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THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH: A QUESTION OF MATERIALS OR ATTITUDES?

Introduction

One of the simplest ways of getting a communicative element into language teaching is to create an information gap — one student or group of students has some information and must give it in a certain form to one or more of the other students. However, it has been our general experience in using this technique that it does not work as well as it might. Students on both sides of the information gap approach the tasks in an egocentric way: as givers of information they take little or no account of the needs and background knowledge of the audience; as receivers they hear but do not listen. Consequently the amount of communication is minimal.

We felt that there were two possible reasons for this. Firstly, in their traditional teaching situation the students had never been taught how to process and present data effectively. As a result they were not able to bring to bear on the task the communicative strategies of selection and organisation that would produce a coherent, interesting and appropriate presentation. The second possible cause was that the students had no direct reason for getting or giving the information, other than that they had been told to do so. Only if the transfer of information was satisfying some need in the students would they have the natural motivation to participate actively in the communication process.

We conducted a series of lessons to test these ideas and to try and assess what the implications were for our own materials production. In general, our assumptions were confirmed, providing valuable feedback for improvement of teaching materials. However, the lessons also revealed that our second hypothesis concerning the motivation for transferring information was a much deeper and more pervasive problem than we had originally considered. The communicative approach was, in effect, in conflict with the students' view of the educational process and their perception of their role within it.

In this paper we shall explain how we arrived at this conclusion by reporting on the lessons we conducted. We shall then consider the implications for language teaching.

Input materials

The materials we shall discuss were based on a theme of popular technology — important inventions e. g. television, the record player, the telephone, the WC. Parallel experiments were done with materials on

different themes — British History and Dieting — with similar results. Since the work on the technical materials was the most extensive, we shall take this as representative.

The teaching unit was designed to cover five lessons, i. e. one week's work. It had three stages:

- a) A teacher-led investigation of how a TV works and how the modern appliance developed.
- b) Language work.
- c) Group work, in which each group was given information on a particular invention. Their task was to read and discuss this data, then teach the rest of the class how their device worked, adding any background information they thought important. In effect, they were being asked to do what the teacher had done for TV in the first stage.

The students

Lessons were taught in two classes in their final year of schooling, i. e. after seven years of English. The classes had a similar range of abilities, but they were very different in character.

The first class were a rather passive group and had a reputation in the school for being disinterested and unmotivated. Their normal English teacher had a fairly traditional approach, insisting on a high standard of linguistic correctness. However, she also gave over one lesson per week for one or more of the students to talk to the class on any subject that interested them. So the students were not unused to making large-scale presentations to the class. Linguistically the level was generally high.

The second class were a much livelier group. They were eager to participate, to ask and answer questions. Their teacher had a more "modern" approach — paid a lot of attention to finding materials of interest to the students and used group work. Again the linguistic level was high, although the class tended to be dominated by two or three very fluent students.

The lessons

The lessons were taught by Tom Hutchinson, a native speaker and writer of the materials. The first class took five lessons to complete the unit, the second class took six (see below). Each unit was followed by a discussion with the students to get their reactions.

a) Teacher-led investigation

This stage had two aims, apart from the normal ones of introducing the topic and the language. The first aim was motivational: it was important to rapidly overcome the general aversion for technology — to show that there is nothing intrinsically dull or incomprehensible about how a TV works. This was achieved by using what the students already knew — starting from the TV set itself: "What can you see if you look at the back of the set?" — "An aerial cable?" — "What does the aerial do?" — "It picks up waves from the air?" — "Where do the waves come from?" — "From the transmitter up there on the hill." etc. In this way the TV system and its

basic principle (that it turns light into transmittable waves and back to light again) were established, using the students' own knowledge. As we proceeded through the system, a schematic diagram was built up to illustrate the various stages. It was now a fairly simple matter to look in detail at diagrams with brief texts were used for this.

The first class, being less responsive to the teacher's questions, needed to rely more heavily on the written input, but in general both classes reacted well to this stage and seemed to grasp the knowledge with little difficulty. This knowledge was then reinforced by a text on the development of TV, which the students did largely on their own.

