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The Communicative Method as a Model for Language Teaching

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Abstract

Many of the obstacles currently in the way of effective language learning and teaching may be circumvented through application of an educational model structured around the Communicative Method. Interaction leads to spontaneous expression and can heighten the value of the foreign language in learners' eyes. Group literary analysis, informed by the introduction of CEFR standards, expands and deepens learner vocabulary in the target language.

Keywords: Communicative Method, Language Teaching, Vocabulary, CEFR Standards, Meta-knowledge

Introduction

Albert Einstein said once that "the world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking." When we apply this idea of change to our current state of foreign language teaching strategies in the United States, it suggests that if we change our thinking of and around language teaching, we have the opportunity to actually teach foreign languages more effectively. To do this, the country must accomplish three things. First, it must begin discussions over the ideal context for learning and the methods used successfully in other countries. Then the country must analyze its current systems to determine their effectiveness. And finally, the United States must define a new system of strategies. The answers to many of the questions for both the teachers and students of language may be found in the application of the Communicative Method.

Setting

As mentioned, one must first start by understanding the true effective environment for learning a second language for students of all ages. In France, as in the US, often one professor will teach more than one course level. In the US, though there may be hints of partner work and group work, in a class the majority of time is consumed with lecture. The effectiveness of this method is questioned by Edwards in Examining Target Language Use, stating: Recent foreign language pedagogy research supports the use of a communicative approach to teaching. In an ideal classroom, stimulating and provocative instruction is delivered in the target language, and students are committed to interactive lessons conducted almost exclusively in the target language (Edwards 2011). Lecture mainly consists of standby participation from the students as the instructor provides notes over grammar and points of knowledge "needed" to effectively utilize the language. As found in many situations within the schools of the United States, lecture consumes almost, if not all, of class time. As stated by Edwards, classrooms must be stimulating and consist of interactive lessons, a description which is not often to given to lecture format. So even in this brief description of the strategies used in the United States, one can see a stark contrast in methodology. This style of lecture and class is not found in abundance within the institutes of France. In the Centre Linguistic Applique (CLA), for example, one finds many "alternative" ways to learn French. From excursions to soirees, there are copious activities exploited for language exposure. In part, the CLA's approach is "based on research in linguistics applied to teaching and [using] modern tools and methods: laboratories, Communicative Methods, independent study."

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When comparing the mission statement of the CLA to Edwards' statements on ideal classroom environments, we see a common valuation of the "Communicative Methods" (CLA 2014).

The Communicative Method

The Communicative Method can be explained as the "idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning" (British Council 2006). When learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language at a fluid pace. As David Crystal explains, "communication is said to have taken place if the information received is the same as that sent. .." (1991). Though technically it is plausible that students of foreign language courses may have, in fact, received the information during lecture, there are no effective forms of immediate feedback relayed to the teacher. They are forced to rely on exams and essays and the process suffers for the delays attendant to the testing schedule. In the Communicative Method, the continuous application of material allows for more timely and consistent, and therefore more effective, evaluation and correction. Within the existing testing calendar, it functions to provide the salutary side-effect of informal assessment. Therefore we can begin to see how the communicative method can improve ways of teaching and using the language, thereby ultimately improving a crucial area of language teaching and learning. The United States has the opportunity to make the classroom experience more meaningful, which is possible with adherence to the Communicative Method guiding the process. When dealing with the "ideal" second language learning environment and the communicative approach, there must not only be an evaluation of its effectiveness, but a description of what it entails for our school systems. How do institutes other than the CLA use the Communicative Method? How are these institutes utilizing the approach explicitly and teaching effectively with this approach? There are many ways in which this outcome is approached within the classroom, as will be later discussed, however one way that bears especial mention is by exploring education outside the classroom. Currently, in the United States it is thought that by using extracurricular activities, one is rewarding students in some manner. With "participation points," field trip, and free time all being words synonymous with this idea of extracurricular activities, there leaves a negative sense of the practicality of extracurricular activities and their ability to actually teach the subject. In many study abroad programs, conversely, the sheer probability of acquiring specific language skills balances on a strong connection between classwork and exterior methods (such as trips to museums, administration buildings, etc). According to Dornyei:

