

THE COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH CLASSROOM: A FASCINATING QUEST

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In the present article I describe my vision of what an English classroom should be like. For me, the vision is that of creating a communicative classroom. I define it as the space where participants (both learners and teachers) seek the learning of a foreign language bearing in mind specific objectives. I then point out its main characteristics. I conclude that the communicative classroom may facilitate learning because of its many advantages.

Introduction

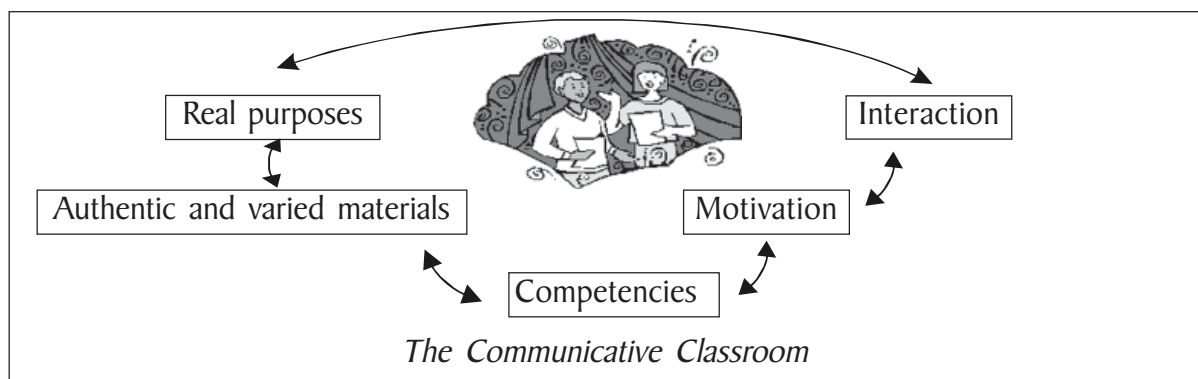
There are many issues that affect the teaching of English as a foreign language for the public in general, and for the future professionals in this field in particular. Among the most important are the roles of the student, the teacher, and the materials as well as the approach followed within the classroom and the curriculum.

Whether the teacher of English has clarity over the approach s/he follows in his/her class,

s/he is certainly following a route that embraces a whole philosophy on teaching, learning principles and practice. The teaching of English has undergone many changes due to the great contributions in the field made by academics, researchers, and experienced teachers. It has been possible to see the move from a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred one (Block: 1994 and Clarke: 1989), from a narrow focus on language as a formal system to the concept of competence by Chomsky (1965), from a linguistic competence to a communicative competence proposed by Hymes (1972). Their contributions have helped to model new approaches to the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Definition and objective

One of the emerging models is known as the communicative classroom. The communicative classroom is the space where the participants (learners and teachers) seek the learning and practice of a foreign language bearing in mind real purposes that give a true dimension to



the activities, tasks, and processes carried on in the classroom. The main objective of the communicative classroom is to provide the learner with the necessary tools and elements of thought for performing well in a foreign language. To do so, we need to take into consideration the language itself (linguistic performance), the functions of language (pragmatic competence), the ability to create coherent language in written as well as in spoken texts (discourse competence), the ability to cope in authentic communicative situations (strategic competence), and the ability to use units of speech together with facility (fluency). The communicative classroom is then the space where language is both received and produced. The curriculum of the communicative classroom must therefore reflect the real needs of students and how these are going to be settled. A lot of effort will be needed in order to reach the objectives proposed in the communicative classroom as it demands a lot of requirements many practitioners are not prepared or willing to follow.

The language input in this type of approach takes into consideration the real needs of learners, the learning conditions, the context in which learning is taking place and the motivation present in each individual learner. The real needs are the reasons why the learner decides to study the foreign language. Future professionals in the area of English teaching will certainly have clear the underlying reason for their studying of English as a foreign language: to have an excellent command of the target language as well as a deep knowledge of the cultures in which it operates, and its impact and importance in the society they are going to serve when they major in order to teach the language or to serve as vehicles of communication in very different arenas. The

learning conditions refer to circumstances under which learners will be exposed to the foreign language. Is the teacher prepared enough to deliver X course to a specific group? Are learners going to be taught by native or non-native teachers? What type of materials do they have access to? What type of curriculum do learners depend on? Will they have access to different kinds of media such as multimedia, internet, etc? Will they have the possibility of crossing the barriers of the classroom and be able to have contact with the outside world?

