

## *Is the Communicative Approach a Panacea? Thoughts from Hong Kong*

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The Communicative Approach has been dominant in the field of second language education since the 1970s. Although other teaching methods like the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method cannot be said to have disappeared completely, they become lifeless residues that are under the shadow of the Communicative Approach. A language course cannot be attractive without the label of the Communicative Approach. Along with an increasing number of proponents and publications concerning the effectiveness of the Communicative Approach, the circle of using it keeps expanding.

### **ABOUT THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH**

In brief, the Communicative Approach advocates learning a language through use. In contrast with the traditional approaches and methods, which stress linguistic competence, the Communicative Approach emphasizes the competence of using language for communication. Learning is regarded as a process of natural growth rather than acquiring isolated items of language. As learners have their own active mechanisms for making sense of language input and constructing their own systems while receiving linguistic input, what teachers need to do is to help them operate these natural mechanisms by providing them with “triggers.” In lessons, teachers can facilitate the

acquisition by assisting students to practice so that they can learn to use language actively for real communicative needs.

As the Communicative Approach focuses on effective communication and fluency of language, errors in language are tolerated as long as they do not affect the flow of meaning. In theory, teachers should not correct students' errors when communication is underway. They will hold up error correction until later, or simply ignore it.

According to Mey (1998), the Communicative Approach has some common features of practice that derive from its basic principles. First, classrooms are learner-oriented. Second, opportunities are provided through developing a wide repertoire of activities. Third, the teacher's roles are multiple. Instead of imparting knowledge and skills to impart, he may act as animator, co-communicator or counselor in the classroom. Fourth, authentic materials are used in teaching.

## **PRINCIPLES APPLICABLE TO HONG KONG**

Some of the principles of the Communicative Approach are applicable to the situation of Hong Kong. They can brighten up our classroom if carefully used.

First, the Communicative Approach reminds us of the use of authentic materials for teaching. In line with the principle, teachers may select materials from various resources. The more authentic the language is, the more likely students will use it.

Second, language functions receive attention. For the same function, there might be different linguistic forms. If students can express their ideas in their own words, communication occurs. For example, to express an obligation of doing something, one may use such linguistic forms as need to, should and ought to. As long as a student chooses one such form, the communicative purposes can be reached. So, rather than cramming a particular linguistic form into students' mind, teachers should allow students to search a form in

their data bank (mind) to convey their meaning. In this way, students won't be reduced to passive learners.

## **LIMITATIONS IN HONG KONG**

Although quite useful and popular worldwide, the Communicative Approach is by no means the perfect match to Hong Kong. As is known, the Approach is tolerant of errors. Fluency always overshadows accuracy. However, precisely on this point, it runs counter to the reality of Hong Kong, where English is needed not merely for communication, but also for academic examinations. Therefore, the ability of producing or reproducing grammatically accurate English is of utmost importance in the important public examinations that students sit for. Their performance in English or English-related subjects will directly affect their chance of getting a place in a tertiary institution as well as a decent job upon graduation.

Emphasis on global meaning rather than linguistic forms is another point which is detrimental to Hong Kong students. The Approach guides students mainly through practice in oral communication. Communication is considered to be successful once the learners catch the gist of messages. However, subtle semantic differences may escape the learners' realization, because they are usually expressed through varying linguistic forms. This is evidenced by Hong Kong students' general weak performance in some important language examinations like HKCEE (Hong Kong Certificate Examination of Education) and HKAL (Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination), in which students always have difficulty in handling the closeness of meaning.

Closely related with this is the giving of feedback. According to the principles of the Approach, teachers can defer or even withhold feedback provided that the meaning of the speaker is clear. This may be detrimental to learners because it leads them to concentrate attention on what they want to say, thus neglecting how to say it. Less feedback may give learners the

illusion that they use the target language well; therefore, it diverts their awareness of the incorrect use of words and sentence structure. This is especially dangerous in Hong Kong where most parents and principals will judge a teacher's attitude (and sometime quality) based on the amount of feedback one gives as well as the detailed marking of grammatical mistakes.

