The Fulfillment of the Principles of the Communicative Approach to Teach English as a Second Language: The Case of Public Costa Rican High schools.

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Abstract

In Costa Rica since 2003 the teaching of English was redesigned to follow the principles of the Communicative Approach, whose foundation is meant to provide students with classroom opportunities for interaction in a pleasant and cooperative environment to reach communicative competence. In order to achieve communication, professors must be aware of the teaching-learning strategies, direct and indirect, as part of the mediation process. Aspects such as classroom management, the materials to be used, the learning environment, and the assessment proposed by the Communicative Approach, as well as the methodological strategies used, are aspects that influence the second language teaching learning process, whose aim is the negotiation of socio-cultural meaning to have, both, competent and fluent English speakers. This case study is focused on analyzing the application of the principles of the Communicative Approach by high school teachers. The findings of this research revealed that the application of the approach has been misled by three aspects which are the misconceptions of the teaching of grammar, the overuse of reading comprehension to train students to pass the standardized test and the lack of understanding that each student is different in terms of particular needs, strengths and weaknesses. In the light of the results, a group of recommendations is given to second language high school teachers and authorities to deal with the situation.

Keywords: Communicative Approach, English as a Second Language, Communicative Competence, Second Language High school Learners.

Resumen

En Costa Rica, la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua desde el 2003 fue rediseñada para seguir los lineamientos del Enfoque Comunicativo, cuya base está dirigida a proveer a los estudiantes con oportunidades de interacción en un ambiente placentero y cooperativo para desarrollar la competencia comunicativa. Para lograr comunicación, los docentes deben tomar en cuenta las estrategias de aprendizaje, directas e indirectas, como parte del proceso de mediación. El manejo de la clase, los materiales usados, el ambiente de aprendizaje, la evaluación propuesta por el enfoque comunicativo, como también las estrategias metodológicas utilizadas, son aspectos que modifican el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de un segundo idioma cuyo objetivo es la negociación de significado dentro de un contexto socio-cultural para tener hablantes, con ambas características, competentes y fluidos en inglés. Este estudio de caso está enfocado en analizar la aplicación de los principios del enfoque comunicativo por los profesores de la Región Coto. Los hallazgos de esta investigación revelan que la aplicación del enfoque ha sido desalineada por las tergiversaciones acerca de la enseñanza de la gramática, el uso excesivo de la comprensión de lectura como estrategia para preparar a los estudiantes para aprobar la prueba estandarizada y la falta de entendimiento de que cada estudiante es diferente en términos de necesidades particulares, fortalezas y debilidades. Se da una serie de recomendaciones a los profesores de inglés y autoridades del Ministerio de Educación Pública para tratar el tema.

Palabras Claves: **Enfoque Comunicativo, inglés como Segunda Lengua, Competencia Comunicativa, Estudiantes de Secundaria.**

Introduction

Teaching English as a second language has been an endless pursuit of methodologies, approaches, strategies, and techniques in order to fulfill the needs of all types of students and social purposes. That uninterrupted interest has made professors, linguists and people involved in the educational field be worried about finding the right methodology, approach, techniques and strategies to make others learn a second language in a formal environment within an EFL process.

For public high school students in Costa Rica, learning is an opportunity not only to speak a new language but also to gain competence to deal with the world and its social challenges. The communicative skills that high school students are supposed to achieve during five or six years, whether academic or technical high school, will enable them to face further studies, new jobs and the possibility to access scientific and technological knowledge through the target language.

In the *Communicative Approach*, the assessment is based on the communicative competence/ knowing what to say, how to say it and when to say it. Therefore, every single skill should be taught within a real-life situation context provided by professors in a formal classroom process. Regarding the implications of the policy of learning and teaching English, The English Program as referred to in Spanish El Programa de Estudios, Educación Diversificada (2004) mentioned that "the country needs more qualified people in order to increase productively and improve the spirit of competitiveness" (p.2). From that perspective, the learning of English is not only a personal achievement but also a social responsibility that every teacher is committed to reaching within a pedagogical process that promotes questioning and inquiry of the learner's own beliefs and social realities by means of facing real life situations. Then a question emerges to deal with students' background knowledge: "How are the principles of the Communicative Approach applied in formal second language classrooms during a five-year process?

