In the past most language courses were focused exclusively on this type of activities setting aside the communicative aspect, which is the vehicle for internalization of vocabulary and language structure.

Another concern of the Communicative Approach is the recently rising interest in sociolinguistic matters. This aspect has been left out of language instruction for years, which is very important because sociolinguistics involves the extralinguistic factors that determine the appropriateness of language in a communicative act. In other words, it involves the setting and social conventions which determine the register that a speaker is going to use. Speakers vary their speech according to the characteristics of their interlocutor and the socio-cultural elements of the situation where they interact. They may use an informal register or style: casual, colloquial or familiar; or a formal one: authoritative, diplomatic or academic. Besides knowing what to say and how to say it, speakers must know when and where to say it in order not to offend people or to avoid being misunderstood. "Among other aspects, the speaker may vary the pronunciation of consonants and vowels, intonation, speed of speech, vocabulary, utterance length, and the type of structure used" (author's translation from Gapper, p.32).

Some of the most important aspects affecting register selection are age, sex, status, dialect and other social conventions from the target culture. Unconsciously, interlocutors analyze these aspects before or at the moment of the elicitation of speech.

In the past what was done regarding this socio-linguistic aspect was a detailed study of the target culture. Students had to go through materials about the cultural and suporting expression of the target culture. Many times, they had to memorize information concerning dates, events, famous people, political affairs, meals, clothing, seasons, history and artistic expressions. This particular concept of culture is not used as it was before in the communicative approach. What is really important is that students learn some cultural aspects and social conventions which enable them to interact appropriately with native speakers without misunderstanding or insulting them.

That unilateral concept of culture along with other types of cultural or social aspects were mostly presented to students through readings or listening excerpts which were generally written by textbook writers or other language professionals. This material was far from being natural, genuine texts from the target culture. They were mainly texts which had been modified to conform to particular pedagogic and linguistic criteria. In contrast, the communicative approach calls for the use of authentic reading or listening materials other than simulated or modified texts.

Knowing how to switch and identify the different socio-linguistic registers, the students will be able to use the grammatical patterns they are studying more appropriately. They will be capable of distinguishing and using the different variations of grammatical structures according to the context and the level of formality. Some grammatical structures are more likely to appear in some social situations than in others. For example, two-word verbs are common to be found in informal communication more than their counterpart one-word verbs, and inverted word order are more likely to be used in written formal texts than in everyday language.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BASES

The communicative approach is based on the psychological approach called Cognitivism. According to its basic tenets, humans are considered thinking individuals who are capable of performing the most difficult tasks and are able to face any threat: analyzing, processing and assimilating data dynamically. "Cognition" means the mental process or faculty through which knowledge is acquired; it implies a purpose and for implication is internal and is subject to the individual's control. "Thus, the expression cognitive process refers to the individual's internal mental operations, such as daydreaming or manipulation of abstract symbolic concepts such as to solve some complex problem" (Chastain, p.131). Mouly (Chastain, p.131) compares this cognitive mental process with the strength and power of a whirl or hurricane. "Knowledge is acquired, not implanted...in this sense, there aren't passive students" (Chastain, p.131).

When referring to the way language is learned, we need to understand how linguistic knowledge originates in the mind. According to Clark and Clark (p.259), storage of language is achieved by the integration of two important parts of the brain: the word-storage stage and the conceptual stage. In the first stage, forms of words (pronunciation, stress, definitions, gender, number of syllables, letters or phonemes, etc.) are stored; while in the latter, concepts and images of words are conformed. Concepts are conceived when individuals interact in situations similar to those in real life. A situation, with the use of authentic relia if possible, is called for so that the images and the concepts of vocabulary, structures and the situations themselves are built up in the mind while learners use the language with a communicative purpose. That is why it is very important not to learn words by memory because memorization only reaches the first stage, which refers to the theoretical aspects of language. Learning from practicing items and structures in context with communicative intention is what helps integrate these two stages in the mind.

To ensure learning of particular grammar or vocabulary, learning activities should provide opportunities that enable the student to get grammatical patterns or words to connect these two stages. If he reaches only one, learning is not achieved because there is not enough retention of language. Thus these activities must let learners find strategies to unify these two stages.

Similarly in communicative teaching, time must be provided for what Keith Johnson has called "Incubation Process" (Johnson, p.138). When language learners are in contact with a grammatical pattern or vocabulary item, there is a certain period of time so that they can process it or integrate it into their memory. This takes some time; obviously that process cannot be carried out with only one contact. According to Janice Yalden (p.26), an element is retained in the mind if it is practiced during a certain period of time and in different contexts.

Thus learning activities must account for this process of language incubation. They have to provide students with opportunities to assimilate structures and vocabulary through constant practice in context. The more contact students have with a particular item the better learning, or incubation, is achieved.