"Extracurricular Language Use" showed a positive, significant relationship with integrative motives, indicating that the extent of the effort made by learners to use their English skills outside the classroom is associated with their affective predisposition towards foreign cultures and foreigners, or, in other words, with the extent of their "international openness." Need for Achievement contributed positively to Course Achievement and Further Enrollment, proving that it is a major component of motivation in foreign language learning. Attributions about past failures were not represented by sufficient items on the questionnaire to enact us to draw detailed conclusions about their nature and effects. The results, or rather the lack of results, point to the fact that in behaviors which are related to actual language learning practice, the students original motivation seems of secondary importance and other factors, presumably classroom-specific ones concerning the teacher and the classroom milieu are likely to play a determinant role; the rather low correlations are due to the fact that such factors have not been included in the survey. This assumption is confirmed by the inter correlations of the four criterion measures (Dornyei 1990).

None of this in any way lessens the value of in-class learning. Indeed, it is only within the structured environment of the classroom that educators can direct interactions so as to be most beneficial to the learners. "Pair group, work group, cooperative/collaborative learning settings, authentic materials, culturally integrated lesson content, and interactive tasks focused on the cognitive and affective domains [can be] integrated into foreign language classrooms" (Moeller and Catalano, 2015). Without negating the value of in-class learning, the US education system must begin to recognize and take advantage of the value of extracurricular activities in second language acquisition. Even in a non-immersive learning environment, it is often possible to find opportunities for authentic exchange in the target language. The answer is the Communicative Method. Proper student motivation is a nearly ubiquitous obstacle in US classrooms. The Communicative Method ameliorates this by allowing teachers to slowly work their way outside of the school walls. Perhaps it may be as simple as allowing professor and teachers-the chance to take their students out to the local grocery store, for example. This can achieve many things for both parties, such as giving the learners a real life example of language use. This may take the form of just one trip per month, semester, or even once per year, just so the chance of immersive exposure is presented.

Once more, it is possible that this one trip the student takes part in may change the way he/she thinks about a language, and ultimately push them to take the initiative. One aspect of the Communicative Method is that it promotes positive engagement for both the learners and the educators. It is important to influence learners to interact with the language, rather than relying solely on classroom instruction. According to EikoUshida:

Students who had positive motivation and attitudes toward the study of French and Spanish were able to control their learning even though they had to study mostly on their own. Since module tests were considered as one of the learning outcome measures in the study, this result suggests that a positive relationship between students' motivation and attitudes and achievement was present (2005). The Communicative Method would provide a positive relationship between motivation and achievement by creating an entirely different ideology behind language learning. Though it may be important to utilize extracurricular activities for the involvement and development of a language, the need for class lectures still exist. Matjasko and Farb suggested that there is "a curvilinear relationship between number of activities and positive developmental outcomes, suggesting a threshold at which the number of activities no longer has a beneficial relationship with developmental outcomes" (Matjasko and Farb 2012). This can mean that while using excursions and outings to supplement traditional pedagogy, there are limits to what any student can learn outside the classroom.

Language Learning Through Reading

Beside the methods of instruction used in any institute, the resources used by the institutes can be, and are in many cases, just as important. Without the proper resources for teachers and students when learning a language, the language learning process may be negatively impacted. For example, the libraries at a university, if the school does not possess a specified language center, should not only carry books on methodology, but also books on literary analysis and comprehension. With the wealth of commonly accessible literature available to the student in the United States, that vast resource, through communal and analytical engagement with texts, can be taken advantage of within the structure of the Communicative Method. In fact group reading in the target language fits rather neatly into the communicative method, expanding, as it has been shown to do, the vocabulary of learners. Referring back to Stephen Krashen's Input hypothesis, reading would certainly qualify as one of the multiple vectors of exposure to the target language. Group discussion of shared reading, with the opportunity for correction of errors, would first widen learners' vocabularies through exposure to the text and then deepen their understanding of the new words through communication. One giant step one can take to assure they are finding the right stories and words for their ability comes from the very popular rating of language skills found in Europe and other parts of the world. Ranging from the very beginner at A 1.1 all the way to the mastery of a language found at C2.2, these ratings, called CEFR (Common European Framework Reference), can help steer all learners along an effective path of learning. This is why it is crucial that schools in the United States adopt this scale of skill determination.