The communicative approach presents teachers as facilitators of knowledge who are the guide to encourage students to be actively involved in the learning teaching process. This process, which should be constructed by professors, implies the development of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) through effective interaction. As stated by Brown (as cited in Rahman, 2014) "in the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication, it is what communication is all about" (p. 203).

According to an exploratory diagnosis made in 2015 at Universidad Nacional, Campus Coto, conducted as part of a master program, 80% of high school graduates from public schools that come to the Campus to major in "teaching English as a second language" are neither highly semantically fluent nor structurally accurate. Moreover, their grammatical competence is limited to isolated rules, which is a negative aspect because the structural knowledge of the target language is necessary once the appeal for assistance occurs in the classroom. Whether grammar should be taught or not, this research is focused on the application of the principles of the Communicative Approach in the EFL process and the use of the language learning strategies to take students across storing, retrieving, understanding, producing, self-evaluating, self-attitudes regulating, and finally interacting during classes.

Theoretical Considerations

Teaching English as a second language has to do, among many other factors, with the learning abilities students might have, their level of acquisition in a formal environment, motivation, cultural influence, approaches, methodologies, strategies, techniques, but basically, it has to do with the level of commitment that each professor has. In relation to Costa Rican public high schools, teachers have a five-year process to take students through the developmental sequence learning of the language. Actually, the development of the four skills is closely related to the constant use of different techniques to deal with all kinds of learners.

Communicative Approach

Among the pedagogical conceptions derived from the Cognitive Psychology and Social Constructivism, the communicative approach was the one adopted by the English second language teaching field, having a positive transcendence and impact. Brown (2007) explained that language meaning in this approach is perceived as the supreme objective (p.49). This approach presents communicative competence as the capacity to elaborate utterances taking into account not only the semantic and structural accuracy but also the social appropriateness. It has to do with determining social, cultural and psychological rules that define the use of language.

Communicative competence as the capacity to understand and interpret communication makes significant what is said as well as what is meant and understood. According to Howatt as (2012), there are two versions of the Communicative Approach: a strong and a flexible one which is focused on communicative language aspects while the flexible version suggests the integration of the structural practices with the communicative elements. It means that the strong version highlights fluency and the second one on both, fluency and language accuracy (p.76).

Competences that form Communicative Competence. The ability for communication comprehends different dimensions immersed into the great communicative process. These dimensions are pointed out in Figure 1.
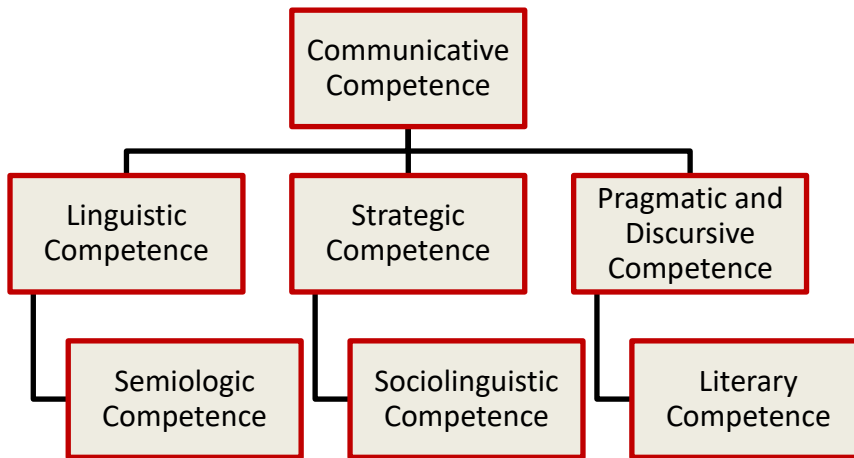

Figure 1. Language linguistic competences are the ones that measure the capacity individuals have to understand each other and make themselves understood orally and in written way in a language.

Source. Brown (2014 p. 204)

Regarding the integral capacity of the complete language usage, Hymes as cited in Brown (2014) defines the communicative competence as the aspect of our competence that enables us to transmit, interpret messages and negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts (p.206). This is a construction that links the language linguistic competences.

Approach

To define what an approach is from the perspective of teaching English as a second language, Brown (2007) defined "Theoretically well-informed positions and beliefs about the nature of language, the nature of language learning, and the applicability of both to pedagogical

settings" (p.17). That means that any approach is based on the ideas that its designer or creator has about what language is and how it should be taught and acquired.