The communicative teacher

The teacher is one of the most important learning factors in the learning-teaching context because s/he provides a lot of the input learners will receive. His/her personal teaching style will also make an impact on the learner. S/he may hinder or promote acquisition in learners in many different ways, depending also on their learning styles. In the communicative classroom, s/he takes many roles: providing and presenting new language, setting up activities, organizing material resources, guiding students in group work, encouraging contributions, monitoring activities, and diagnosing the further needs of students as established by Hedge (2000). Based on the varying number of roles assumed by the teacher in the communicative classroom, s/he does not remain at the front of the class but creates favourable circumstances for learners to become responsible for the activities developed, and in this way encouraging less dependency on him/her on the part of the learner. The teacher in the communicative classroom in conclusion must be very adaptable in order to fulfil the needs of learners and very creative and open so that they feel committed to do their best.

The role of materials

Materials play an important role in the learning process as they are helping hands that may serve as guides and starting points for tasks and project works that seek to promote language learning. These include textbooks, in-house materials, multimedia material, brochures, newspapers, magazines, videos, documentaries, films, plane tickets, maps, leaflets, or any written and/or oral real piece of information. Textbooks offer many benefits including a grammatical and functional framework which provides for the common needs of a group of learners as stated by O'Neill (1982). However, textbooks are not the only resources teachers must use. Allwright (1981) suggests that the use of textbook materials places emphasis on the teaching process perhaps at the expense of emphasis on the learning process. In the communicative classroom, the teacher must be very clear in what materials s/he is going to select and use in his/her class in order to attain the proposed objectives of the course. Materials must be rich and varied in order to help the learners interact under many different circumstances in real life. As important as the materials are the types of activities promoted in the communicative classroom. Examples include information-gap activities, reasoning-gap activities, and opinion-gap activities. Each gap activity attempts to create a real need on the learner, so s/he will be forced to contribute in a simulated but close to real situations.

The Colombian context

The context refers to the social, educational, and local factors that affect or have an influence on the learner. Our society as any other one is facing a growing need for professionals who are proficient in the English

language so they will be able to fulfil their personal needs as well as those of the country. Personal needs may take many forms: the simple desire for the acquisition of the language as a personal asset, the need to be able to communicate at a good level when travelling abroad, the requirement for a job application, the possibility of understanding a film without the dubbing, and so on. On an international level, the process of globalisation is exercising an enormous demand on people from all over the world to interact. That interaction has been carried out in English, which has become the lingua franca in the international arena. Therefore, Colombians must be ready to cope with this language in the best possible conditions to have equal opportunities.

What does the above information mean for English teachers? On the one hand, it is one of the channels through which the personal needs of many people and the needs of the country may be satisfied. On the other hand, teachers must be prepared to contribute to the fulfilment of those goals. The English teacher has then the mission to empower his/her students with the language and cultural competences that will enable them to perform well in the contexts of interaction they are dealing with. The communicative classroom may facilitate learning by exposing students to real situations, by providing authentic and varied materials, by promoting interactions that have real objectives, and by creating an atmosphere of confidence that will trigger students' self-confidence and motivation.

Motivation

Motivation is the force that determines the impulse with which a learner arrives to the classroom and then the strength to carry on

along the whole learning process. Some people will be intrinsically motivated to be in the classroom as they have openly and honestly chosen to be there, while others haven't still found a reason to be there. Regardless of the level of motivation brought to class by learners, it is irrefutable that it goes hand in hand with successful learning. If learners are not motivated, the process is going to be tiresome for learners and teacher alike, and the end results will be disappointing. Motivation is a highly complex phenomenon that deserves all the attention from language practitioners, whether learners arrive with it or whether they acquire it through classroom experiences.

Conclusions

The communicative classroom aims at both the input and the output. The input refers to the learning process itself whereas the output implies the product obtained after the process has been carried out. The process must be rich in materials and supported by the practitioner. The output must then show the acquisitions and the reflections made by the learners. Both are important and neither is neglected at the expense of the other.

The communicative teacher adopts many roles, maybe the most important one being that of a source of empowerment that will permit his/her students to be at the centre of the process, and not only as individuals who receive knowledge but as creators of it. This entails a responsibility on the part of the learner to actively participate in the construction of his/her learning inside and outside the classroom.

In order to achieve the goals of the communicative class, the teacher is not alone for s/he can count on a wide range of materials (authentic among others) together with his/

her enthusiastic methodology and will to motivate the participants in the process.

The Colombian context is in need of teachers and methodologies that can contribute to the attainment of international standards that will ease the understanding of its citizens with the global community for business, friendship, co-operation, and all human interchanges that are part of people's lives. The communicative classroom can greatly contribute to the empowerment students are in need of because of its many resources and vision of the teaching and learning processes.

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