

Contextual Factors in Determining Appropriate Language Methodologies

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Abstract

In this paper, I would like to challenge the assumption that there is such a thing as 'the communicative approach'. This is not to say that there are not ideas which have evolved over the years which may conveniently be captured by the rubric 'communicative language teaching' (CLT). However, there is a large gap between ideas that are set out in books and materials, or that are traded in teacher education programs of various sorts, and ideas as realised at the level of classroom practice. In this paper, I argue that when ideas are translated into practice, they will inevitably be affected by a range of contextual factors which will determine what can, and, indeed, should, be accomplished in any given classroom. From the perspective of classroom practice, it makes little sense to talk about whether ideas, in their raw, indigested form, are either 'good' or 'bad'.

Dans cet article, je voudrais contester l'hypothèse selon laquelle il existe une "approche communicative". Ceci n'infirmes pas que sont apparues au fil des ans des idées qu'il est commode de regrouper sous la rubrique "enseignement communicatif de la langue" (CLT). On observe toutefois un grand écart entre les idées présentées dans les livres et les documents ou celles proposées dans les divers programmes de formation des maîtres et celles qui sont utilisées dans la pratique de la classe. Dans cet article, je soutiens que lorsque les idées sont traduites dans la pratique, elles sont inévitablement modifiées par un ensemble de facteurs liés au contexte qui vont déterminer ce qui peut et doit être réalisé dans chaque classe.

Introduction

There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years about the appropriateness of 'communicative language teaching', developed principally in European and North American contexts, for other cultural contexts. The assumption underlying this discussion is that there is such a thing as 'the communicative approach', and that this approach is imported in a raw, undigested state into other contexts. The major problem that I have

with the debate as it currently exists is that it is referenced against assumptions of what goes on in language classrooms in various parts of the world, rather than against documented evidence of what actually happens in language classrooms. Without referencing what one has to say against the realities of the classroom, assumptions and pronouncements are likely to be simplistic and naive.

My own position is that there is no such thing as 'the communicative approach'. Rather there is a family of classroom techniques and procedures which have evolved over the years which have been designed to operationalize changing conceptions of the nature of language and the language learning process. I would also argue that at the practical day-to-day level of teaching and learning in genuine language classrooms, techniques and procedures are inevitably modified, transformed and adapted by both teachers and learners. At the level of procedure (Richards and Rodgers 1986), classroom techniques, practices, and behaviours are inevitably affected by the context in which the teaching and learning takes place.

In this paper, I should like to explore the role that various contextual factors play in determining what can be accomplished in language classrooms. I shall focus in particular on classroom, institutional, systemic and cultural contexts. I shall illustrate what I have to say with examples from classrooms in different institutional and cultural settings. Ultimately, the issue of whether or not it is a 'good idea' to have one's students 'talking to each other in pairs and groups' (this seems to be the default definition of 'communicative language teaching' on the part of many commentators), will depend on the interpersonal dynamics of the class (classroom context), the relationship of the language class to other influences upon the learners during the course of their school day (institutional context), the goals of the language program (systemic context), and the acceptability of the activity concerned to the culture concerned (cultural context).

The paper consists of two main sections. The first of these provides a perspective on communicative language teaching. The second describes some of the factors associated with the different contextual factors impinging on what happens in the classroom, and illustrates the operation of these factors through a number of different case studies. These case studies have been selected from a forthcoming collection of naturalistic investigations into processes of teaching and learning in many different cultural settings (Bailey and Nunan, forthcoming).

A Perspective on communicative teaching

In this section, I shall provide my own perspective on the complex construct 'communicative language teaching' (CLT). The content of this section has been adapted from Nunan and Lamb (in press). Communicative language teaching emerged from a number of disparate sources. During the 1970s and 1980s applied linguists and language educators began to re-evaluate pedagogical practice in the light of change views on the nature of language and learning, and the role of teachers and learners in the light of these changing views. The contrast between what for want of a better term we have called 'traditionalism', and CLT, are contrasted in the following diagram in relation to a number of key variables within the curriculum. The diagram presents contrasts in relation to theories of language and learning, and in relation to objectives, syllabus, classroom activities and the roles of learners, teachers and materials. The views illustrated in the table below represent points on a continuum, rather than exclusive categories, and most teachers will move back and forth along the continuum in response to the needs of the students and the overall context in which they are teaching. The truth is that language is, at one and the same time, both a system of rule governed structures, and a system for the expression of meaning. Learning is a matter of habit formation as well as a process of activation through the deployment of communicative tasks. The challenge for the teacher, the textbook writer and the curriculum developer is to show how the rule-governed structures enable the language user to make meanings.

