

Communication in the English Classroom : the Current Status of Communicative Language Teaching in Japan

Simon Fraser*

英語の授業におけるコミュニケーションの実情
ーコミュニケーションに重点を置いた日本の英語教育の現状ー

S. A. フレイザー*

In the Faculty of Social Information Science we are concerned with many aspects of the society in which we live. In any society, language is of fundamental importance in that it allows human beings to communicate with one another and to develop and maintain social relationships. Today, no language is more important than English, which is the medium for the exchange of an enormous amount of information throughout the world. In Japan, it is now realised that there is a need for people who are at ease with the spoken language, and the Ministry of Education has introduced a more communicative language-teaching syllabus into the school classroom. This reflects the world-wide trend towards a communicative language teaching approach which places emphasis on increasing the ability of learners to use the language appropriately. The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the current status of communicative language teaching and to discuss the problems of adopting such an approach in Japanese classrooms.

Key Words (キーワード)

Communicative language teaching (コミュニケーションに役立つ実践的な語学教育),
Communicative competence (コミュニケーション能力), Tasks (目的別の演習),
Information transfer (情報交換), Strategy development (習得法の開発)

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims and Scope

With the introduction of the Ministry of Education's new guidelines on teaching communicatively, the traditional grammar-translation oriented classroom looks set to become a thing of the past. However, in order to implement the new guidelines successfully teachers need an understanding of the nature of communicative language teaching (CLT). This paper aims first of all to look at current issues in CLT, and then to discuss particular requirements and problems of adopting a communicative approach from the perspective of the Japanese classroom.

*Faculty of Social Information Science, Kure University (呉大学社会情報学部)

1.2 Background to CLT in Japan

1.2.1 *A Brief History of Language Education in Japan*

English language education in Japan began about one hundred years ago, in the era of the Meiji Reformation. Educators looked overseas, and in particular to Britain, for models. At that time, the predominant method was 'grammar-translation', which the British themselves had borrowed from Germany. This method stresses the teaching of grammatical forms, using model sentence sequences and emphasising practice by translating in both directions. Meaning is not important: it is the discipline that matters. Little attention is paid to the way language is used in everyday situations. This results in an emphasis on accuracy, a belief that all examples and exceptions must be learned, and an almost total neglect of the spoken language. Learners, although 'structurally competent', are unable to select the appropriate language for use in specific situations.

Times have changed, and the Ministry of Education in Japan now accepts that traditional approaches such as the grammar-translation method are inadequate if we are to equip learners with the ability to handle the spoken language comfortably. A new school syllabus has been introduced with the aim of bringing communication into the classroom, and this is a reflection of the trend towards a more communicative methodology which has been taking place in the language-teaching world for some time now.

1.2.2 *The Evolution of CLT*

The communicative approach has evolved from what U.S. anthropologist Dell Hymes¹⁾ has referred to as 'communicative competence'. This is what a learner needs to know to be communicatively competent in a speech community, and includes both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Canale and Swain²⁾ identified four dimensions of communicative competence:

- Grammatical competence - the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity
- Sociolinguistic Competence - an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place
- Discourse Competence - how meaning is represented in relation to the entire discourse or text
- Strategic Competence - the strategies that communicators employ

The unit of language teaching is now seen to be a social situation or context, and it includes people, objects, purposes and social factors as well as language. It is not now considered enough for learners to be able to manipulate the structures of the foreign language; in CLT, we are concerned with developing learners' communicative competence so that they can use the language to get things done.

2 WHAT IS 'STATE OF THE ART' IN CLT ?

2.1 Emphasis on the Learner

2.1.1 *The Learner as a Partner in Learning*

Today the focus is on learners' intrinsic needs for learning a language. We are investigating ways of giving learners opportunities to learn language for their own reasons of competence and autonomy. In 'traditional' classrooms, the student plays a very passive role; the balance of power is very much in the direction of the teacher who is largely in control of what will or will not be said. In the communicative classroom, however, the teacher and students are equal: they are partners in learning. The learner participates on an equal footing with the teacher and other students, and is required to draw on his own resources rather than simply repeating and absorbing language.