The second aim of the teacher's presentation was to give the students a model for their own presentations to show them how a mass of information about a complex device could be selected, organised and then presented in a meaningful way. This model was then analysed in the second stage of the unit — Language Work.

b) Language Work

This section was on the organisation of information into a coherent presentation. The exercises were:

- 1) **Labelling:** One of the most important aspects of any technical presentation is giving the names of the parts of the system. So the first task was to label a diagram of a TV system.
- 2) **Selecting Facts:** By answering a few comprehension-type questions, the most important facts about the invention and development of TV were established. These questions were deliberately non-specific, so that their application to any other device was clear e. g.: "Who invented the first working TV system?", "What system did the first TV use? What was wrong with it?", "What are the latest and possible future developments of TV?" etc. These questions were intended to give the students a framework with which they could approach their own data in the group work.
- 3) **Describing a System:** A simple way of describing a system is to relate a verbal description to a schematic diagram, working from one end to the other and saying what happens at each stage. This work was done in two parts. Firstly, from a list of eight sentences the students had to select four that best described the first four stages of the system and put them in order. Then for the second half of the system they had to write similar sentences of their own. Thus from the two parts and the diagram a complete description of the system was built up.
- 4) **Writing a Report:** The task now was to put all the information together into a coherent whole. The first stage of this was to establish a list of headings (e. g. inventors, making the picture, transmission, future developments etc.) and decide on a logical order. Then the information which the students had from the preceding steps was set down under the appropriate headings to produce a report on how the TV works and how the modern system developed. In the first class this was done in a written form and in the second orally.

With each of the exercises in the language work section we discussed what sort of information was being sought and presented, and why. Thus by the end of the second stage the students had seen a model for explaining how a device works and had looked at how this model was built up. The next stage was to transfer the model to new input.

c) Group Work

Working in groups of four or five the students were given data on a particular invention, each group having a different one. The data was of a similar kind to what they had received for the TV work. It did not require a great deal of re-organisation, as it was already broken up under headings, such as those in the TV report. However, a lot of selection was required, since the data was far more detailed than was needed for the students' task. It was also necessary to create a diagram to illustrate the system clearly.

In the first class the students were given the instructions: "Read your data, then select and organise the information in order to be able to teach the rest of the class how your invention works and how it developed. Use a diagram and the report structure you have practised with TV". Then they were left to do the best they could, receiving only *ad hoc* advice from the teacher(s).

As we had anticipated, the students found difficulty in transferring the model to their new data and the presentations were ineffective. In the second class, therefore, further stages of analysis were done. After the students had had a chance to read through their data, there was a classroom discussion on what sort of information they had and what sort of information they needed for the task. We compared their data to what was given and selected for the TV report. Then we considered organisational and presentational strategies, such as moving from the general to the particular, explaining technical terms, using a diagram, drawing on the audience's background knowledge of the subjects.

This work was reinforced by going round to each group in turn and discussing each point again in relation to their own data. Nevertheless it became apparent that the students were still finding difficulty in selecting the most appropriate facts and imposing a coherent structure on the information.

So, in the next lesson they were given a ready-made structure like that used for the TV report, which they simply had to fill in. We discussed the structure and filled it in for the TV presentation. Then the students had to fill it in for their own device.

Thus the second class received considerably more help in doing the group work task, and this was reflected in the work they produced.

The Results

The most striking feature of the lessons was the sharp contrast between the work done with the teacher and the group work. In the first stage the students were very interested and participated well. They answered the teacher's questions readily, asked questions of their own, and in general grasped the ideas very well. The presentations which the students made themselves, however, were dull, uninspired and non-interactive. Little account was taken of the audience's state of knowledge, e. g. technical words were used with no explanation given, even though the presenters themselves

had had to find out what the words meant. Not one group made any attempt to use the step-by-step, question-answer strategy used by the teacher.

What the students did, in effect, was to summarise the data they had been given and then read out these summaries.

There was a significant difference between the two classes in terms of the overall structure of the reports, but not as great a difference as one might have expected, taking into account the extra help given to the second class. Nevertheless, most of the students in this class made some attempt to put into the practice the strategies and techniques we had analysed. The reports were more concise, a few technical terms were explained, a couple of groups used diagrams (though not very effectively), and they showed a greater willingness to depart from the structure given by the original data. The effectiveness of the additional analysis and discussion work was clear to see.

But the feeling still remained that there had not been any really significant shift towards a more communicative relationship in the classroom. Linguistically there was little to fault in the presentations of either class. Structurally the second class's work was considerably better, and, no doubt, with a series of graded materials the skills and techniques we had focussed on could be developed to a higher level. But in terms of the communicative value of the work the level was as low as ever.