We do not believe that there are many classrooms that can be defined exclusively in terms of a particular methodology. Whether a classroom is characterized as 'traditional' or 'communicative' will therefore be determined by the relative emphasis and degree to which the above views underpin what happens in the classroom rather than on the exclusive adherence to one set of views to the exclusion of any other. The difference will lie, not in the rigid adherence to one particular approach rather than another, but in one's basic orientation. Some teachers will operate out of a traditional paradigm, making occasional forays into CLT, while for others it will be the other way round. In the ESL and EFL classrooms we have worked in and studied in recent years, the prevailing trend has been toward CLT, although this is by no means exclusively so. In the following table, I use the term 'traditional' rather than 'non-communicative', as the non-adherents to CLT principles does not mean that communication does not happen.

	<i>Traditionalism</i>	<i>Communicative Language Teaching</i>
Theory of language	Language is a system of rule-governed structures hierarchically arranged.	Language is a system for the expression of meaning: primary function - interaction and communication.
Theory of learning	Habit formation: skills are learned more effectively if oral precedes written; analogy not analysis.	Activities involving real communication: carrying out meaningful tasks; and using language which is meaningful to the learner promotes learning.
Objectives	Control of the structures of sound, form and order, mastery over symbols of the language; goal - native speaker mastery.	Objectives will reflect the needs of the learner: they will include functional as well as linguistic objectives.
Syllabus	Graded syllabus of phonology, morphology, and syntax. Contrastive analysis.	Will include some or all of the following: structures, functions, notions, themes and tasks. Ordering will be guided by learner needs.
Activities	Dialogues and drills: repetition and memorization; pattern practice.	Engage learners in communication, involving processes such as information sharing, negotiation of meaning and interaction.
Learner role	Organisms that can be directed by skilled training techniques to produce correct responses.	Learner as negotiator, interactor, giving as well as taking.
Teacher role	Central and active: teacher dominated method. Provides model, controls direction and pace, needs analyst, counselor, process manager.	Facilitator of the communication process.

Role of materials	Primarily teacher oriented. Tapes and visuals: language lab often used.	Primary role of promoting communicative language use: task-based, authentic materials.
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Changing views on the nature of language and learning: traditionalism and CLT

The insight that communication was an integrated process rather than a set of discrete learning outcomes created a dilemma for language education. It meant that the destination (being able to function in another language) and the route (attempting to use the target language) moved much closer together, and, in some instances (for example, in role plays and simulations) became indistinguishable. The challenge for curriculum developers, syllabus designers, materials writers and classroom teachers revolved around decisions associated with the movements between points on the continua set out in the tables in the preceding section. Questions such as the following therefore appeared with increasing frequency in teacher training workshops:

- How do I integrate 'traditional' exercises, such as drills, controlled conversations and the like, with communicative tasks such as discussions, debates, role plays etc.?
- How do I manage decision-making and the learning process effectively in classroom sessions devoted to communicative tasks which, by definition, require me to hand over substantial amounts of decision-making power and control to the learners?
- How can I equip learners themselves with the skills they will need to make decisions wisely, and to embrace power effectively?

For some individuals the solution lay, either in rejecting the changing views along with their inconvenient pedagogical implications. Others went to the opposite extreme, eschewing 'traditional' solutions to their materials development and language teaching challenges. However, in most contexts, a more balanced view prevailed.

