Communicative Language Teaching in EFL settings: A Long Way to Go

Guo Jie
Xi’an International Studies University

Abstract An effective teaching methodology has always been a research target for language teachers. When structural approach is considered to be responsible for the incompetence in communicative use of English, English teaching is directed to communicative approach, with structural approach almost discarded. In this paper, I am going to explore the virtues and vices of each approach, discuss the needs analysis of the students and the problems in communicative language teaching and work out a syllabus to build bridges between structural and communicative approaches and to benefit English teaching and learning.

Key words: structural approach, communicative approach, needs analysis

I. Introduction
Language teaching has long been viewed as a problem-solving activity. Teachers try to impart the knowledge of a language to learners, and learners, at the same time, earnestly drink in everything that is different from their mother tongue. In order to make this knowledge transfer successful, language teachers have tried every means possible to help students learn efficiently. From structural approach to communicative approach, English teaching has undergone different stages and received a great deal of praise as well as criticism. With structural approach dominated in language teaching for many years, language teachers have found the vices of it—learners are not competent enough to perform daily communicative activities. Then communicative language teaching prevails as a solution to the problem. Language teachers bear the hope that this communicative approach can work wonders. As the theoretical pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, a lot of problems in communicative approach emerge as well. In section II-III, I try to clarify the virtues and vices of each approach and discuss the needs analysis of the students, and in section IV, I focus on an integration of structural and communicative approaches. The last section is the conclusion of the paper.

II. Structural approach
An English lesson in China, composed of a text and a list of language points drawn from the text, is considered to be a grammar-oriented class, for grammatical rules are the main problem that needs to be solved in class. It’s commonplace for teachers to deliver a lesson by analyzing sentence structures, explaining lexis and answering questions on grammar. Teachers play an important role in acquainting the students with rules and usages of a language different from their own. Meanwhile, students are quite happy to accept this teaching mode. In this mode, students are treated as passive recipients (Li, 1984). They listen attentively, memorize the new words earnestly
and do loads of exercises to polish their language skills. The progress of learning is generally evaluated by the achievement in grammatical structures and usage of words and expressions. This methodology, known as ‘structural approach’ in second language teaching, has been carried out in English teaching in China for many years. In fact, a Chinese student usually has spent about 10 years learning English before he gets his first degree: six years in the high school and four years in the college or university. It’s really a long time. (Nowadays some primary schools are also encouraged to run English courses to popularize this foreign language.) Therefore, it’s reasonable to assume that a person with so many years English learning experience must have mastered English very well and that our language teaching is successful because students have passed an immense variety of examinations. They then get their degrees and find decent jobs with their English Band Four or Six Certificates. Some of them even have got “surprisingly high” scores in TOEFL and GRE, and thus been admitted by foreign universities and research institutes. However when they are in a foreign country, they suddenly find their mouth stuck. They encounter a lot of language problems. They can’t express everyday notions or perform basic communicative functions. They can’t ask the way; they can’t claim their money when overcharged by accident in a supermarket; they can’t even order meals in a café, and they keep silence most of the time in seminars, distant from the class discussion. Therefore, the effectiveness of this structural approach faces challenges. It has been pointed out that this approach—grammar-oriented approach—reflects an artificial and formalistic view of language skill and learning. It does not allow the learners to use language in a natural way (Widdowson, 1990). In addition, students have learnt the form of the language but not the use of it. The progress of learning is assessed on the basis of what has been taught but not on what needs to be learnt. In exams, students try to get everything correct—grammar correct, structure correct and usage of words correct. Correctness of the language form is the first thing important to students and teachers. In reality, however, the correct form of the language hinders the use of a language when they communicate. At this situation, teachers are pored into criticism and ponder over a way to tackle this problem of teaching English in an artificial and formalistic way.

