Brief Analysis of Classroom Activities Applied in
Communicative Approach to College English Teaching

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Abstract;
As we know, many communicative tasks involve in face-to-face encounters in the classroom. Interaction gives students practice in communicating and negotiating meanings, at the same time, allows them to establish how well they can understand and make themselves understood. This paper reviews theories of communicative competence teaching, which implies teachers must do more than just supply learners with a number of language structures to manipulate, and it also examines the characteristics of task design in a communicative classroom. It proves how practical and effective communicative activities are to enable students to understand, simulate and use the language material in the form of communication.

Key words: communicative competence; task; classroom activity

1. Introduction
Much effort has long been made, either by researchers or by teachers, to create a communicative classroom by the use of activities where students have a certain amount of choice in what to say, or what to do. Experience in ‘authentic’ communication should not be delayed until the learner has a basic set of grammatically correct sentences, the writer, from the academic year 2000 to present, has adopted the “New College English” course book in her English majors’ comprehensive English course. This course book is compiled based on the student-centered teaching approach, which advocates student’s involvement in fulfilling tasks in the learning process. The writer has investigated the students’ interest in classroom activities of various kinds, required them to complete tasks in class, and encouraged them to make connection between their background knowledge and the information in the text. After these years’ practice, the surprising reward is that students’ motivation and participation in different types of tasks are beyond teacher’s expectations. In particular, the macroskills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, incorporated into classroom activities, have been well developed, which would benefit them a lot in their future study and work.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Teaching Communicative Competence
We use language to communicate. We do not just communicate facts to each other. Communication is an exchange between people, of knowledge, of information, of ideas, of opinion, of feelings. Theories of communicative competence imply that teachers must do more than just supply learners with a number of language structures to manipulate. In 1970, Campbell
and Wales proposed that the Chomskyan notion of competence should be extended beyond purely grammatical competence to include a more general communicative ability. In practice, however, the crucial question is how to bridge the gap between linguistic competence and communicative competence, how to develop a smooth transition between ‘skill-getting’ and ‘skill-using’. In ‘skill-getting’ the emphasis is on the going, not on the destination, whereas in ‘skill-using’ students are aiming at the goal of communicative competence. The gap is so difficult to bridge because the classroom environment by its very nature makes genuine communication extremely elusive. What I would suggest for bridging the skill-getting and skill-using gap are activities where learners are playing a part in situations.

From the remarks already made, it should be obvious that the current interest in classroom activities stems largely from what has been termed ‘the communicative approach’ to language teaching. Although it is not always immediately apparent, everything we do in the classroom is underpinned by beliefs about the nature of language and about language learning. In terms of teaching, it is generally accepted that teachers need to distinguish between ‘learning that’ and ‘knowing how’. In other words, we need to distinguish between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use the rules effectively and appropriately when communicating.

2.2 What is task?

Here is a definition from a dictionary of applied linguistics:

An activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape may be referred to as tasks. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative.

From a pedagogical perspective, ‘task’ is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning --- from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision making. It has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. Tasks involve communicative language use in which the user’s attention is focused on meaning rather than linguistic structure. In general, I consider the communicative task as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.

2.2.1 Components of a task

Tasks will contain some form of input data which might be verbal (for example dialogue or non-verbal (for example a picture sequence) and an activity which is in some way derived from the input and which sets out what the learners are to do in relation to the input. The task will also have (implicitly or explicitly) a goal and roles for teachers and learners.

A communicative task, as learners are involved in processing and producing language for communicative ends, can be characterized in the following framework:
Goals: the vague general intentions behind any given learning task
Input: the data that form the point of departure for the task.
Activities: what learners will actually do with the input which forms the point of departure for the learning task
Role: the part that learners and teachers are expected to play in carrying out learning task as well as the social and interpersonal relationships between the participants
Settings: the classroom arrangements specified or implied in the task, and it also requires whether the task is to be carried out wholly or partly outside the classroom

For now, let us say that every component should have an effect on task, and on task design. In turn, tasks can be analyzed or categorized according to their goals, input data, activities, settings and roles.