According to John Read: In some respects vocabulary testing is quite a simple activity, a matter of selecting a suitable number of target words and assessing whether each one is known by means of an established test format such as multiple-choice, matching, gap-filling, or some form of translation. Such tests continue to be routinely used in second language teaching for a variety of assessment purposes and, if well designed, can be highly reliable and efficient measures of learner competence. (2007)When entering, and possibly during every semester of school, students should be tested based on the ratings transcribed earlier. Not only can the ratings act as an effective determiner, they may also act throughout the process as facilitators. For example, when a person is out of class, it is vital in the new system that they continue their learning outside the classroom walls. A part of this should be spending time reading literature to practice comprehension and add fresh ideas needed to assist in continual expansion of language skills. If the student knew what their exact level was in a certain language, they could easily find books of interest, marked with the same level as their language fluency. With the new ratings placed into the current system, a child, or adult for that matter, would be able to control much more of their own learning by obtaining more met knowledge. Met knowledge, or knowledge about knowledge, of certain subjects, such as reading levels, can contribute in an impactful way to the learning experience of an individual. One way met knowledge can aid in learning for an individual is by allowing them the chance to see their progress, and what steps they must take in order to "climb up" to the next level. In the case of moving from a rating of A1 to A2, one can merely read the description of each level, compare, and evaluate their situation solely for their own progression. From this table, one can see the differences stated for each level in the A groups.

Level Group	Level Group Name	Level	Level Name	Description
A	Basic User	A1	Breakthrough Or Beginner	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at satisfying needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows, and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided that the other person speaks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.
		A2	Way Stage Or Elementary	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

From just the first point, one can see what changes occur as a student becomes more proficient according to the CEFR. For one standard, a student must understand frequently used expression in both A1 and A2. However, in A2 we see the understanding of frequently used expressions go from simple expressions of everyday life, to more in-depth context such as shopping, instead of simply needing to find food as showcased in level Al. Once more looking at the differences, we observe that in level Al one must be able to introduce themselves, while in level A2, one must be able to talk about one's background and immediate environment as well. For the most part, concerning levels within the same grouping (i.e. A 1 and A2, B I and B2) one must not expand his or her width, but rather their depth into certain subjects. When discussing language progression it is vital to understand there are dimensions to growth. There is width, and then there is depth. Width, in this case, refers to one's skills as a line of subjects. When one widens their language faculty, they are able to speak and comprehend a "wide" range of topics such as sports, cuisine, current events, history, etc. While when one is "deep" into the language, one can not only speak on several topics, but also can delve into detail on those topics as well. An example of the differences could be taken from eating at a restaurant. When one has acquired the width needed to order food and understand choices given, one may choose to expand their depth next. This has the ability to appear in several ways, but may come in the form of one being able to ask complex question, such as "What are the cook's specialties?" or inquire of the server why they recommend certain foods over others. Relating this back to the CEFR, one can find much more elaboration and detail pertaining to width and depth of language knowledge and use.

Level Group	Level Group Name	Level	Level Name	Description
B	Independent User	B1	Threshold or Intermediate	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons for opinions and plans.
		B2	Vantage or Upper Intermediate	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her professional field Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers possible without strain for either party Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
C	Proficient User	C1	Effective Operational Proficiency or Advanced	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts and understand implicit meaning. Can express ideas fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
		C2	Mastery or Proficiency	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in complex situations.