III. Communicative approach

Due to the failure of structural approach, teachers tended to lay emphasis of teaching on communication in order to improve students’ communicative competence in English. Thus developed the communicative approach decades ago—the term used to designate activities, topics and themes which create an authentic communication for learners (Stern, 1992). With this approach, the focus is not on learning specific language features such as grammar or lexis, etc., but on putting the language into real use as the circumstances require. Also with this approach, the content of a language is no longer defined in terms of forms, lexis and syntax, but in terms of concepts or notions used to perform communicative functions (Stern, 1992). With the introduction of communicative approach, teachers begin to feel guilty about their traditional way of teaching: translating English into Chinese or vice versa, analyzing grammatical rules, explaining language points, dictating new words, or asking students to compose sentences with a pattern learnt in class. They are told that language teaching should occur in authentic situations and classroom discourse should correspond as closely as possible to real-life use of the language. Teachers’ task then won’t be rattling on grammatical rules but on creating situations for effective performance with English on the assumption that knowing will emerge from doing (Li, 1984) The
boring and mechanical exercise activities that dominated English learning before are replaced by a variety of exciting and engaging practice activities in the most authentic settings. Students are exposed to appropriate samples of English and given relevant activities to help them learn. In communicative approach, students must adapt themselves to learning in authentic situations and develop strategies of communication to help themselves learn English informally in a natural setting (Stern, 1992).

As a result, communicative approach gears the objectives of language teaching to what students actually need in real situations. Students are given the chance to experience the learning process, instead of accepting everything imparted for them by teachers. Thus, students are free from rote learning. They are encouraged to do communicative activities which will polish their speaking, listening, writing, reading or even thinking in a natural way (Li, 1984). Obviously, the teachers’ and students’ roles are completely different from those they play in structural approach. Communicative approach, which provides for real communicative activities in a language course, is thus considered to be one of the most important recent developments in the second language curriculum. Admittedly, communicative approach, being in current fashion in language teaching has its undeniable attractions. It makes the means of teaching consistent with the ends of learning. It is not difficult to believe that such progress in course design has resulted in a real improvement in the quality of language learning. Unfortunately, communicative approach has failed to work wonders. It is not quite practical as a theory in most language classes, esp. in China. No matter how authentic the settings are, the learning or teaching takes place in a classroom, which is far from being authentic. As mentioned above, the teachers are supposed to create ‘real settings’ to provide the students with chances to do in the real world. Due to the unpredictability of communication, ‘real settings’ are unpredictable and thus can’t be created either. In addition, communicative approach requires a teacher of exceptional abilities. He must know what the real settings are; he must know how to perform in these settings himself; he must be technically skilled so as to ask down-to-earth questions (Medgyes, 1990). Furthermore, in communicative approach, it is meanings rather than structures that are given priority. So some amount of grammar that students must acquire to perform well is overlooked. Lastly, students in China must pass code-based exams anyway. Their achievement is still tested by how well they can display their ability in the usage of the language. Apart from its impracticality, some studies that have looked into the effectiveness of communicative approach fail to prove that communicative approach is superior to structural approach or that students in communicative class gain better results than those in structural class. Palmer (1979) compared the effects of ‘traditional’ instruction and ‘communicative’ instruction involving extensive peer-communication based on language games. The subjects were Thai students of English. No significant differences in achievement between the groups were found. Li (1998) studied a group of South Korean secondary school English teachers’ perceived difficulties in adopting communicative language teaching and concluded that the educational theories of South Korea and those of Western countries attributed a lot to the difficulties. Yang & Cheung (2003) have taken secondary school English teaching in Hong Kong as an example and examined such barriers as large class size, lack of training in communicative techniques and the extensive language syllabus that deterred teachers from using CLT in their classes. Deckert (2004) also illustrated that communicative language teaching face an arduous task in EFL setting. So after years of the practice of communicative approach and from lots of reports
on the practical difficulties of implementing the communicative approach in EFL settings, this approach goes beyond the reality. It has failed to work wonders. Theoretically, it sounds good, but practically it is hard to be implemented. Theorists always go to extremes. They emphasize on one methodology usually at the expense of the other. When some unsatisfying results are caused by structural approach, they scramble for another method earnestly. Lots of problems like textbooks, teachers’ beliefs and training and the needs of the students should be solved before the communicative language teaching can be put into practice. If we look at the language matter more closely, we can see that it’s not an issue as to which approach should be put first, but how to match the needs analysis of the students with our teaching. Thus communicative language teaching in EFL setting still has a long way to go; an integrated approach will benefit more in language teaching.