In a classroom where the Communicative Approach is implemented, students' grammatical awareness comes from the roles of the interlocutors (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). However, with a relatively low English standard, Hong Kong students may lack the basic language foundation to initiate a conversation or give an appropriate reply to the interlocutor. In simulated activities, if all participants are weak in English, who can get the ball rolling and what language items can one learn? So the Communicative Approach is ideal only for more competent students who have a good foundation in English. Moreover, language items should be organized from simple to complex. Presentation and practice should always precede application.

Students in the Communicative Approach classrooms often carry out activities in small groups, which means the time allotted to each student for learning to negotiate meaning is maximized (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). However, in Hong Kong, the class size is normally very large --- with about 40 students in one class. If students are divided into groups of four, the whole class still comprises 10 groups. With ten groups of students having discussion or other activities at one time, a lot of noise will be produced, which is usually mistaken as a symbol of the teacher's poor classroom management.

Even if students are cooperative in minimizing the noise, it's doubtful whether a teacher can take care of 10 groups of students interacting simultaneously? Without the teacher's timely feedback, it's doubtful again whether students can carry on the assigned tasks or digest what is presented.

Even if there is no noise problem and students do not need help, the Communicative Approach is still not applicable in Hong Kong. How long will it take for all the groups to make a report or a presentation on what they have done? How can a teacher cater to every individual learner's needs and rectify his errors? English teachers in Hong Kong usually have a tight

schedule to follow, and hence the Communicative Approach may not be a wise choice for them.

Despite large groups of students, Hong Kong teachers want to maximize the students' learning. On the other hand, they want to ensure completion of lesson without major problems of classroom management. The use of what is called "recitation", "teaching what involves a mixture of quick questions and teacher talk" is in this situation efficient (Morris, 1996, p. 127). Teachers choose a teaching method not because of its professional or theoretical worth but rather because it allows them to cope efficiently with the realities of the environment.

## **IDEAL TEACHING METHOD IN HONG KONG**

Considering the pitfalls of the Communicative Approach in Hong Kong situations, one might ask what is the best teaching method or approach. Everything has its pros and cons. Hence, a combination of the strengths from different approaches is the best. To me, in a language lesson, if students are actively using the target language and the teaching materials and activities meet the needs of the students, whatever teaching method is used does not matter much.

Biggs (1996) pointed out that many westerners have wrong conceptions towards Chinese learners. They misunderstand that Chinese adopt a surface approach to learning such as repetition and memorization without understanding the real meaning. They don't understand that repetition is a step towards understanding. Biggs' argument throws light onto the understanding of what are the ideal teaching methods for Chinese learners. By the grammar approach, teachers cram some language items into students' mind. At first students may use the items correctly simply by imitation. However, after knowing the patterns or the words, they will start to remember the rules as well as internalize their meaning. Such understanding is gradual but remains useful for a long time. In this respect, the Communicative Approach cannot

be compared with the grammar approach.

Mastering linguistic forms is an important component of second language learning. Johnson and Yau (1996) suggested that Hong Kong schools needed to place more emphasis upon the acquisition of grammatical competence. They also suggest a “bottom-up” processing in learning English: from the meaning of what is in the text and to the ways in which the forms of language in the text signal that meaning.

The Communicative Approach is not an ideal approach for Hong Kong ESL learners in terms of the nature of ESL of Hong Kong and the problems created. I suggest that language forms should be presented systematically from simple to complex, rather than through casual learning, in which students are given autonomy over learning activities. On the contrary, the grammar approach is much more useful to those who are accustomed to “memorizing what is understood” and “understanding through memorization” (Gu, pp. 74-75).

The Communicative Approach can be criticized on two aspects: neglecting the role of L1 and over-stressing the importance of speaking. L1 actually promotes L2 understanding and simplifies explanation, especially when students have homogeneous linguistic background. This is precisely the case of Hong Kong. Besides, it is impossible for Hong Kong students to use English for communication like native English speakers because their needs for English communication are limited. Also, English is not a common language in Hong Kong although it has a designated official status. Most local residents can live without English. Then how can students speak English as much as native English speakers?

All in all, the frequency of use and actual needs of the learners are two major factors which can best explain why the Communicative Approach may cost double efforts but achieve half the effects in Hong Kong.

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