This began as an intuitive feeling when observing the presentations, and was then confirmed in the post-session discussions with the students. The most telling feature of the presentation lessons was that both as listeners and as speakers the students simply *did not care* whether anything had been communicated or not. This is not to say that they did not work hard in reading the data, trying to understand the ideas and preparing the reports, for most of them did. But they had been given the task of closing an information gap, and that is not what they tried to do. After two of the presentations in each class, members of the audience were asked to relay what they had just heard: they could not do it. And neither they nor the presenters thought this was significant. In the first class not a single question was asked of the presenters. Thus in a stream of linguistically accurate and, particularly in the second class, coherently structured discourse, there had been no effective transfer of information — no communication.

Why should this be so? There are a number of points to consider.

Possible Causes

a) *The topic*: It might be suggested that the topic itself was unmotivating. These were not technical students and so had no special interest in technology. In fact, a few of the students said they found the topic boring. However, even these students admitted that they had enjoyed the teacher-led work and had found the input data for the group work interesting. Those who had found the topic of interest produced no better results in their presentations than the others; and, as we have already noted, different topics produced similar results. There does not, therefore, seem to be any significant correlation between the students' interest in the topic and the level of work produced.

b) *Communicative strategies*: The analysis, organisation and presentation of large amounts of data requires the students to employ strategies of macro-structuring — creating a framework into which the detailed infor-

mation can be slotted. Our students had had little or no practice in doing this and were, as a result, rather overwhelmed by the task they had.

The difference we noted between the two classes shows that there is a clear need for materials that will teach students the kind of structuring techniques needed for the effective selection and transfer of information. As already noted, the presentations of the second class were more coherent, less rambling and more concise: some attempt was also made to use diagrams. It would seem reasonable to attribute these results to the additional analysis work done with this class.

c) *Presentation skills*: Presenting information in an interesting and entertaining way demands specific skills and talents. The dull and uninspiring effect of the students' presentations may in large part have been due to the fact that the presenters were simply not good presenters. However well structured a talk may be, if it is delivered in a low, monotonous voice with little or no paralinguistic interaction with the audience, communication will be severely restricted.

In giving students tasks such as: "Present your ideas to the class", we must be wary that we are not demanding of them what are, in effect, teaching or dramatic skills — skills which are a very specific mode of communication. They might well find such tasks difficult in their own language.

d) *Responsibility*: The sharp contrast between the work done with the teacher and the group work says much about the students' willingness (or rather unwillingness) to take on the responsibility for their own learning. With the teacher they were guided step-by-step to their goal. The task of organising the data was not in question — the teacher organised it: all the students needed to do was to concentrate on each step as it was presented to them by the teacher's questions.

In the feedback session a number of students remarked on how they had enjoyed this stage of the work. There is, of course, some intrinsic enjoyment in having a native speaker as teacher, but probably of greater importance is the fact that students used to a teacher-centred approach feel more comfortable, and may well learn more, in a teacher-led piece of work. The responsibility for defining goals and objectives and for organising the work to achieve these objectives lies, in group-based project work, with the students themselves. The extra burden this imposes may well be — and in our case seemed to be — a hindrance, even a deterrent to effective work.

e) *Motivation*: The factors noted so far can give some clues towards explaining the results of the group work, but they do not really get to the root of the problem. It emerged quite clearly in the discussions with the students after the lessons that the problem lay not in the question of "how?" but of "why?". Certainly, to cope with tasks of this scale students need help in developing strategies for selecting, organising and presenting information. But this work will be of limited and rather superficial value, if the fundamental question of motivation is not taken into account. There is little to be gained from considering communicative strategies, if the students do not see the work as a communicative task in the first place.

To us, as teachers, the results of the group work were disappointing. But that is only our observation. In terms of the objectives that the students seemed to have set themselves they were not disappointing at all — quite

the reverse. Linguistically they performed very well; in most cases they understood the input data with little help from the teacher; they produced accurate and well-formed summaries of what they had read. But there it stopped, because this was what the students saw as the objective of the work: it was not an attempt to bridge an information gap by transferring data from one mind to another, but an exercise in converting one presentation of information into another kind of presentation for the teacher to assess. In other words, it was not a communicative task, but an academic exercise in the manipulation of linguistic realisations — an exercise that existed within the triangle of data, student and teacher. The fourth element — the student audience, the element that would make the task communicative — was not taken into consideration, because it was not relevant to the task as the students saw it. It did not matter whether what was said was understood. Thus, in the terms in which the students perceived the task, their performance was adequate and in some cases very good.