**IV. Integration**

Language teaching is such a complicated process that we can’t say a certain methodology is all-powerful. A good language course is likely to include lessons that focus on particular structural practice as well as lessons that deal with lexis and meaning. From my years of teaching and in the light of the current English testing system in China, I’d like to suggest a syllabus that combines structural approach and communicative approach.

Firstly, grammar and meaning should be treated as of equal importance. Language mainly consists of syntax and semantics. Learning a language must go through these two parts. We can’t sacrifice one in order to save the other. We need to ask both ‘What words and structures are needed to express meaning X?’ and ‘What meanings make it necessary to teach for word Y or structure X?’ (Swan, 1990). This can be even achieved with a comparative study of both Chinese grammar and English grammar. Communicative approach focuses on the English only approach to presentation and practice because inter-languages are notoriously responsible for the errors caused by the interference from the mother tongue. However, a large proportion of the correct features in an inter-language also contain a mother tongue element (Swan, 1990). Actually, mother tongue is very essential in second language learning. We can say that without the experience of the mother tongue, one can’t learn the second language well. It is proposed that there is an innate language acquisition device, a cognitive capacity of the human species, which helps the child to acquire a language. This innate cognitive capacity, which is referred to in the literature as universal grammar, will enable a child to acquire any language he or she is exposed to. Universal grammar is composed of two parts: principles, which are fixed and common to all human languages and parameters, choices that have to be set for each language. Principles are predetermined, given at birth. They are part of the cognitive capacity enabling us to acquire language and they themselves do not need to be acquired. Parameters, the choices left open by universal grammar, concern properties of language that are subject to cross-linguistic variation. The acquisition of a language does not necessitate acquiring the rigid principles of universal grammar, but consist in fixing the parameters left open by universal grammar (Haegeman and Gueron, 1999). To acquire English, students must select, among others, the language specific properties. So don’t frighten the students with ‘completely different’ rules. The comparative study between Chinese and English may help students compose English sentences easier and understand strings of English phrases and sentences better. For example, English and Chinese are both SVO language, that is, the word order
is subject, verb and object. Learning X’-theory that all linguistic structure is endocentric and that all phrases are projections of a head, students may find it easier to compose English sentences. It is true that some points of grammar are difficult to learn, and need to be studied in isolation before students can do interesting things with them. But it is no use making meaning tidy if grammar becomes such a mess that it cannot be learnt properly (Swan, 1990).

Secondly, both authentic and scripted materials should be used in an English course as long as they contribute to content-based settings. Content-based instruction proves to be an effective way in language teaching (Balsas & Hartmann, 2001). Communicative approach advocates authentic materials. It is, in fact, desirable to use both scripted and authentic materials (Swan, 1990). Scripted material presents specific language items economically and effectively. The material itself has a content which provides linguistic elements and contextual back-up. Students can acquaint themselves with the settings provided by scripted materials and even imagine that they were in those settings. In this way, students get familiar with the language items and they know in what kind of setting a certain linguistic element is used. When they are asked to do exercises, the settings easily activate the lexis and grammar occurring in them. Authentic material, on the other hand, gives students a taste of ‘real’ language in use, and provides them with valid linguistic data so that they can do or practice in the real world. If students are exposed only to scripted material, they may learn an impoverished version of the language—artificial and formalistic. They will find it hard to deal with genuine discourse when they are thrown to the real situation. If they are only exposed to authentic material, however, they cannot get enough language input in the time available. So scripted and authentic materials should be combined in an English course.