THE LISTENING AND READING MATERIAL

If readings or written texts for introducing specific grammatical patterns are used, some general principles and guidelines must be taken into account in order to respond to the demands of communicative language teaching. In the communicative approach, authentic material is required for students to get a clear picture of the target culture. Materials designed for pedagogical purposes distort the way native speakers communicate and may show a different view of the target culture.

When dealing with written or aural material, teachers always face several problems concerning authenticity of texts. Due to this fact, Geddes and White (Omaggio, pp.128-129) propose two categories to distinguish between two kinds of discourse: *Unmodified Authentic Discourse* and *Simulated Authentic Discourse*. The first is material designed for native speakers in their own culture and the second is designed for pedagogical purposes. We will be analyzing discourse in listening texts precisely along Geddes' and White's categorization. These two categories are only described in a general sense in

the book *Teaching Language in Context Proficiency-oriented Instruction* by Omaggio; therefore for our purpose, some detailed criteria have been expanded to provide specific notions and characteristics of each of these two pieces of discourse. Besides, the term "discourse" used by these authors has been replaced by "language", which is a more practical term.

1 UNMODIFIED AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE: It is "Language that occurs originally as a genuine act of communication." This material is gathered from authentic communicative contexts.

2 SIMULATED AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE: It is "Language produced for pedagogical purposes, but which exhibits features that have a high probability of occurrence in genuine acts of communication" (Omaggio, pp.128-129). Adapted and creative texts are included in this category since both share similar characteristics.

Simulated or simplified material may be either similar to authentic discourse or too elaborated and unnatural. It can be recognized for the adaptations to present particular grammar, syntax, and vocabulary in such a way that, often, these aspects are repeated so many times that the text sounds or appears unnatural. This is mainly done to introduce linguistic forms in a dialogue or reading in order to increase the students' contact with those patterns as much as possible. Many textbook writers do this type of adaptation because an unmodified authentic piece of language does not present a varied range of uses of a particular grammatical pattern or vocabulary item; instead, it shows a great variety of grammatical and lexical items in a random way. On the contrary, the focus of a genuine text is on the content of the written piece or the speakers'intention, not on particular structural aspects of language. A natural piece of language may contain one or two linguistic patterns of the same kind. Sometimes depending on the nature of the discourse, it may have more, but too many may make it unnatural.

This does not mean that a text necessarily has to fulfill all these characteristics to be considered authentic because a particular text may show some but not others (See Rojas, pp. 170-194).

ORAL TEXTS

I. *UNMODIFIED AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE:*
   1.1 Normal speed
   1.2 False starts and/or unfinished sentences
   1.3 Many interjections and exclamations

1.4 Background noise

1.5 Overlapping speech

1.6 Faded speech

1.7 Variety of simple/complex structure, syntax and language functions throughout the passage at all levels

1.8 Variety of simple and complex vocabulary throughout the text at all levels

1.9 Some structural, syntactic, phonological or vocabulary errors may be possible

1.10 Common personal background

1.11 Use of anaphoric features of language

1.12 Randomness of subject matter

1.13 Non-standard language is possible

1.14 Hesitation

1.15 Tendency to use loosely coordinated clauses

1.16 Tendency to overuse parenthetic compound sentences

1.17 Source is given

II. *SIMULATED AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE*:

2.1 Moderate (sometimes too artificial) speed

2.2 No false starts or only a few intentional ones

2.3 No unfinished sentences or only a few intentional ones

2.4 Some well-placed interjections and exclamations

2.5 No background noise or some but well placed or too soft to interfere with speech

2.6 No overlapping of speech

2.7 No faded speech

2.8 Overuse of particular grammar, syntax or vocabulary

2.9 No use of complex structure and syntax rules at beginning stages

2.10 No use or just a few advanced vocabulary items at beginning stages

2.11 No structural, syntactical, phonological or vocabulary errors are possible

2.12 Common personal background is made explicit

2.13 No use of anaphoric features without a context

2.14 No randomness of subject matter

2.15 Non-standard language is not possible

2.16 Hesitation is possible only with a purpose

2.17 Loosely coordinated clauses are avoided

2.18 Parenthetic compound sentences are avoided or strategically placed

2.19 Source is not given

WRITTEN TEXTS

1. *UNMODIFIED AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE:*
1.1 Variety of simple/complex structures and syntax throughout the text
1.2 Variety of simple and complex vocabulary throughout the text at all levels
1.3 Structural, syntactical and vocabulary errors
1.4 Relative use of formal writing format
1.5 Common personal background
1.6 Redundancy of information
1.7 Randomness of subject matter
1.8 Variety of registers
1.9 Slang and non-standard language is possible
1.10 Source is given