2.2.2 Activity types

In terms of activity typologies, it has been proposed by Doughty and Pica that small-group, two-way information gap tasks seem to be particularly appropriate in stimulating interactive communication. But Prabhu’s three principal activity types can be explained as follows:

1) Information-gap activity, which involves a transfer of given information from one person to another --- or from one form to another form.
2) Reasoning-gap activity, which involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning.
3) Opinion-gap activity, which involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation.

These activities can be specified in different patterns, such as completing a tabular representation with information available in a given piece of text, deciding what course of action is best for a given purpose, or taking part in the discussion of a social issue.

3. Application

When examining “New College English” with examples of different activity types, I will particularly single out one unit to demonstrate how these activities are carried out in the communicative classroom. Now let us take a close look at Unit Two (Book Two) -----Personality, which is the theme of the unit. All the activities, with an aim at written communication as well as with a largely oral focus, comply as far as possible with the characteristics of tasks that are necessary for learning purposes, i.e. to enable students to understand, simulate and use the language material in the form of communication.

Part One: Preparation

It serves as a warmer for the whole learning process. The function of a warmer is to stimulate the student’s interest in the topic, and the tasks designed in this part aims at broadening the student’s horizon and actively preparing students for more activities with the certain amount of intake of the topic-related language material. The following activities are all designed to provoke spoken communication between students and/or between the teacher and the students.

Activity 1) Personality and Job:

To encourage short sharp bursts of discussion and get students quickly absorbed in their classroom role, the little teaching technique is adopted: buzz groups where students are put into loose groups of three or four for a two-minute session. Frequently the teacher will ask students to think of as many words as possible that describe a person’s personality. Next step is the class pools
the information. In this way, students are sharing their previous knowledge about vocabulary.

Usually buzz groups can form the prelude to a larger discussion session, which is Step Two in Activity One -----matching the personality traits with the jobs of different kinds. It’s a free-talk session, where the teacher invites the students to speak freely and loudly, possibly with a reason or two for their choices. For example, salesman and saleswoman, in student’s eyes, are persuasive because their job is to persuade people to buy things. Others may argue that they are tricky and dishonest since people are sometimes fooled into buying faulty goods. With the shared vocabulary, students find themselves more open and willing to speak before class.

**Activity 2) Personality Test**

Typically students do questionnaires to release and exchange information. The pair work of ‘Personality Test’ is done by asking the questions and expecting the partner to give answers. It helps classmates know who their partner is and what kind of individual he/she is. The kind of activities is based on the notion of creating an information gap by letting learners make a personal and secret choice from a list of language items which all fit into a given frame. The aim is for students to discover their classmates’ secret choices. This activity can be used to practice almost any structure, function or notion.

**Activity 3) Personality Words**

The role of teacher is viewed as a guide, leading students through the puzzle in all directions: forward, backward, up, down, and diagonally, finding all the words related to personality. Why is the guide of teacher necessary in this activity? The answer is some of the words are unfamiliar to students. Therefore, the purpose of the activity is obvious: to summarize and consolidate what has been discussed and what needs to be known, and to render students expand their vocabulary useful for the following activities.

**Part Two: Listening-Centered Activities**

The purpose of this part is to help students do more activities after they acquire an amount of linguistic intake that is comprehensible for students via audio material.

There is no doubt the listening competence is promoted in these activities, but it is by no means the destination. Based on the information in the recording, the final goal is discussing questions in groups: “To what extent do you think culture affects personality?” and “What personality traits do you think are associated with the Chinese people?” From the point of comparing the Canadian culture and the Korean culture and understanding the influence on the Korean girl once she is exposed to a foreign culture, the designed questions are more open-ended, which ensures the student’s freedom to speak out their opinion about the relation between culture and personality and impression of the Chinese people.