For some time after the rise of CLT, the status of grammar in the curriculum was rather uncertain. Some linguists maintained that it

was not necessary to teach grammar, that the ability to use a second language ('knowing how') would develop automatically if the learner were required to focus on meaning in the process of using the language to communicate. In recent years, this view has come under serious challenge, and it now seems to be widely accepted that there is value in classroom tasks which require learners to focus on form. It is also accepted that grammar is an essential resource in using language communicatively. (Nunan 1989: 13)

In educational terms, a useful way of viewing this emerging dilemma in language education is in terms of high- and low-structure teaching. High-structure tasks are those in which teachers have all the power and control. Low-structure tasks are those in which power and control are devolved to the students. We have borrowed the terms high-structure and low-structure from Biggs and Telfer who suggest that the successful management of the learning process depends on teachers knowing where to locate themselves on the high-low-structure continuum in relation to a given task. In a high-structure task, the student will be placed in a reactive role, and will be accorded relatively little choice. In a low-structure context, students will have many options and maximum autonomy. This does not mean we equate high-structure with non-communicative and low-structure with communicative tasks. There are certain communicative tasks where learners have relatively little freedom of manoeuvre. However, we do believe there is an association between low-structure and CLT, and that the incorporation of communicative tasks with low-structure implications into the classroom increases the complexity of the decision-making process for the teacher. Whether, at any given pedagogical moment it is desirable to engage in high-structure or low-structure teaching will depend very much on the contextual factors operating at that particular moment. As we shall see in the next section, these will include the curricular goals driving the pedagogical action, the needs of the learners, and the dynamics of the instructional group.

Contexts for pedagogical action: from local to global

The extent to which principles of communicative language teaching are realised in the classroom will be determined by a large range of contextual factors. These factors may belong to the individual classroom, they may be associated with the

institution, or they may be brought into the teaching situation from outside. In this section of the paper, I look at ways in which contextual factors influence what teachers and learners do in class.

Classroom context

The immediate context of particular language classrooms will have a powerful effect on what teachers and learners do and how they do it. Some of the factors affecting the nature and quality of what goes on in the classroom will include the personality, motivations, and skills of the teacher and students and how they relate to one another, the size of the class and the physical conditions of the classroom, and the dynamics of the group. The power of the immediate classroom context is immediately apparent to teachers who teach identical programs to different classes which are, to all intents and purposes, identical. In such situations it is not at all unusual to find that what works well in one classroom is highly problematic in another. This instability can be ascribed to interpersonal factors, and the dynamics of the group.

The powerful constraints imposed by the dynamics of the individual classroom was brought home to me in the course of collecting data for a study into the perceptions of teachers on the teaching - learning process (see Nunan, forthcoming, for details). The study, which involved the observation and documentation of nine classrooms looked at ways in which processes of classroom instruction were illuminated by the voices of teachers. One of the fascinating things about looking at each of the nine classrooms from a variety of perspectives was that each emerged as being a 'mini-culture' with its norms and rules of interaction, and these norms and rules, each of which was peculiar to that particular classroom, exercised powerful constraints on what could and couldn't go on. Parallel classes, with similar students using identical teaching materials evolved in very different ways.

The power of individual classroom factors to shape the teaching and learning comes through strongly in the concluding section to my study in which I wrote:

...in retrospect, the image which endures in my own mind is one of teachers and learners collaboratively constructing and inhabiting their own worlds. In the co-construction, the 'official curriculum', which resides within the mandated documents, lessons plans, commercial textbooks, and bureaucratic directives to teachers and

learners, is transformed, sometimes radically, in the experiential and ongoing interactions between the active participants in the classroom drama.'

Institutional context

In some situations, the distinction between institutional and systemic contexts is somewhat blurred. Where the teaching and learning takes place in schools that are part of national or regional educational systems, there will be lines of demarcation between the two. Where instruction takes place in independent educational institutions there may be no superordinate systemic context represented by Ministries of Education and the like. However, this is rather rare. In most countries, there are accreditation requirements and government regulations which require some sort of accountability of private as well as public educational institutions.

