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REFLECTIVE TEACHING AS A MEANS OF OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

The article deals with the problems of practical implementation of the communicative approach, such as the style of teaching, teacher talk, and correcting mistakes. The strategies of reflective teaching methodology are suggested as an effective way of tackling these problems.

Keywords: communicative approach, reflective teaching, teaching style, teacher talk, and error correction.

In short, the communicative approach (hereinafter referred to as “CA”) is a teaching method that encourages students to speak more in the classroom.

This article starts by exploring the advantages of the CA, and then turns to the difficulties associated with its practical implementation. Finally, the reflective principle of teaching is suggested as an effective way of countering those difficulties.

The use of the CA in teaching foreign languages has been extensively covered in academic publications. The most prominent authorities on this topic include D. A. Wilkins, who pointed out the necessity to teach not just grammar rules, but also rules of communication [10, p. 10–11] and S. Savignon, whose works focus on different aspects of communicative competence [7, p. 207–220].

Another well-researched teaching method is the so-called “reflective teaching”. Recent publications on reflective teaching include the insightful works by K. Cross, who suggested that teachers should treat their classrooms as laboratories for systematic observation of the learning process [2, p. 3]. Jack C. Richards and Charles Lockhard made an important contribution by formulating the main approaches to “classroom investigation” in teaching [5, p. 7–15].

However, a topic on which academic discussions have not focused sufficiently is the ways in which reflective teaching can be used as a tool for

mitigating the shortcomings of the CA. The present article aims to contribute to the body of research in this field by arguing that the CA and reflective teaching may, and should, be usefully combined.

1. The communicative approach and its advantages

The CA has over the decades earned a well-deserved reputation of a reliable and effective method of teaching English. It has the indisputable advantage of equipping students with fluent and confident English in a relaxed and unconstrained environment of a CA-practising classroom. Consequently, it has become well-established and accepted by many teachers all over the world. The merits and practical advantages of the CA are numerous and have been tested by time and “armies” of followers.

The first, and most salient, advantage is that the CA has brought much more life and excitement into the classroom. The CA precipitated a switch from endless and boring drills of pre-CA teaching to life-like communication, stimulating and engaging activities. Instead of sending students to sleep, the CA helped teachers arouse interest and motivation in the classroom, which came like a breath of fresh air in the stilted Grammar-dominated teacher-centred pre-CA learning environment.

The advent of the CA meant that communication started to be viewed not just as the goal, but also the means of teaching. It encouraged focusing on interactive, problem-solving tasks, such as role plays, group work, paired practice, games, information-gap activities. This helped create a much more dynamic and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom, which in turn fostered a more positive emotional attitude to the educational process among teachers as well as students. Teachers lost their overbearing position as the sole decision-makers and the classrooms became more student-centred.

This encouraged students to shed unnecessary inhibitions and communicate freely in their target language. The new principle of tolerance towards inter-language, with all its mistakes, also promoted students' freedom and motivation to use English right there in the classroom. The resulting confidence and fluency of target language were among the most important gains of the CA teaching.

However, the shift to the CA has had its trade-offs and difficulties, as described in the section below.

2. Problems in using the communicative approach

Together with the advantages described above, the extensive use of the CA over the years has also unearthed myriads of practical problems, frustrations and challenges. According to Decker, "Reports abound on the practical difficulties of implementing a communicative approach when teaching English in English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) settings" [3, p. 12].

The "role of the teacher" problem

The first problem related to the CA stems from the changed role of the teacher, who is no longer perceived as a figure of authority, but a facilitator and a guide, helping and directing students rather than imposing rules and telling what to do. This new role of the teacher creates certain ambiguity as to the appropriate teaching style. Stephen Ryan draws attention to this underlying conflict, connected to a split between having to be a disciplinarian and a friend at the same time. In his words, at some stages, we are expected to be strict about certain aspects such as regular attendance and punctuality. On the other hand, we often have to assume the role of friend-coach to make our learners feel compelled to speak and not be afraid of making mistakes. This creates a stark contrast between the teacher who can fail and the teacher that wishes to encourage speaking and, necessarily, making mistakes [6].