The kind of activity is not complete until students agree with each other after a certain amount of discussion. When students take part in it, they have great fun and spontaneously produce a lot of English. In my belief, the so-called consensus activities have always been successful in promoting free and spontaneous language use.

There are many other occasions when students are asked to come to a consensus about things they are learning. Reading tasks might involve this kind of agreement.

**Part Three: Reading-centered Activities**

As a key part of a unit, the reading task begins with a number of interpersonal exchanges in the form of discussing questions in the pre-reading part. In this, students can release personal information about such questions as “When you arrive at the university, did you find it hard to talk
with your new classmates? If so, explain why.” and “Do you feel uncomfortable when people say nice things to you?” Such activities are often useful at the beginning of the main task to warm things up or to create a good and positive atmosphere in class, which is a bit “icy” to the learning material.

The class is then put in groups. Each group must follow the instructions and work out the outline as well as some important details with what they get from the reading passage. The whole learning process demonstrates the wide variety of student’s roles. The students are no longer the passive recipient of outside stimuli (e.g. the teacher). They are more like an interactor and negotiator involved in a process of personal growth. They may take responsibility for their own learning, developing autonomy and skills in learning- how-to-learn. The role of students is thus adaptable, creative, inventive, and most of all independent, which is relatively uncommon in traditional instruction.

Turning from the focus on the roles of learners to that of the teacher, it has been pointed out that the status of the teacher is counselor or model, whose function has been limited to that of manager of the learning process. The teacher, therefore, should have the full awareness of the degree of control over how learning takes place among groups, and that to which the teacher is responsible for the learning content. The teacher may invite students to reflect on language, provides many examples of grammatical structural consciousness-raising activities, make them interactive and communicative, and stimulate genuine communication between students.

Part Four: Further development

With the exposure and understanding of the topic-related learning content, students are provided with an opportunity to enhance their applied competence by fulfilling activities of various kinds. The types of activities range from story-telling, problem-solving to class discussion. The problem-solving activity ----Can We Improve Our Personality, for example, requires students to collect and share information to reach a decision. Some undesirable personality traits are given to students to discuss and decide what is supposed to do to get rid of selfishness, impatience and dishonesty. Discussion activities usually induce heated arguments, but the main thing to remember is that proper organization and full preparation can ensure productive results. Lack of them can mean failure.

It is often easier to provide opportunities for spoken communication in the classroom than it is for the written medium. Frequently writing is relegated to the status of homework. This is a pity since writing, especially communicative writing, can play a valuable part in the class. We will look at the writing task “Lonely Hearts Club” because it involves all the skills, as well as the ability to order and organize ideas. Students can write and design a short ad for the personal column in a newspaper describing your (or a friend’s) personality, appearance and hobbies. What is most enjoyable and motivating in the writing tasks is that students can amuse themselves. All this renders writing less uninteresting and stressful because we see students actually write things for communicating purpose. The process of co-operation is as important as the actual fact of writing itself.

4. Conclusion

We have looked at activities designed to have the characteristics we said were desirable for communicative activities. We have seen how these activities contribute to students’ ability to communicate in English. However, before we can conclude, I should like to mention difficulties that can arise in the classroom.
The first problem is a physical one: in a classroom with fixed desks all facing forwards in rows, group-work is difficult. But such difficult is easily tackled by reseating students in large or small circle, which makes communication much easier. There is evidence that different students are on different levels of learning. How much students can benefit from activities is the second problem. What has to be done with those teacher-dependent students or those lacking initiative to learn? Or what treatment is acceptable to error because students will probably make quite a lot of mistakes? Should teachers interfere or alarm the students when hearing a mistake?

Whatever difficulties are, it is firmly believed that communicative activities mean getting students to actually do things with language, and it is the ‘doing’ that should form the main focus in a communicative classroom, and that students will, in the long run, build up the communicative competence.

[References]