Institutionally, the status afforded a subject as indicated by where it is placed on the timetable, and the resources allocated to it will have a significant effect on the what is achievable in the classroom. An excellent example of the complex interrelationships between classroom and institutional contexts is provided by Block (1994). Block describes a classroom in which there was conflict and lack of cooperation on the part of the students. It transpired that this conflict was attributable, at least in part, to the fact that students came into their language class at the end of the day, having had several hours of high pressure instruction in a graduate level management course. The language class had also been scheduled over a lengthy period with inadequate breaks. Here was a situation where factors external to the language classroom impinged upon that classroom and placed major constraints upon what was achievable inside the classroom. The resistance felt by the teacher to the 'communicative' activities was due less to apathy than to exhaustion.

Systemic context

One of the most important influences exercised by the institutional and systemic contexts has to be the curriculum. To me it makes little sense to argue the merits or otherwise of group work, role plays, language drills, controlled practice, selective listening etc. without reference to the curricular goals and objectives which ought to be steering, if not driving, the overall curriculum.

Even more significant than goals and objectives is the examination system.

Common wisdom has it that if you want to know what students will take seriously, look at the examination system. If the examinations emphasise pencil and paper knowledge of grammar, it is hardly likely that the students will take seriously activities encouraging them to interact orally in the classroom.

Cultural context

In numerous non-western cultural contexts, it is considered inappropriate for pupils to speak up in front of the class. Such contexts are characterized by high-structure, transmission modes of learning, in which teachers control the action. This creates a potential problem if the curricular goals point towards the activation of oral language as is the case in some of the programs conducted by the English Centre at the University of Hong Kong. Some of the undergraduate English for Adults and Professionals (EAP) programs run by the Centre give a high priority to the development of oral language skills because these skills are demanded of graduates in certain fields once they take up employment in their chosen profession. Failure to assist students to develop these skills would disadvantage them in seeking employment.

Several solutions have been explored to this challenge with varying degrees of success. One of the classroom variables which has had a marked effect on student participation in oral activities has been group size. Students who remain silent in groups of ten or more will contribute actively to discussions when the size of the group is reduced to three or five. Another significant factor in this particular cultural context has been the type of communicative activity. Students here greatly enjoy formal debates, and many students who would be reluctant to contribute in other kinds of oral tasks, will participate enthusiastically in debates, particularly when they have had the opportunity to determine the topic of debate.

Tsui (forthcoming) provides a fascinating account of the cultural barriers to student communication at the school level in Hong Kong. She reports that when 38 ESL teachers were asked to nominate a specific problem that they have which might form the basis for action research, the great majority nominated getting more student oral responses. Reasons for this reluctance to speak were largely cultural. They included low English proficiency, fear of mistakes and derision, desire not to stand out from one's peers, teacher's intolerance of silence, uneven allocation of turns, and inability on the part of the students to understand the teacher in the first place. Strategies for encouraging greater oral partici-

pation included lengthening the wait-time after a question to give students mental 'processing space', modifying and improving questioning techniques on the part of teachers, accepting a variety of answers, encouraging students to rehearse and check responses with peers before offering them to the whole class, focusing students on the contents rather than the form of their utterances, and establishing good relationships with students. While not all of these measures were equally successful in all classrooms, they do illustrate the fact that, while cultural norms will have an important influence on classroom interaction and the deployment of target language by the students, there are measures that one can adopt to increase the target language use.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that at the level of classroom interaction, plans and teaching intentions are interpreted and reinterpreted as teachers and learners collaboratively co-construct the curriculum in action. Seen from the perspective of the classroom, debates about whether or not communicative language teaching 'works' or indeed 'exists' become simplistic or naive. In the post-communicative era, we should be asking, not whether our classrooms are communicative, but whether the classroom activities we have planned are appropriate to learner needs and curricular goals.

We have also seen the importance of context to pedagogical processes. In the paper, I have argued that classroom, institutional, systemic and cultural contexts will all impinge upon, and have an important bearing upon what is achievable in any teaching and learning situation. Examples are provided which support the observation that:

Classroom teaching is a complex social process that regularly includes interruptions, surprises and digressions. To understand fully the operation of teacher planning, researchers must look beyond the empty classroom and study the ways in which plans shape teacher and student behavior and are communicated, changed, reconstructed, or abandoned in the interactive teaching environment.

(Clark and Peterson 1986: 268).

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