2.1.2 *The Importance of the Development of Strategies*

In keeping with the central position accorded to them in the CLT classroom, learners are now much more active and responsible for their own learning. Not only are they participating actively in communicative events, but they are encouraged to take communicative risks and to focus on the development of learning strategies. As Nunan³⁾ says, 'teachers have to accept that learners have a right to have their views incorporated into the selection of content and learning experiences, and need to provide learners with the appropriate opportunities to make choices. Learners, for their part, need to develop a range of skills related not only to language, but also to learning and learning-how-to learn.' The use of strategies is not something new - good learners have always used them - but by teaching methodology to the students we can help them all to take some responsibility for their own success.

Rubin and Thompson⁴⁾ list strategies such as 'organising information about language', 'being creative', 'using mnemonics' and 'learning how to make intelligent guesses'. Brown⁵⁾ shows how certain activities in the classroom can be used to make students aware of the underlying strategies. For example, when teachers direct students to share their knowledge or ideas, or talk in small groups, they can help students to be aware of the importance of socioaffective strategies of cooperative learning. Oxford⁶⁾ provides teachers with a wealth of practical recommendations for developing such strategies in their students. Of course, it is not possible or even desirable to teach them all, but we can select a few of the most useful ones and integrate them with tasks and activities in the classroom.

2.2 The Use of Communicative Activities and Tasks

Central to a communicative approach is the use of activities in which there is some purposeful interaction or exchange, with some kind of goal to be attained. These activities are often carried out in pairs or small groups, which gives the students far more opportunities to interact and practise speaking. They are distinguished from linguistic practice in that they provide opportunities for relatively realistic language use, focusing the

learner's attention on a task, problem, activity or topic, and not on a particular language point. Stern⁷⁾ identifies seven approaches to communicative exercise design, in which the focus is on the activity and not on a specific aspect of the code:

- 1) *Giving and following instructions*, where the students have to follow instructions such as directions given on a map.
- 2) *Information transfer*, which might be extracting information from a diagram and writing a summary, or transferring read information to a table.
- 3) *Information gap*, where information is not known by all of those present, and there is an exchange of information, experiences, or opinions. This works best when the information conveyed is relevant and of interest to the students; 'personalised' exercises are likely to be much more motivating.
- 4) *The jigsaw principle*, where each student has the piece of a puzzle; the parts have to be fitted together to find a solution.
- 5) *Problem solving*, in which students focus on a particular problem, riddle or puzzle which arouses their curiosity.
- 6) *Informal talk tasks*, which are discussions where the emphasis is on getting the meaning across.
- 7) *Role-play and drama techniques*, which require students to use a range of emotions and gestures. *Scenarios*⁸⁾ are activities which give the learners practice in coping with situations where there is potential for conflict on a personal level.

There are many books giving examples of communicative activities and tasks; see for example Ur⁹⁾, Klippel¹⁰⁾, Hadfield¹¹⁾, and Johnson and Morrow¹²⁾.

2.3 The Use of Authentic Materials

The most effective way to develop a particular skill is to rehearse that skill in class. If we want learners to understand aural and written texts in the real world, then they need opportunities for engaging in these real-world texts in class. Ahellal¹³⁾ gives a list of reasons why authentic materials should be used in the classroom:

- 1) They relate teaching to less formal situations.
- 2) Materials play a positive role in motivating learners.
- 3) Learners will be prepared to process language in real situations.
- 4) Using authentic materials shows the usefulness of learning a foreign language.
- 5) Different styles and strategies are accounted for.

The kind of materials used is important: they should be interesting, and of immediate use (e. g. sports and news reports); they should include a lot of non-linguistic data, especially for beginners; and they should not be culturally biased.

While there is general acknowledgement that authentic materials have a place in the classroom, the issue of 'active authenticity' is less widely recognised. The things the learner is required to *do* should also be authentic; for example, he should use train

timetables to plan a trip, or TV guides to decide which programmes to watch that evening.