2. *SIMULATED AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE:*
2.1 No use of complex structure and syntax at beginning stages
2.2 No use or little advanced vocabulary items at beginning stages
2.3 Overuse of particular grammar, syntax and specific vocabulary
2.4 No structural, syntactical or vocabulary errors are possible
2.5 Use of formal writing format
2.6 Common personal background is made explicit
2.7 Reduced redundancy and/or unnecessary repetition of information
2.8 No randomness of subject matter
2.9 Predominance of elements of formal registers
2.10 Non-standard language is not possible and slang expressions are really scarce
2.11 Occasional use of unreal cue indicators
2.12 Source is not given

THE SYLLABUS

Adopting the communicative approach implies the adoption of a communicative syllabus as well. To respond to the objectives of the course and the students' needs, the teacher must decide which language textbook, material and thus which syllabus to use.

In these types of syllabi, it is advisable that functions and structures be integrated from beginning to end through the units of a textbook. They may be

manifested through simple and complex structures. "Just a simple linguistic form can express a number of functions, so also can a single communicative function be expressed by a number of linguistic forms" (Littlewood, p.2). Besides, these syllabuses are not accumulative; they are spiral. At first functions are learned through certain linguistic patterns, and later on they are practiced by using other more advanced forms. "The teacher can re-cycle functions, each time with more complex language to suit the learners' developing linguistic competence" (Littlewood, p.80).

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1 Theoretical explanations can be given in class so that the students do the pre-communicative practice at home. These activities generally take too much class time that otherwise can be devoted to communicative activities that develop the communicative ability. Explanations should not take longer than the time assigned for the pre-communicative and communicative activities. For example, in a fifty-minute class, ten minutes can be devoted to theory and the rest to the application of that theory in communicative activities.

2 The teacher can make use of songs, readings, dialogues, tapes, videos, newspapers, magazines, and any other type of oral or written authentic material to introduce the structures.

3 The activities must be planned in a way that the material and the activity respond to the structures that are being introduced. The nature of pre-communicative activities allows a better integration of the grammatical pattern; however planning communicative activities is a more complex process. For the latter an appropriate situation and a context must be selected so that they contain the structures under study. They also have to include a communicative function in order to meet the requirements of communicative teaching. For instance, to develop the function for advising, the modals *should* and *must* can be used. Or, for carrying out the function for expressing wishes and desires the conditional *I wish I could...* can be introduced. Also, for the function of getting things done causative verbs such as *make, let* or *have* can be used.

4 Some of the activities recommended are writing compositions, dialogues, reports and summaries of different articles, news, daily events in which the students can use of the structures under study. It is very important that they do some of these activities in order to monitor how well they are using the structures.

5 Traditional expository classes must be avoided as much as possible. Students can work individually, in pairs and in groups to develop a particular task that includes the use of specific grammatical patterns. The teacher turns out to be only a guide.

6 The teacher must explain how useful learning strategies are when learning a second language, and he has to encourage the students to develop their own strategies to achieve a better command of structures.

7 Most grammar texts contain mainly pre-communicative activities. For this reason varied material from different texts is recommended to keep a balance between communicative and pre-communicative activities. This also allows for variety in the activities of a unit.

8 The development of a particular grammatical pattern must include a balance between communicative and pre-communicative activities. Explaining the theory about usage of a certain structure, practice that structure through pre-communicative activities and then use in one or two communicative activities is not enough to internalize it. The grammatical pattern must be introduced with a dialogue, tape, reading, etc. followed by a brief explanation, only if necessary. After that, some pre-communicative activities are introduced so that the students learn how to manipulate it for later on to use it in more communicative activities, in discourse with real contexts.

9 The grammatical patterns must be developed and evaluated in the written as well as the oral part. The evaluation must resemble the activities that have been used in class. Since the four skills of language are used to practice structures in class, the examinations must also include this type of skills. The grammatical contents of the course must not have to be exclusively evaluated through written tests; they have to be evaluated in oral exams as well.

10 It is advisable that the evaluation be varied. If multiple-choice items are used, they do not only have to include the structure itself but they have to call for the elicitation of a particular communicative function. Moreover, these items do not have to be limited to isolated sentences without a context. In addition, the test has to include the four language skills in order to evaluate how well the structures are mastered in the oral and written expression.

As we have seen, communicative grammar is based mostly on broader principles that go beyond the manipulation of linguistic form. It focuses on the

social demands that an individual is exposed to. People use language as a means of performing other tasks which give meaning to human communication and interaction. This approach is based on the social communicative intentions that regulate most human relationships.

Language teachers should consider that a communicative grammar class has to provide opportunities that enable learners to use the language structure appropriately when they communicate and interact. It is not enough to provide only pre-communicative activities without actually communicating.

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