Communicative Approach, Task-based Approach and the Development of Competences in Foreign Languages

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The Communicative Approach has been around for more than a quarter of a century. However, its implementation in places like our country has not always been an easy task due, partly, to disinformation. The goal of this article is to provide teachers with a concise review of the concepts of Communicative Competence, Task-Based Instruction (TBI), and Competence. We also intend to provide some insights about teacher roles and task creation in TBI.

Experience has shown that knowledge comes from desire, pleasure and utility; three sources that complement and validate each other when we try to help our students obtain significant learning and competence in what they have learned. That is why every educational action should be focused on the learner, the actual center of the process. The learner, with his/her potentialities and weaknesses must be seen as an active agent of the learning process. Special attention should be paid to the learner's previous knowledge, his/her daily struggle, his/her needs and interests, abilities and attitudes. If the learner is the center of the teaching-learning process, as it has been suggested, then teachers should be in charge of informing students about learning strategies and to bring them into practice in the foreign language classroom. Also, the teacher needs to create certain procedures to motivate students by turning homework and class work into activities where curiosity, participation and interest are present. Of course, these elements would not be successful if they lacked an environment where learners could express themselves, create affective bonds and interact in order to learn.

This ideal context would be the perfect place to validate and apply

the hypotheses implied in the Communicative Approach for foreign language learning. In order to better understand the main concepts of this approach it is necessary to define Communicative Competence, which is ultimately what learners need to achieve. This concept, which in turn is composed of linguistic, pragmatic, discourse, and strategic competence, is explained by Savignon (1997) as "a continuous process of *expression, interpretation,* and *negotiation of meaning* (p.14).

Canale and Swain (1980), based on Hymes (1972) works, suggest that communicative competence has four dimensions:

Grammatical Competence: It includes vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, spelling, pronunciation and semantics.

Pragmatic Competence: This involves the social character of communication and it refers to the extent to which utterances are produced and understood adequately in different contexts according to contextual factors such as the participants role, the motives for interaction, the appropriacy rules, conventions and other factors related to social interaction.

Discourse Competence: It refers to the interpretation people give to individual messages and it is also related to the skill we have to combine grammatical forms and meanings to obtain a cohesive written or oral text. And the final dimension is Strategic Competence: It deals with the ways interlocutors use to start, keep, take turns and end communication. This strategy is focused on how people handle the strategies of verbal and nonverbal communication needed to successfully interact in a given communicative process.

Now that the most important aspects of communicative competence have been briefly explained we now turn to some key concepts in the communicative approach.

THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

This approach, which first appeared in Europe at the end of the 20th century and specifically in the 70s, was a reaction against structural methods such as the Audio Lingual Method and Grammar Translation Method. The foundations of this approach come from the research and works of interdisciplinary proponents, which include Canale and Swain, 1980; Guntrie, 1984; Halliday, 1978; Hymes, 1971; and Savignon, 1972,

and also philosophers like Austin and Searle and representatives of the Europe Council (e.g., Van Ek, Ritchterich, Trim, Alexander), who suggest analyzing languages from a communicative and functional point of view. These researchers also implied that the final goal of learning a foreign language should be the communicative competence opposed to the linguistic competence supported by Chomsky (1998.)

Among the objectives of the communicative approach it can be mentioned that teaching and learning should be centered on the needs and motivations of the learners. Also, learning should include the ability to handle speech acts and use language functionally. According to this, some core characteristics of the communicative approach can be outlined:

The contents and vocabulary found in the syllabus of each course should have the specific purpose of fulfilling the learners' needs. Grammar instruction should be embedded in a notional functional orientation and practiced in real situations.

The topics used to introduce students to learning should serve as a tool to activate their previous knowledge and to allow them to be aware of cultural comparisons between the culture of the L1 and the culture of the L2.

Finally, the materials used in the communicative approach should be authentic and they can include almost any document in the L2. For instance, booklets, brochures, TV shows, news, interviews with native speakers, INTERNET texts and so on. The preferred activities for exploiting these materials are tasks involving analysis, problem solving, and interpretation among others.