Of course, authentic materials also include audio and video tapes, which enable learners to encounter the most common and typical uses of a language and help them to increase their sociolinguistic competence. To be communicatively competent, learners need to have an understanding of how to use the language appropriately according to the social context, but this is often a source of difficulty. The use of recordings of native speakers interacting naturally in different situations can be an extremely useful way of increasing learners' awareness of social appropriateness.

2.4 Grammar is Still Important

One concern often heard is that CLT favours learner self-expression without regard to form. However, as Savignon¹⁴⁾ points out, involvement in communicative events necessarily requires attention to form; both linguistic and communicative components are needed. Grammar should not be ignored, but should be related to the communicative needs and experiences of the learners. Research shows that students learn grammar best when there is some need for it, which means that form-focused exercises should therefore be integrated with meaning-focused classroom activity.

Littlewood¹⁵⁾ attempts to reconcile communicative and non-communicative activities and suggests two categories: pre-communicative activities, in which the learner's attention is focused on the forms she needs to use, and communicative activities proper. However it is done, most teachers now accept the value of grammatical explanation, error correction and drilling, while at the same time providing learners with opportunities to engage in genuine communication and interaction.

Rutherford¹⁶⁾ provides many examples of grammatical consciousness-raising activities which can stimulate genuine communication between learners. In such activities, the learner is exposed to data in a principled way and has to discover his own theories and rules. Nobuyoshi and Ellis¹⁷⁾ describe one way of combining linguistic and communicative components in what they call 'focused communication tasks'. In this kind of task, the teacher pushes the learner to be accurate, by making requests for clarification. Some linguistic feature is prominent, although not in a way that causes the learner to pay more attention to form than to meaning.

Ellis¹⁸⁾ believes that new structures are actually best learned when they are heard or seen in input, rather than when learners are trying to produce them. He suggests the use of 'comprehension-based grammar tasks', in which input is manipulated to ensure that the learners' attention is drawn repeatedly to the target structure. Such tasks require the learners to demonstrate their understanding in some way; for example, they may be asked to highlight the target form, perform an action, or make a judgment.

2.5 The Importance of Active Listening

Listening, along with reading, is often considered to be a passive skill, but it is not pas-

sive at all: it demands active involvement from the learner. Anderson and Lynch¹⁹⁾ stress the active nature of listening by pointing out that we do not simply take in language like a tape-recorder, but interpret what we hear according to our purpose in listening and our background knowledge. The hearer has to actively contribute knowledge from both linguistic and non-linguistic sources, and should therefore be engaged in the active process of listening for meanings. This means that we have to give the students some reason for listening in the classroom. We can choose from a wide range of recorded and broadcast material, but merely exposing the learners to such material is not enough. Learners have to develop the ability to listen and understand, and activities have to be realistic. The results of successful listening should contribute to some further purpose. Even at low levels, there should be some kind of 'listen/respond' cycle.

Nunan²⁰⁾ notes that successful listening involves:

- skills in segmenting the stream of speech into meaningful words and phrases;
- recognising word classes;
- relating the incoming message to one's own background knowledge;
- identifying the rhetorical and functional intent of an utterance or parts of an aural text;
- interpreting rhythm, stress and intonation to identify information focus and emotional/attitudinal tone;
- extracting gist/essential information from longer aural texts without necessarily understanding every word.

We can see that listening includes both *top-down processing* (making use of previous knowledge when processing received information) and *bottom-up processing* (considering the words, sentences, etc. which are actually present in the data). Teachers should try to develop listening exercises which take into account both kinds of processing. For example, pre-listening exercises can be used to activate the students' background knowledge before going on to more analytical exercises.

Listening activities can include listening and drawing, listening and performing actions, identifying the correct picture, interrupting a story (students have to listen and ask questions), transferring information to a chart, and listening as a basis for problem solving, jigsaw tasks, and so on. Ur²¹⁾ and Brown and Helgesen²²⁾, for instance, illustrate a wide variety of exercise types.

