



## **Developing a Personal Approach to Teaching Language for Communication**

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### **Introduction**

When I began working as a language teacher many years ago, I had been ‘trained’ to use the audio-visual method. This was similar to the audio-lingual method, with a lot of repetition and controlled practice, but had the added dimension of visuals which connected the language with real-life situations. I remember it as a time of high expectations followed by frequent disappointments. In the course of our training we had been assured that, in contrast to the grammar-translation method, the real-life visuals would motivate the students to learn and that since it was an ‘active’ method, the students would never be tempted to go off-task or misbehave. With many classes, however, the visuals soon lost their charm, and much of the activity was unmasked as mindless ‘language-like behaviour’ (Spolsky, 1966) which soon ceased to engage the learners.

Similar experiences were multiplied in countless settings. A major turning point in changing attitudes to approaches based on imitation and repetition was the so-called ‘Pennsylvania Project’ (described and evaluated by e.g. Valette, 1969), which showed no superiority for the audio-lingual method over the much-disparaged grammar-translation approach. But teachers’ own disappointments provided even stronger arguments and by the end of the 1970s, most people engaged in language teaching felt ready for a fundamental change. It was in this context that communicative language teaching (CLT) was born. (On the sources and variations of CLT, see for example Littlewood, 2011; Richards, 2006.)

### **The Emergence and Evolution of CLT**

In the beginning CLT seemed to offer what Morrow and Johnson (1983, p. 4) called ‘an automatic solution to all the problems of language teaching’. Bax (2003, p. 280) describes the attitude that prevailed for many years, as CLT was propagated over the world and into all teaching situations: ‘assume and insist that CLT is the whole and complete solution to language learning; assume that no other method could be any good; ignore people’s own views of who they are and what they want; neglect and ignore all aspects of the local context as being irrelevant’. Gupta (2004) gives a detailed account of the confusion this attitude created when CLT was first introduced at a leading Indian university in 1989 and others have described similar challenges that have faced teachers when they have been asked to introduce CLT into contexts for which it was not suited (these experiences are reviewed in e.g., Butler, 2011; Lai, 2015;

Littlewood, 2007 and 2013).

One important result of these experiences has been that the initial euphoria surrounding CLT subsided and its identity changed. Whereas it was initially propagated as an intact package of principles and techniques (as indeed was the case with the audiolingual method), it came to serve more as what Harmer (2007, p. 70) describes as a ‘generalized “umbrella” term to describe learning sequences which aim to improve the students’ ability to communicate’ in contrast to ‘teaching which is aimed more at learning bits of language just because they exist’. In a similar vein, Hiep (2007, p. 196) states that although ‘teachers in many parts of the world may reject the CLT techniques transferred from the West’, ‘it is doubtful that they reject the spirit of CLT’, namely that ‘learning is likely to happen when classroom practices are made real and meaningful to learners’ and that the goal is to teach learners ‘to be able to use the language effectively for their communicative needs’. Beaumont and Chang (2011, p. 298) remind us that such practices are best defined not in terms of the ‘communicative / traditional dichotomy’ but in terms of their learning outcomes and their ‘potential to make a contribution to the general goal of learning a language, i.e., successful communication’.

### **Freedom and Responsibility**

Taken together, these views represent a shift into a so-called postmethod situation. The individual teacher is no longer expected to adhere to a method prescribed by others but has freedom to develop his or her own approach. However, in the famous words of Eleanor Roosevelt, ‘with freedom comes responsibility’: teachers are not constrained by fixed techniques but their methodology still has to be guided by clear principles for action, otherwise it will lack coherence and have no direction. In an influential analysis which bears the title *There is no best method – Why?*, Prabhu (1990) suggests that teachers need to be guided not by a single method but by their sense of ‘plausibility’: their sense of what seems most likely to be true or possible to believe. Still, however, we must face the question of what higher-level principles each teacher bases his or her sense of plausibility on. These ‘macro-principles’ cannot be arbitrary but must be based on a coherent view of what experiences are fundamental to the acquisition of another language and the ability to communicate in it. They should be ‘context-free’ in the sense that they are fundamental to the nature of second language learning as a process wherever it takes place. But they should be translatable by the individual teacher into a pedagogy which is ‘context-sensitive’ in the sense that it fits the needs and preferences of the learners and the individual teacher.