The "teacher talk" problem

Another notorious teacher-related problem facing CA-practising instructors is teacher talk. Glen Deckert claims that "the most frequent obstacle to [communicative language teaching] is excessive talk on the part of the teacher" [3, p. 13]. This is a generally accepted view among the CA advocates, because, allegedly, "Excessive teacher talk hampers the emergence of sustained purposeful student talk" [3, p. 13]. It's hard to argue with this proposition; however, according to David Barker, "It can lead teachers to assume, that all they need to do is set up communicative activities and the learning will take care of itself" [1]. This is, of course, a dangerous route to follow, because it may rob the students of the sense of purpose and direction, which only a vocal input of a good teacher can provide. Besides, it's unwise to disregard the fact that, "In many EFL situations the teacher is the only access students have to native or proficient speakers of the language, and listening to the teacher talk is both useful and beneficial for them" [1].

The "mistake correction" problem

One more contentious issue of the CA concerns correcting mistakes. The CA favours fluency over accuracy and its avid ideologists advise strongly against error correction, as, according to Stevick, "Constant correction inhibits students and constrains both the content and forms of students' expression" [qtd. in 3, p. 15].

As will be shown below, there are means of tackling each of the above problems. This article advocates the use of reflective teaching as an effective tool for doing so.

3. Overview of the reflective principle of teaching

In the words of Jack Richards, reflective teaching "involves instructors observing themselves, collecting data about their own classroom and their roles within them, and using that data as a basis for self-evaluation, for change, and hence for professional growth" [5, p. IX].

A number of simple procedures, instrumental in critical reflection, have been developed by the proponents of reflective teaching. Jack Richards, for example, lists the following strategies:

- 1) *Teaching journals*. Written or recorded accounts of teaching experiences.
- 2) *Lesson reports*. Written accounts of lessons which describe the main features of the lesson.
- 3) *Surveys and questionnaires*. Activities such as administering a questionnaire or completing a survey, designed to collect information on a particular aspect of teaching or learning.

4) *Audio and video recordings*. Recording of a lesson, or part of a lesson.

5) *Peer observation*. Tasks completed by a teacher visiting a colleague's class.

6) *Action research*. Implementation of an action plan designed to bring about change in some aspect of the teacher's class with subsequent monitoring of the effects of the innovation [5, p. 6].

This article will now turn to describing how these reflective techniques may enable teachers to tackle the difficulties of the CA described above by modifying and adapting their teaching to the realities of the classroom.

4. Applying the reflective principle to counter problems of the communicative approach

Recognizing the fact that the CA has its drawbacks and difficulties does not undermine its value as a useful and virtually irreplaceable teaching tool. Any functioning system devised and used by human beings inevitably displays some shortcomings with time. It doesn't mean that it should be discarded off-hand as a useless relic. After all, quoting Michael Swan, "By and large, we have probably gained more than we have lost from the Communicative Approach" [8, p. 87].

Among the publications dedicated to the problems of implementing the CA, two articles by Michael Swan, published in the ELT journal, caught general attention of both linguists and teachers. In these articles Swan makes a strong case against interpreting communicative approach simplistically, as a self-contained methodology, without integrating it into the general context of teaching [8, p. 2–12; 9, p. 76–87]. Michael Swan advocates a sensible approach to the CA and suggests that "we [...] try out the new techniques without giving up useful older methods [...]" [8, p. 87]. Thankfully, the prevalent teaching methodology nowadays is no longer rigid or dogmatic. It does not insist on a single teaching approach. Teachers are free to make use of the best parts of what have crystallized out of a host of speculations, experiments and ideas over the centuries.

Thus, it seems appropriate to avoid the "tunnel vision" when it comes to the CA, and, having analysed its strengths and weaknesses, to modify, adapt, complement, and hopefully improve it. In doing so, one can take advantage of both the traditional methods and techniques and comparatively new ones, such as the principle of reflective teaching. This should empower teachers in their quest to further perfect and advance the

inspiringly helpful method of communicative teaching, and to effectively integrate it into their daily teaching practices.

a) *Tackling the "role of the teacher" problem*

Coming to terms with the changed role of the teacher in a CA environment requires the instructor to strike a difficult balance. The reflective strategy of observation can be of great assistance in finding this delicate point of equilibrium between being a "proper" teacher and a friend, and it's important to remain continuously aware of one's teaching style. To this end, as Stephen Ryan maintains, "It often helps to observe a colleague's class or have a trusted colleague observe your own. You may find some useful insights into your own lessons" [6]. These insights may include observations about one's own style of teaching.