Learner and Teacher Roles in the Communicative Approach

Learners, as mentioned before, are the center of the process; learners are the active agents who learn to communicate through meaningful social interaction with the teacher and their peers. On the other hand, language teachers have in their hands the task of performing several roles in the classroom. For instance, the teacher is a facilitator of learning. The teacher is also a researcher, analyst, organizer, observer, guide, counselor, friend, and learner. When having a communicative orientation the teacher also has to rethink his/her

view of errors. In the communicative approach errors are considered a natural product of communication and a positive element since they can become the basis for perfecting learning. Finally, teachers have to change the conceptions about assessment in which written tests with discrete grammar points were the only tools to measure success and progress. The communicative tradition sees assessment as an important part of the teaching/learning process which can be carried out in different ways, for example by means of tests, interviews, dictations, oral and written reports, reading comprehension exercises, portfolios and jigsaw activities. Weir (1990) advocates the assessment of the learner as a whole, an evaluation in which different aspects are considered, not just the number of words used or the grammatical accuracy displayed by a learner in a dialogue or presentation. Then, the options mentioned above constitute valuable tools for an effective assessment.

The communicative approach has had the favor of researchers and teachers in the last decades. However, in EFL settings the implementation of this approach has had some drawbacks, partly because the communicative approach is not a method and it lacks specific steps or procedures to be followed. This limitation has been overcome thanks to an innovative proposal including tasks.

TASK-BASED INSTRUCTION

Task-Based instruction (TBI) is an innovative strategy that moves from reactive and proactive responses of the learners to an interactive stage where the desire of learning with others through group work and cooperation is essential. As the name of this approach suggests, the work should be focused on *tasks*.

Ur (1999) defines a task as an activity that asks students to perform something, where the discussion process is a means to an end (p. 123). Breen (1987) quoted by Brown (1994) suggests that a task is "any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. (p. 23).

In turn, Nunan (1989) takes a step further and provides a comprehensive definition of pedagogical task. He states that it is "a

piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end" (p. 10).

A very general and essential characteristic of a task is that it is accomplished when after following some directions, the learner is able to draw a map, write a paragraph, complete a paragraph and so on.

It is important to mention that in language teaching we can find communicative tasks and learning tasks. The former focus on the exchange of meaningful messages with similar purposes to the daily communicative interactions while the latter tend to explore aspects from the linguistic system per se. Both tasks are interrelated and they are brought into practice when learners use the L2. This combination makes possible that learners develop learning skills and self-assess their progress.

The obvious advantages of working with a task-based approach in the foreign language classroom are evident: not only are students using language to perform different functions (e.g., make requests, apologize, obtain information), but they are also going beyond mere transmission and repetition of grammar. Since the task encourages students to use meaningful, real language in a wide array of situations, learners are more aware of socio cultural differences, they explore and develop their own ways of interaction and learning and at the same time analysis and problem-solving skills are stimulated.

The Role of teachers in TBI

The main concern for the teachers who are in touch with the communicative approach and specifically with TBI is to be able to accept the new roles they have to assume. The procedure characterized by presentation, practice and production is replaced by a view in which the center of the teaching-learning process is the learner.

Brown (1994) expresses that teachers can play many roles in the course of teaching. Some of these roles are more restricting than

others. For example, when the teacher becomes "the controller" he/she is in charge of every minute of the class. He/she stages every single moment (i.e., when the students must talk, when they must respond and even know ahead of time what they will respond). On the other hand, the teacher can assume a more relaxed role. In the case of the teacher as director, he/she can assume the role of conductor of an orchestra. That is being always in charge, making sure that the class runs smoothly, and giving the students the opportunity to speak freely but guiding them back to the topic when necessary. The teacher as a manager will divide the class time in well-planned intervals of time, just like the manager of a corporation making sure that he/she has control over the larger objectives but allowing others to work on their time. In contrast, when using TBI the teacher assumes a less directive role. He/she must be a facilitator or a resource. In the first role the teacher is engaged in the learning of his/her students to the extent of making the learning easier, finding shortcuts, providing feedback or giving any type of guidance in an easy and gentle way. On the second role the students use the teacher. They come to him/her for advice or counsel when the student is in need. The class is less controlled in the sense that anything goes as long as it is inside certain organizational limits (161).

Creating Tasks

Nunan (1999) explains that there are certain elements and principles in creating a pedagogical task. First, he asserts that tasks should have some kind of input data. Here Nunan is careful to point out that this input includes not only texts but also pictures, diagrams or other nonverbal material. Second, a pedagogical goal should be immersed in the task and the roles of teacher and students should be clear. Finally, the setting is another aspect to be considered: where will the task take place? Will learners work in groups or individually? Will the class work be in a teacher-fronted or small group mode? (p.27).