Methodology

Brown (2007) defined this concept as "pedagogical practices in general (including theoretical underpinnings and related research). Whatever considerations are involved in how to teach are methodological" (p.17). In fact, what links theory and practice is methodology. For a second language teacher, a method is the way how he or she relates the approach to the activities during the class in order to achieve a higher proficiency in the language learning teaching process integrating a group of linguistic principles.

Technique

The techniques used by the professor are scaffolding activities that are organized to achieve both, a general objective and the specific ones of any course or cognitive target. Within the pedagogical mediation, the techniques used by the professor to enable students to build knowledge are derived from the vision he has from three perspectives: the teacher's, the students' and the learning teaching process. Brown (2007) said "techniques are the specific activities manifested in the classroom that are consistent with a method and therefore were in harmony with the approach as well" (p.14). The author also emphasizes the reformation that Richards and Rodgers, with their contributions, have given to the concept of technique. They state that the techniques are any of the wide variety of exercises, activities or assignments used within a second language classroom to fulfill the objectives (p.16). That is the reason why, techniques are part of the methodological projection that the academician has about the learning-teaching process.

Languages Learning Strategies

The strategic competence, which is part of the communicative competence, includes a set of mechanisms associated with the information processing system of the brain. Those mechanisms, within a second language environment, are called Language Learning strategies.
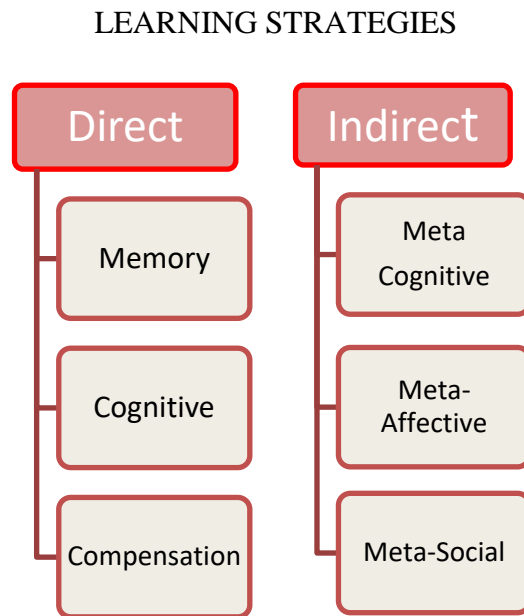
LEARNING STRATEGIES

Figure 2. Direct and Indirect strategies proposed by Oxford (2003)

When learners consciously choose strategies that fit their learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulation of learning. Therefore, this research also analyzes how professors incorporate these principles into the activities of the lessons. Their application cannot be taken for granted because language learning strategies are defined as "specifications, behaviors, steps, or techniques-- such as seeking out conversation partners or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task -- used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p. 63). This research focuses on relating the activities proposed in the class to the promoting of students' mechanisms to learn the second language.

Methodology

It was a naturalistic correlational field research in which the researcher observed in an attempt to identify during 16 different lessons the application of the principles of the communicative approach. It was a non-participant observation of both, professors and students, in their natural setting. The variables were not manipulated during the observation process.

Type of study. It is based on the qualitative paradigm and the information is supported methodologically by qualitative facts. This is a case study focused on a descriptive approach whose purpose is to describe situations and events regarding the use of the principles of the communicative approach. It tries to specify the relevant features (characteristics) about people, groups, and any methodological phenomena within the application of the approach which is the object of study and the high school beginners and advanced leveled students are the subject of study of this research.

Table 1 displays the categories to be analyzed along this research, its conceptualization, which supports each category, as well as the instruments used by the researcher to collect the information.

Table 1. *Categories to be analyzed*

Analysis Categories	Conceptualization	Instruments
The application of the Communicative Approach in public high schools	Communicative Language Teaching	Non-participant observation as the tool for collecting data.
Activities prepared by professors that promote Language Learning Strategies	Oxford Taxonomy	Non-Participant observation

Finding and Analysis *Aspects applied in second language classrooms by professors in their mediation process.*

The following table describes the material used by teachers according to the guidelines of the Communicative Approach. The non-participant observation was done in different high schools and different levels.