Thirdly, learning a language is a double-facet matter. We need to know something about a language (competence) and to do something with that language (performance) (Widdowson, 1990). Structural approach concentrates on competence whereas communicative approach emphasizes on performance. These two are no doubt inseparable. Students need to improve not only performance but also competence. Knowing well guarantees doing well because knowing gives people confidence in doing. In a case that a student is competent enough, she or he may be free from any restraints to do it; on the other hand, if she or he does not know something, we can imagine that she or he is not confident enough to practice it. Just as a Chinese saying goes, “Boldness of execution stems from superb skill.”

Fourthly, the students’ needs should be given due attention. Before we give a final and binding answer to these two approaches, we may make a needs analysis first. Who the learners are; What they bring to the class; Why they have signed up for the course; What expectations they have from the course. (Medgyes, 1990) Take a class of students in an English training program as an example. Students in this training course come from different walks of life, with the age ranging from about 16 to 40. With such a great range of age gap, they bring innocence as well as social experience in class. The students at the age of 16 need some amount of grammar to enable them to pass a test to study abroad, appropriate strategies to communicate with foreigners and familiarity with a foreign culture. Students at the age of 40, on the other hand, have strong cultural background and are, comparatively speaking, more familiar with foreign customs. They need proper words to express their appropriateness when communicating or working abroad. Generally,
most of the students need to pass different sorts of exams. So communicative approach meets a certain resistance. My American college, Azul, once got very angry with her students. She taught students oral English. After several weeks’ situation-based activities with the students, she found that students got bored. In order to elicit the real reason underlying, she had a talk with her students. The students told her the truth. They thought it a waste of time to practice these dialogues, such as asking the way, or greeting people, etc. These students were going to take IELTS. What they needed was the CORRECT answers to those questions that might be asked by examiners in the test. What the students need is to pass IETES in a quicker and more efficient way. For an oral course, students surely hope Azul to make a guess about the questions that will probably be asked. From this example, the students’ impatience in Azul’s class is quite understandable, but not desirable of course. As the saying goes, testing is the baton of teaching. In structural approach, students learn set rules of grammar and word usages. It seems that 80% of a language is set. They thought oral English must be set as well without realizing the unpredictability of communication. Having these students from different backgrounds and with different needs, teachers have to adjust teaching to their needs. Thus structural approach and communicative approach each fails to satisfy these needs, but they compensate for each other if integrated.

Lastly, teachers should be tolerant of grammatical errors from learners. If a teacher stresses too much on grammar, the flow of thought is lost and the meaning of the message escapes. So sometimes accuracy serves as a bar to communication. We emphasize accuracy in writing, but in oral English, we can give students more elbow room to make mistakes so as to catch the real meanings in communication.

V. Conclusion
Given the discussion above, we may find it impossible to get to a final and binding answer to a single and an effective methodology in English teaching. According to Rodgers (2003), educational design should take into consideration Knowledge, Instructional, Learner and Administrative, which he refers to as KILA Model. Education design is only successful in the area in which all considerations are in “congruence and synchrony”. Therefore, a good language course should include many lessons, each performing its own function. Taking the learning process into consideration and with an integrated syllabus of both structural approach, which provides for the competence in English, and communicative approach, which caters for the performance, we can predict that students’ learning dumb English is about to disappear and they can really master the use of English effectively.

References:
Balsas, Laurie and Pamela Hartmann. 2001. Content-based instruction—a language teaching method that really works. In English Language Learning 351: 43-44, Beijing Foreign Studies University (eds.)
Li, Defeng. 1998. It's always more difficult than you plan and imagine: teachers' perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea. TESOL Quarterly 32(4): 677-703

Li, Xiaoju. 1990. In defense of the communicative approach. In Rossner, Richard and Rod Bolitho (eds.), Currents of Change in English Language Teaching. Oxford University Press. 59-72