### **Macro-Principles for Second Language Teaching**

There have been several proposals in the literature for frameworks of macro-principles which can guide second language teaching in our ‘post method’ era. In this section I will present three such frameworks which have been proposed.

#### **Principles of Instructed Language Learning (Ellis, 2005)**

The ten ‘principles of instructed language learning’ of Ellis are based on his interpretation of evidence from second language acquisition research:

- Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.
- Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.
- Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.

- Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge.
- Instruction needs to consider the learner's 'built-in syllabus'.
- Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.
- Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.
- The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.
- Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.
- In assessing learners' L2 proficiency it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.

### **A Principled Communicative Approach (Dörnyei, 2013)**

Dörnyei's seven key principles for a 'principled communicative approach' are similar in spirit and also based mainly on research findings:

- The approach should be meaning-focused and personally significant.
- It should include controlled practice activities.
- It should provide explicit initial input.
- It should seek an optimal balance between implicit and explicit instruction.
- It should recognize the importance of formulaic language.
- It should provide exposure to large amounts of L2 input.
- It should provide ample opportunities for genuine L2 interaction, preferably with a specific formal or functional focus.

### **Core Assumptions of Communicative Language Teaching (Richards, 2006)**

Richards defines his ten 'core assumptions' of communicative language teaching as 'a set of generally agreed upon principles that can be applied in different ways, depending on the teaching context, the age of the learners, their level, their learning goals, and so on':

- Second language learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in interaction and meaningful communication.
- Effective classroom learning tasks and exercises provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, expand their language resources, notice how language is used, and take part in meaningful interpersonal exchange.
- Meaningful communication results from students processing content that is relevant, purposeful, interesting, and engaging.
- Communication is a holistic process that often calls upon the use of several language skills or modalities.
- Language learning is facilitated both by activities that involve inductive or discovery learning of underlying rules of language use and organization, as well as by those involving language analysis and reflection.
- Language learning is a gradual process that involves creative use of language, and trial and error. Although errors are a normal product of learning, the ultimate goal of learning is to be able to use the new language both accurately and fluently.
- Learners develop their own routes to language learning, progress at different rates, and have different needs and motivations for language learning.
- Successful language learning involves the use of effective learning and communication strategies.
- The role of the teacher in the language classroom is that of a facilitator, who creates a classroom climate conducive to language learning and provides opportunities for students to use and practice the language and to reflect on language use and language learning.

- The classroom is a community where learners learn through collaboration and sharing.

These frameworks differ in their details but they clearly agree and overlap in several areas, such as the importance of interaction and personal meaning.

### A Higher-Level Framework for Developing a Personal Approach

Here I will propose a higher-level framework within which principles such as those above can operate. It is based on what I understand to be two superordinate requirements of L2 pedagogy which derive from the nature of the task. These requirements are that learning activities should:

- engage learners as deeply and personally as possible (since only in this way can learning take place at all);
- be oriented towards the goal of communicative competence (since only in this way can learning proceed in the appropriate direction).

We can represent the two dimensions of ‘engagement’ and ‘communicativeness’ in a matrix as below:

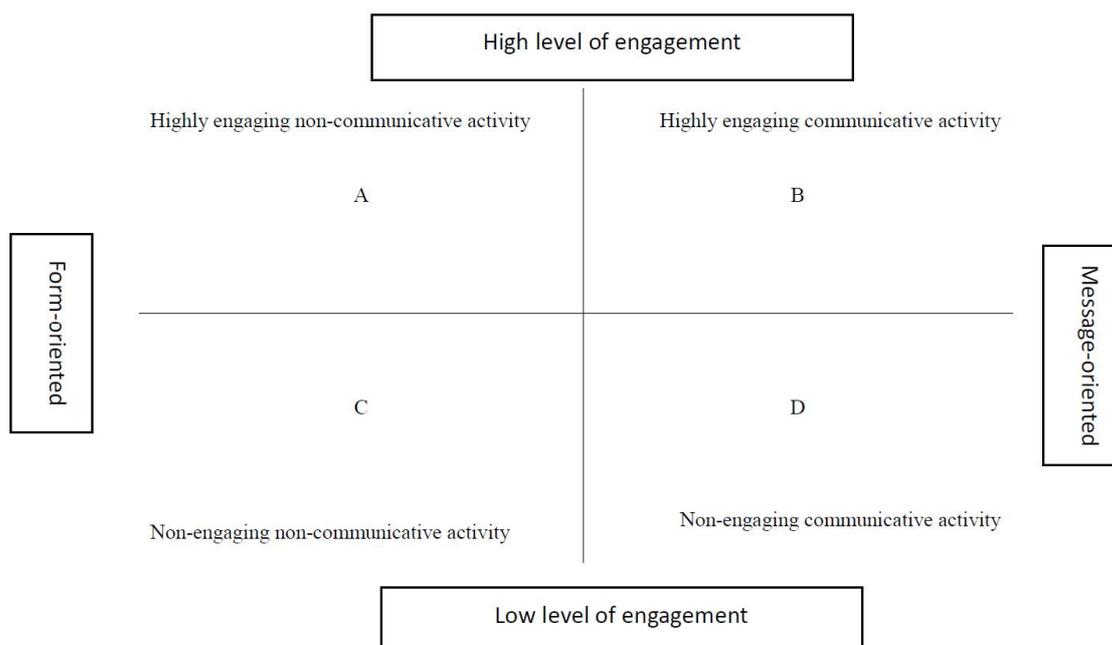


Figure 1: A higher-level framework for developing a personal pedagogy

The *horizontal* line in the matrix represents an activity’s orientation towards the communication of messages. In the course of learning, the dominant nature of the activities will move further towards the right, as learners extend their communicative competence in preparation for ‘real world’ situations, but the ‘part-skills’ of communication may continue to be developed by activities from all parts of the continuum.

In all of these activities, equally important is the *vertical* line which represents the degree of student engagement. Whereas with the horizontal line, the teacher may aim to exploit all parts of the continuum, with the vertical line the aim is always to be located as high as possible.

We should remember that message orientation and level of engagement are not objective qualities of the activities themselves but qualities of each student's experience. Thus, in the same class and the same activity, some students may be highly engaged, others not at all; some students may be oriented to the communication of messages, others may focus on the correct or appropriate production of forms. The teacher *designs* the activities with a view to eliciting the maximum possible degree of engagement and the desired orientation from a specific group of learners, then evaluates the results and learns from them for the next time.

We will now look at each continuum and illustrate how a teacher might use it as a principle for developing a suitable pedagogy.

## Engagement

Every teacher knows from experience (sometimes positive, sometimes bitter) that the students' level of engagement can make or break the most carefully planned lesson or activity. However, it is only comparatively recently that the nature and conditions of student engagement have been systematically scrutinized and discussed. In the wider field of education, there has been an increasing amount of research into the concept of engagement, resulting in e.g. the comprehensive collection of articles in Christenson, Reschly and Wylie (2012). In an important article which applies this research to exploring how learners engage in tasks in the language classroom, Philp and Duchesne (2016) distinguish four strands of engagement which affect L2 learning:

- cognitive engagement, e.g. sustained attention, mental effort, self-regulation;
- behavioural engagement, e.g. time on task, participation;
- emotional engagement, e.g. motivated involvement;
- social engagement, e.g. when learners listen and provide feedback to one another.

These strands are closely intertwined in practice (e.g. increased social engagement supports the other three strands). They may all be supported by factors such as:

- personalization and authenticity: activities are related to students' own selves and interests;
- emotional and intellectual safety: students feel free to take risks;
- challenge: students also feel stimulated by an acceptable degree of challenge;
- autonomy: students feel they have choices and independence;
- novelty and variety: there are elements of the unusual or unexpected;
- relatedness: students feel socially connected to other students;
- collaboration: learning is supported by collaboration and sharing in a spirit of community;
- relevance: students connect what they do in class with their lives outside it.

Many of these factors can also be captured in the ARCS model of motivational design (Keller, 2010), which is influential in the wider educational field:

- **Attention:** capture the interests of learners and stimulate their curiosity to learn.
- **Relevance:** meet the personal needs and goals of learners.
- **Confidence:** help learners believe in their success and facilitate success.
- **Satisfaction:** reinforce achievement with rewards (internal and external)

## Orientation towards Communication

All the factors above which encourage engagement need to be harnessed to the second main criterion: the activities in which they operate should all lead towards communicative ability. This does not mean that every activity in the classroom *engages* learners in real communication but that the role and value of each activity is evaluated according to how it *contributes* to learners' ability to engage in real communication (their 'communicative competence'). Some activities may involve actual communication but some may focus on separate aspects of communicative ability, such as mastery of structures, vocabulary or pronunciation (the 'part-skills' of communication). An important temptation to avoid (and a failing with many methods of the past) is to attach so much attention to the part-skills that practice in actual communication is neglected.