As the table indicates, there are certain areas of emphasis when dealing with language use, and it is simply a matter of defining certain markers which can identify a student's progression in second language acquisition. For example, referring back to the differences made clear from Al to A2, the change is in depth. Now in the A2 level, a user must be able to not only understand frequently used expressions, but also be able to understand the main points of clear input from a wide range of topics such as family matters and work. This comes as an expansion of depth and width of knowledge within the target language. It is essential for educators and learners alike to understand the concept of width and depth so that it may be easier to asses which areas need the most improvement. This does not imply more standards must be created, but rather simply structuring current standards more functionally. Currently, it seems as though standards for teaching foreign languages in the United States, much like teaching sex education or music, can vary wildly, even from schools of the same district. A more consistent understanding of what is expected from both teachers and students cannot but improve outcomes. Educators in groups such as the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) have come together independently to define such standards. Clearer standards make it easier for the students to understand what is being asked of them and do the same for the teachers. Teachers stand to benefit the most from the new standards, as they are the ones who must most closely follow the guidelines set in place. As said by Olivier Jaquez, a professor at the CLA in Besancon, "I believe students need less restriction, and more guidance. Professors must have clear standards, and clear goals with those standards. And when professors can have a common goal and common standards, it can help them make better decisions when teaching a language" (2015).

Knowing the differences between width and depth is just one more example of the met knowledge surrounding language learning, and obtaining more information in this regard can help students tremendously while acquiring a new language. If a student can identify their level within a language, indicate which skills they must gain to continue their studies, and see exactly where they will need to gain more width and depth, the student will be able to engage with their own studies far better. By having the student involved with their own learning, teachers and professors alike will be able to focus more time, evolving the class environment and ambiance of the language and culture, aiding the class as a whole. As has been expressed, the students' responsibilities will change with the new system. There needs to be more pressure on students to take language learning more seriously. Regardless of their perceptions, they can benefit from learning a foreign language. The role of teachers will also change. Teachers must become facilitators as well as educators - at least in language learning.

The role of the educator should resemble that of referee in sports; they must remain unseen for the majority of the time, but will interfere when they are needed. There are rules to follow, but there are also times when there are alternative ways to play the game. When teachers fall into a "one size fits all" approach, their students, whether truly or falsely, begin to fall in line with each other and will have certain areas pressed on them, instead of having their natural abilities and inclinations guide their progress. Accordingly, by allowing students to showcase their natural abilities against the concepts needing more attention, the learner can help the educator discover the best path for the student. Returning to the sports metaphor, we can understand this approach in the context of basketball. At the very beginning, some will be better at dribbling the ball, while others may be better at shooting. These abilities can be classified as a natural talent. However, diving deeper into met knowledge, we may observe exactly how one acquires either the specific talent, or how they learn the new attribute. In the parlance of the classroom, we would be comparing students who are visual learners versus students who are more aural learners. It is how the student tends to learn something which we can classify as being their natural characteristics when speaking of language learning. Without awareness of the effects, teachers may inadvertently subject their students to one or two types of teaching styles not effective at reaching the entire class. This effect, unfortunately, does not become evident until testing, which can lead to the realization, made long past the point where changes might have been made, that both teacher and student have wasted a significant amount of time.

Conclusion

The Communicative Method is the answer. Making communication the guiding principle of all decisions made in language teaching more than adequately addresses every obstacle to language learning herein presented. The Communicative Method allows for immediacy in error correction, before mistakes become ingrained. It encourages or at least allows for native-like original expression in the target language. Discussions in the target language within or outside of the classroom can open the eyes of learners to the real world value of language learning and affect their engagement with the material. Talking about shared reading can deepen understanding of widening vocabularies. The process lends itself naturally to revealing and encouraging the most efficient approaches for individual students. The communicative process is not only a method which can elevate the critical areas within the foreign language classrooms of the United States, but as well has been proven to be effective in other countries where language learning is more natural.

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