2.6 Reading and Writing

As with listening, there should be some purpose for reading and writing. Reading should provide the learners with useful input, and they should be required to respond to the meaning and communicate it to their fellow students. When we write, we usually have an audience in mind. We want to create a need for writing in the class, so that writing is followed by sharing and students can receive a personal response. Of course, there has

to be some focus on form, but the *vehicle* is meaning.

2.7 The Importance of Reflection in the Classroom

Now that CLT has established itself in many classrooms around the world, some of its principles are being examined more critically. Tarvin and Al-Arishi²³⁾, for example, contend that many CLT activities, being phenomenally and intuitively oriented, discourage reflection or contemplation. They do not argue the usefulness of such activities, but believe that because certain situations are best handled through a more deliberate, reflective approach, more activities centred around reflective thinking should be incorporated in classrooms. Many CLT activities require 'off-the-top-of-your-head' responses, but there should also be opportunities for learners to make considered evaluations or judgments before interaction takes place.

3 PROBLEMS WITH INTRODUCING A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

3.1 Are the Activities Really Communicative?

How can we be sure that the activities we use in the classroom really are communicative, and not just ostensibly focusing on functional aspects of language use? Nunan²⁴⁾ carried out a classroom-based study of communicative language practice which revealed the persistence of non-communicative patterns of interaction. In each of the lessons analysed, the teachers claimed to be teaching 'communicatively'. However, there was in actual fact found to be very little genuine communication between teacher and student (or student and student); rather, there was a preponderance of 'display questions' in which the answer was already known, such as 'Are you Japanese?'.

Reasons for this may include the conservative nature of the classroom and the attitude of the learners themselves. There is evidence that learners have strong views on what are 'legitimate' classroom activities, and that there are frequent mismatches between learner and teacher expectations. Students expect to spend most of their time in the classroom practising language for its own sake. Nevertheless, Nunan demonstrates that it is possible to instigate truly communicative activities when learners' interests are engaged and when they are able to make use of their own background schemata. Teachers have a responsibility to select material which engages the student, to encourage students to bring their own experiences into the classroom, and to be sensitive at all times to what the learners are actually focusing on.

3.2 Reluctance of Teachers and Students

We have seen that expectations in the classroom can have a bearing on the success of communicative activities. Teachers and learners need to understand clearly what their new roles are in the classroom.

3.2.1 *The Students*

The readiness of the students is one of the main problems in adopting a communicative approach. Introducing communicative activities may bring frustration, uneasiness, confusion and even resistance from students who are used to a traditional approach. Teachers therefore have to find ways to facilitate their students' unreserved participation in the new kind of classroom activities. Deckert²⁵⁾ has a useful list of strategies that teachers can use for 'reorienting' learners, which include:

- 1) Regular use of English to conduct class activities.
- 2) Dramatic demonstration of different practice devices for obtaining functional uses of the language.
- 3) Appropriate discussion of how people in general and different individuals in particular best learn a language (the language learning strategies that were mentioned in Section 2.1.2).
- 4) Clear statements of the more appropriate roles of memory work in the acquisition process.
- 5) Resolute prevention of thoughtless copy of illustrative language samples in place of active listening to another.
- 6) Systematic assignment of homework tasks that elicit creative, albeit imperfect uses of the language.
- 7) Frequent uses of short quizzes of communicative character.
- 8) Careful avoidance of test items for which fixed answers might be anticipated and memorised.

While all these strategies will undoubtedly help the students to adjust to a communicative approach, probably the most important consideration is the atmosphere in the classroom. The teacher has to work hard to establish a rapport with the students and increase their confidence. He has to be able to motivate and encourage the students, and to give them the sense that he cares about their success.

The Importance of Preparation

It is not enough, however, to stimulate learners' interest in a subject. If communicative activities are to be successful, the students have to be prepared. As Swan²⁶⁾ points out, there is a vast range of conventional and idiomatic expressions which have to be learned if a student is to be able to perform ordinary communicative tasks. Students need appropriate lexical items: they may know *what* to say, but they do not know *how* to say it. Failure to communicate successfully in a foreign language is often due to a lack of the appropriate vocabulary or structures, and this of course can lead to frustration and decreased motivation. Students have to be properly prepared for an activity, and this includes motivating the students, establishing confidence in the students that they will be able to cope with the problem, and reviewing and practising vocabulary and useful phrases relevant to the topic. Careful preparation is vital for deriving teacher and learner satisfaction: activities have to be set up very carefully, and it is usually better to

give instructions by demonstrating rather than explaining.