Next, Nunan presents three main principles of task design, which are:
1. The authenticity principle
2. The form/function principle

3. The task dependency principle

Let us explain these three concepts. The first principle refers to the extent to which authenticity is present in the linguistic data learners work with. In general, authentic texts are all those types of documents that have not been designed with a pedagogical purpose. The advantage of using authentic data, Nunan says, lies in that learners are able to find elements of study (e.g., parts of speech, grammatical forms) in naturally occurring contexts (p. 27).

Next we find the form-function principle, which is concerned with the idea that teachers should show relationships between form and function in a crystal clear way. Sometimes learners carry out some language activities without realizing the use of that piece of language in real communication. According to Nunan, "the challenge, in activating this principle, is to design tasks that require learners to use inductive and deductive reasoning to develop their own understanding of the relationship between form and function." (p. 28).

Last of all, the task dependency principle solves the problem of connecting tasks into an instructional sequence. A series of tasks should form "progressive steps" or sequences that take students to higher and higher levels of competence. As a general suggestion, Nunan (1999) expresses that reproductive tasks (i.e., the student reproduces language provided by the teacher) precede creative tasks (p. 30).

As final considerations, the author suggests some elements for sequencing tasks: the salience or importance of the pedagogical goals for students; that is, the learners should have a focus for their activity, the explicitness of learning strategies, the extent to which the concept of "learning by doing" is embedded in the task, and the chance learners are given to experience inductive learning. In addition to these conceptual elements, Nunan mentions some elements that concern learners more directly. For instance teachers should consider the amount of space that will be provided for the learners to make their own contributions in terms of ideas, attitudes and feelings. The extent to which students assume active (rather than passive or reactive) roles in performing the task is also a consideration.

Tasks and Competences

It has already been implied that if tasks relate as close as possible to communicative situations of real life, if cooperative work is carried out and if the functions of language are clearly defined, tasks will enhance and improve the learners' competence.

Competence has been defined in such dissimilar fields as administration and linguistics. From a managerial point of view competence has to do with selecting personnel and it also has to do with the observable behavior that facilitate the efficient performance of certain job. From a linguistic point of view, one of the first people interested in the concept of competence was Noam Chomsky. Lightbown and Spada (1999) explain that for Chomsky competence is the knowledge of how language works. This term contrasts with performance, which is "the way a person actually uses language whether for speaking, listening, or writing. Because we cannot observe competence directly, we have to infer its nature from performance." (p. 172)

In Colombia the concern about the development of competences has gained new relevance since the year 2000. In this year competences began to be assessed in the ICFES test, the National Accreditation System for Higher Education and in service assessment for teachers among others.

Bogoya et al. (2000) expresses a different conception: A competence for assessment purposes is defined as the capacity to be able to do something in context. Competences are the ensemble of actions a student carries out in a particular context and that comply with the particular requirements of that context, they are also considered a potentiality or skill to approach a problem situation and explain it, control it or overcome it.

Torrado (1999) complements the definition of competence and she suggests that the concept of competence is different from those of aptitude or mental capacity. The concept of competence implies the idea of an active and complex mind, thus it implies some kind of mental processing and production. The subject, in this case the learner, works actively with the new knowledge adapting it to the knowledge previously acquired and it can be used to describe, compare, criticize,

argue, propose, create and solve problems.

The concepts explained above give us a more clear idea about the relationship between the development of communicative competence and TBI. Task-based instruction: Whereas communicative competence refers to the capacity of doing something with language according to the context, the interlocutor and other factors, TBI expresses that the best way to learn something may be by doing instead of focusing on theoretical aspects. This relationship should be considered when applying TBI, especially to the Colombian context where the goal is to develop in learners different competences that are: interpretative competence, argumentative competence and propositive competence. Interpretative competence encompasses the understanding of different kinds of texts, diagrams, charts, and graphs and the skill to identify thesis, antithesis, examples and illustrations. The argumentative competence refers to the ability to explain and justify statements and actions (i.e., explain why, how something is done, show hypothesis, prove facts and support conclusions). Finally the propositional competence deals with visualizing creativity and production. Among the skills to be developed are: propose and solve problems, generate hypothesis, discover patterns, make generalizations, create models and build projects. Some examples of activities related to propositional competence in foreign language learning are building correct sentences, using different grammatical structures and vocabulary, understanding readings, and making predictions about passages.

The communicative approach has gained importance in the area of English teaching due to the dynamic and motivating strategies that belong to task-based instruction. These strategies help students become active agents of their own learning through the use of real communication making sure the pragmatic aspects of the language are taken into account.

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