The framework presented in Figure 2 is based on the distinction between 'analytic' and 'experiential' learning activities (discussed for example in Stern, 1992; Littlewood, 2014). This is a similar distinction to that between 'explicit' and 'implicit' learning, as in e.g., Dörnyei (2013). Activities are ranged along a continuum, and so the borderline between different types of activity is not clearly defined. Also, as mentioned above, individual learners may experience one and the same activity in different ways.

Analytic / Explicit Learning		← →		Experiential / Implicit Learning
Non-communicative learning	Pre-communicative language practice	Communicative language practice	Structured communication	Authentic communication
Focusing on the structures of language, how they are formed and what they mean, e.g. substitution exercises, inductive 'discovery' and awareness-raising activities	Practising language with some attention to meaning but not communicating new messages to others, e.g. describing visuals or situational language practice ('questions and answers')	Practising pre-taught language but in a context where it communicates new information, e.g. information gap activities or 'personalised' questions	Using language to communicate in situations which elicit pre-learnt language but with some degree of unpredictability, e.g. structured role-play and simple problem-solving	Using language to communicate in situations where the meanings are unpredictable, e.g. creative role-play, more complex problem-solving and discussion
Focus on forms and meanings		← →		Focus on meanings and messages

Figure 2. The communicative continuum

The rationale underlying the diagram is that learning / teaching activities range from:

- those which focus on forms and their conceptual meanings, and stimulate mainly analytic / explicit learning (in columns 1 and 2); to
- those which focus on situated meanings and the communication of messages, and stimulate mainly experiential / implicit learning (columns 4 and 5);
- with a middle category of activities in which the focus is simultaneously on forms and messages (column 3).

At the extreme left of the diagram, *non-communicative learning* involves the strongest focus on form. It includes, for example, grammar exercises, substitution drills and pronunciation drills. As we move to the right into column 2, *pre-communicative language practice* still focuses primarily on formal features but is also oriented towards meaning. An example of this is the familiar 'question-and-answer' practice, in which the teacher asks questions to which everyone knows the answer ('Who is sitting next to John?')

and so on) but the student cannot answer without paying attention to the meaning of the words. With *communicative language practice* we come to activities in which learners still work with a predictable range of language but use it to convey information. These would include, for example, information-gap or survey activities in which learners use recently taught language to gather information from classmates or ask a partner for information in order to complete a table or picture. In *structured communication*, the main focus moves to the communication of meanings but the teacher structures the situation to ensure that the learners can cope with it with their existing resources, including perhaps what they have recently used in more form-focussed work. This category includes more complex information-exchange activities or structured role-playing tasks. Finally, at the extreme right of the continuum, *authentic communication* comprises activities in which there is the strongest focus on the communication of messages and in which the language needed is unpredictable, such as using language for discussion, problem-solving and content-based tasks. These activities may develop into larger scale projects and contribute to students' personal and interpersonal development.

Many teachers' repertoire remains mainly in the two left-hand columns. To develop learners' communication skills, they may use this framework as a 'map' of the pedagogical landscape and gradually include more activities from column 3 (in which the teacher still has a high degree of control) and then move into columns 4 and 5 (where there is greater independence, creativity and autonomy; in current discussions, these activities are often called 'tasks'). As they gain experience (or with more advanced learners), they may increase the proportion of activities that involve structured and authentic communication but continue to use activities from columns 1–3, either to prepare learners for 'communicative tasks' or to remedy gaps that have emerged.

## Conclusion

In the last resort each teacher operates a unique pedagogy based on his or her understanding, preferences and experiences. This article has reviewed some proposals for macro-principles which might help in this search for an individual, context-appropriate pedagogy which also respects the nature of second language learning. It has also proposed a superordinate framework for joining these principles into a coherent and effective personal approach.

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