The same perception of the task determined the behaviour of the students as listeners. They made no real effort to understand, because this was not part of their perceived role. The presentations were regarded as a form of assessment — the means by which the teacher could check that the work had been done. It was enough, then, to be a passive observer of this process. The question of whether they understood the flow of discourse, or could learn something new from it, never arose.

Conclusion

It may seem from the above account that we are criticising the students and their attitude to learning. This is not so. What we feel our experience has shown is that communicative language teaching is more than just a question of materials and classroom techniques. Of crucial importance is the student's perception of the educational process and of his role within it.

Students who have been educated to simply perform as the teacher directs and to regard any piece of language presentation as a form of assessment will develop the kind of functional motivation that was apparent in our lessons. The important thing is to survive, and you survive by playing the game according to the accepted rules. For our students the objective was to produce a piece of work that the teacher would find acceptable in its surface realisation. They could not generate communication, because they did not perceive the process as communicative.

As the comparison between our two classes showed, there is a genuine need to develop materials which teach students how to handle large samples of data — how to select and organise, even how to present effectively. But unless we address ourselves to the question of how students interpret the rules of the educational game, we will still not be able to generate truly communicative language use in the classroom. Although we are concerned with the specific problem of teaching language more effectively, the solution lies in the much wider context of educational philosophy and the students' interpretation of it.

This in turn raises the question, which is both practical and ethical, of whether a communicative approach to language teaching can be introduced into a traditional school system, particularly, as is often the case, at the upper end of the curriculum, when learning styles and attitudes are already fixed. We do not pretend to have an answer to this. But, assuming that a communicative approach is thought to be desirable, then, if it

is to have any chance, of success, it must be considered within the whole context of attitudes to learning and attitudes to education in general. Unless this is so the aims of communicative language teaching will be out of focus with the perceived aims of the student, which will do the student little good and will bring scant satisfaction to the teacher.

Developments in language teaching are all too frequently seen as a question of materials and techniques: change the input and re-train the teacher and all will be well. This was the starting point for our own investigations. But of equal, if not greater importance is the need to change the learning attitudes of the learners themselves. If the students are still interpreting the new materials in terms of the old learning system, the effects of the changes we are trying to bring about in the classroom will be greatly dulled. Language teaching cannot fight a lone battle here. Apart from possible moral considerations, we cannot expect the students to develop new learning strategies for the sake of just one subject. Thus developments in language teaching are inextricably bound up with the whole school curriculum and the attitudes to teaching and learning that underlie it. Only if we address ourselves to change in this wider context will the development of communicative materials achieve all that it promises.

Mirjana Jurčić

ANALIZA UPITNIKA O NASTAVI STRANIH JEZIKA I RADNIM MATERIJALIMA U USMJERENOM OBRAZOVANJU U SR HRVATSKOJ

Na inicijativu predsjednika Komisije za udžbenike stranih jezika Komiteta za prosvjetu, kulturu i fizičku kulturu SR Hrvatske izradila su dva člana Komisije i predstavnici izdavača »Školske knjige« u ožujku 1980. godine upitnik za nastavnike stranih jezika koji rade u usmjerenom obrazovanju. U sva područja SR Hrvatske poslali smo oko 400 upitnika. Svrha im je bila dobivanje ovih podataka:

- 1) u kojim se usmjerenjima, na kojem stupnju i s koliko sati izvodi nastava stranih jezika,
- 2) izvodi li se nastava u homogenoj obrazovnoj grupi ili su to kombinirane grupe raznih usmjerenja,
- 3) s kojim se radnim materijalima učenici služe u nastavnom procesu,
- 4) koji bi radni materijali (tekstualni i netekstualni) bili potrebni, a ne postoje,
- 5) koje su sugestije nastavnika za buduću izradu tekstualnih materijala za pojedina usmjerenja.

Odaziv nastavnika bio je prilično velik. Dobili smo oko 200 ispunjenih upitnika. Nastavnici su vrlo dobro prihvatili takvu suradnju. Evo što, na primjer, kažu nastavnici Centra za odgoj i obrazovanje u građevinarstvu iz Splita: »Od srca pozdravljamo ovu inicijativu te se nadamo da će zajed-