Keeping a teaching journal is another technique, which can also be invaluable in shaping the style appropriate for CA classrooms. According to Alice Murray, "Writing down observations and thoughts about your teaching is one way to gain insight about the how's and why's behind your teaching style" [4, p. 4]. Getting into the habit of writing about your teaching may take time and effort, but it's well worth it, because among other things, it can give teachers a better understanding of how liberal or authoritarian their style is and to modify it accordingly.

b) *Tackling the "teacher talk" problem*

As highlighted above, the question of exactly how much the teacher should talk is a difficult dilemma. It is here that the above-mentioned reflective strategies of observation and keeping a journal are again most instrumental in helping strike the appropriate balance. Such reflective techniques can help to ensure that there is just the right proportion of teacher and students talking in the classroom; they are therefore best placed to mitigate the risks of teachers running to extremes in implementing the CA. Video recordings are among the reflective teaching strategies which should be of great help in understanding whether the amount of teacher talk is adequate to the learners' needs. Seeing oneself from aside, on a video tape, can be quite a revelation as to how much the teacher really talks and if students are given enough time to practice their speaking skills. This way of analysing one's own behaviour can help instructors to decide how to modify their classroom speaking, using the action research strategy of reflective teaching.

To conclude, reflective teaching is recommended as a guide to finding the golden middle between excessive talking and the other extreme – the silent withdrawal from the necessary on-going guidance of one's students.

c) Tackling the “mistake correction” problem

In theory it sounds as if compromising accuracy is a necessary sacrifice, inevitable for a teacher practicing the CA, and made for the sake of students. In practice, however, students seem not to mind being corrected at all. In fact, using reflective approach strategies, it's easy to conclude that most learners feel that the whole point of having a teacher is to have their mistakes pointed out and corrected. This fact is supported by statistical data collected by Glenn Deckert with the help of a questionnaire. Her study revealed the fact that 75 % of students believe that their teachers should regularly correct most of their mistakes; otherwise the learners will not make much progress in English [3, p. 15].

As the CA claims to be learner-oriented, the learners' opinions should certainly be taken into account. So if the majority of students believe that it is the duty of the teacher to identify and correct their errors, the teachers should comply. Failing to do so could result in the loss of motivation and interest on the learners' part. What also matters here, though, is

the manner in which the mistakes are corrected. This should be done tactfully, concisely, and clearly. Analysis of a video recording of one's own lesson should help to make sure that the error correction and feedback in general are handled appropriately, and do not take up too much lesson time. Subsequently, action research strategy can be applied with the gradual implementation of the changes to the teaching style and monitoring of their effect on student satisfaction and performance.

To conclude, the CA is a useful method of teaching, but without underestimating its strong points and emotional appeal, it is important to be fully aware of its shortcomings. This knowledge can help a conscientious teacher to avoid the possible pitfalls of injudicious and unreserved use of the CA. The awareness of the difficulties of deploying the CA can serve both as a deterrent to failure and an incentive for devising an optimal system of practices. Useful tools for devising such an effective system are provided by the reflective teaching method.

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РЕФЛЕКТИВНЕ ВИКЛАДАННЯ ЯК ЗАСІБ ПОДОЛАННЯ СКЛАДНОЩІВ КОМУНІКАТИВНОГО ПІДХОДУ

Статтю присвячено проблемам практичного застосування комунікативного підходу, таким як стиль викладання, усна мова викладача на уроці, виправлення помилок. Різноманітні стратегії рефлексивної методики викладання запропоновані як ефективний інструмент вирішення цих проблем.

Ключові слова: комунікативний підхід, рефлексивне викладання, стиль викладання, усна мова викладача, виправлення помилок.

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