3.2.2 *The Teacher*

Although many teachers welcome the opportunity that CLT gives them to select and develop their own materials and provide learners with a range of communicative tasks, others are less enthusiastic. Many professional teachers lack confidence when it comes to communication. They have had little experience of it in their previous training, and have been brought up in a tradition which places great importance in the maxim 'Silence is golden'. Abbott²⁷⁾ deals with five concerns voiced by teachers reluctant to try out communicative activities. These are:

- Discipline : Won't it suffer? (Many small groups will be working simultaneously).
- English : Is mine good enough?
- Assessment : Shouldn't I bear it in mind?
- Textbook : Shouldn't I follow it?
- Hard work : Can't I avoid it?

These concerns, which spell out DEATH! to communication in the classroom, lead to the teacher losing confidence. The teacher's attitude is absolutely crucial: he has to believe in the approach and exude confidence if the students are to adapt successfully. Teachers who lack confidence should just start slowly; it is not necessary or desirable to change overnight. The first step may just be to bring English into the classroom. For example, greetings and classroom English can be given in English, and the teachers can chat informally with the students at the beginning and end of each class. Other suggestions for introducing communicative activities 'gently' include:

- 1) Concentrating on activities that can be easily carried out using just the textbook and the blackboard;
- 2) doing listening and reading activities first;
- 3) carrying out consecutive oral work before simultaneous work;
- 4) having the students do communicative writing activities individually before doing cooperative composition.

Of course, teachers have to work hard at improving and adapting their techniques, and it is vitally important that they have the time, opportunity and financial support to attend seminars, workshops and refresher courses.

3.2.3 *The Demands of University Entrance Exams*

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to the introduction of CLT in Japanese school classrooms is the difficulty of reconciling the approach with the nature of university entrance exams. Undoubtedly tests have to be developed which measure the ability to use language effectively to attain communicative goals. 'Discrete-point' tests of linguistic structures will

discourage the strategies required for communicative competence. Until entrance exams are made more communicative, there is likely to be reluctance among students (and parents!), at least at first, to adopt a communicative approach. They will understandably feel that valuable time is being wasted on activities which do not prepare the students for exams.

4 CONCLUSION

Current trends in CLT seem to be leading towards an approach which incorporates both creative and cognitive aspects of learning. It is realised that while the need for communicative activities and tasks is not disputed, form-focused activities and opportunities for reflection are also important. The challenge for teachers is to take account of these ideas while developing their own methodology.

The emphasis has now shifted to the learners, and, in particular, to how we can intrinsically motivate them and build up their confidence. Contrary to popular belief, there are a lot of people who have learnt English successfully in Japan! What these learners all have in common is a high degree of motivation. As teachers, we can motivate our students by providing a relaxed atmosphere and making lessons interesting and enjoyable. We can make use of a variety of activities and task types to maintain the students' interest, and we can use authentic material and subject matter of interest whenever possible. We need a clear understanding of what students should be able to do with the language, and this means that not only knowledge but social skills are needed. Learners have to be able to cope with a variety of situations, and so it is necessary to provide them with the appropriate expressions and give them plenty of practice in order to increase their sociolinguistic competence. Perhaps most importantly, however, we need to increase independence and learning strategies in our students, to enable them to keep learning long after they have left school.

There are problems with adopting the CLT approach, but we have seen that there is much that can be done to smooth the transition to a more communicative school classroom in Japan. Teachers should be given the time and opportunity to improve their language skills and teaching methods. Patience and understanding are required, and a realisation that we cannot, and need not, expect a drastic change overnight. With the introduction of the Education Ministry's new guidelines for teaching English more communicatively, CLT has finally gained a foothold in Japan, and it looks as though it is here to stay.

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