Table 2. *Observation Analysis*

Elements	Description
Materials	Books, hand-outs, newspapers, focused on the systematized culture and some of them on international culture. None of the materials was focused on regional culture. Lack of intercultural competence.
Teachers performance	Teacher centered classes, instructions were given in English; however, students did not always respond in English and the ones who participated replied in their native language. During an eight week observation process, there was no listening activity at all, teachers controlled the whole classes. Neither competence errors nor performance errors were corrected while checking the exercises. The primary goal was to make sure students got the general meaning of the material.
Assessment	General remarks at the end of the class, vocabulary reinforcement , group work, .individual feedback never occurred, there was just a skill being focused on by the professors, grammar was totally avoided (inductively, deductively) during the whole process, pair work was fairly used, at the end of the controlled practice.

. *Note:* Data obtained from non- participant observation. The observation took place during 8 weeks.

Table 1 displays that high school professors understand the main goal of the approach which is communication, primarily. However, it also presents factors that might interfere with the fulfillment of the application of the Communicative Approach within the formal second language learning teaching process in public high schools. The materials used by professors were basically focused on promoting reading skills. The warm-ups were focused on asking and responding questions by following given structures without using any visual aids. Moreover, the cognitive targets were focused on national and international events without taking into account the regional reality. Students, who had never been to the capital or any other place, were not fully connected to the meaning of language. The concept of authentic material was not significant since books,

hand -outs and others were not real life situations, and they were not focused on after classroom experiences.

Related to the teacher's role, they were not just a guide but the ones who controlled the class. Groups made up by 30 students would not give them the chance to provide input to everyone, especially because neither deductive nor inductive explanation of the rules was part of the process (structure or pronunciation).

Table 3 presents the activities used by professors along the classes which helped students reinforce their language learning strategies. Even though students might choose consciously which language learning strategies to use, the non-participant observation, done in different high schools and different levels, collected the activities performed by professors and linked them to those strategies.

Table 3

Language learning strategies

Activity	Strategy	Function	Ability
Written-story teller, Simon says,	Memory	Storing	Reading
Flashcards	Memory	Retrieving	Reading, speaking
Key-words underlining, scanning, Using clues in reading comprehension.	Cognitive	Understanding	Reading, speaking
Guessing meaning	Compensation	Producing	Reading and writing
Think-Alouds (for reading comprehension and problem solving)	Meta cognitive	Self-evaluating	Reading and writing
None	Meta affective	Self-attitude regulating	
Dialogues with information about genre-roles,	Meta social	Interacting during classes	Reading

The strategic competence should be consciously reinforced by the professors since doing their classrooms template.

Table 3

It displays the activities that professors used during the development of their lessons and indicates which of them were connected to language learning strategies. Despite the fact that professors were more focused on following cognitive targets presented in the syllabus, during pre-teaching and warm –ups, they proposed some activities that promoted the use of language learning strategies. On the other side, it was evident that there were no activities focused on providing students with the chance to know their own learning. There is definitely a lack of activities committed to developing oral activities.

High school students should not be overwhelmed with linguistic terminology. They need to understand by listening, by reading and by replying in the target language accurately depending on their level. They must not be taught as if they were experts; high school graduates

need to develop English as a tool for their future careers. Nevertheless, they should be taught

structures because they are not immersed in the natural second language acquisition language.

Certainly, it is important to think of a reality stated by Richards (1990) as cited in Lock (1996) "

It is doubtful whether anyone will ever come up with a perfect method for second language

teaching, one that will ensure success with every kind of learner in every kind of context" (p.

270). However, this is when the methodological eclecticism gains relevance to provide each

student with different didactical sources and activities.

Conclusions

After doing this research, some relevant facts emerged related to the application of the principles of the communicative approach, the language learning strategies and curricular influences into the foreign language learning process.

1. The idea of communication as the main goal was clearly understood by professors; however, there was a misunderstanding in what communication deals with. The development speaking skill is definitely the ultimate goal for high school students, and teachers must fulfill it coordinated with the development of listening because they complement each other as reading and writing do within the act of communication.

2. Conversational competence is not the same as communicative competence.

3. There are second language students who can use complex grammar structures while speaking, and they have never been explained the rules, but there are others who will need that explanation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand that conscious knowledge of rules is not enough to speak English.

4. Teaching grammar inductively leads to acquisition; however, since this is not an ESL process but EFL and both, inductive and inductive approaches to grammar teaching should be applied in every single didactic procedure to provide the structures with meaning.

5. The cognitive target as referred to in the communicative approach or the so called scenario as in the action-oriented approach is not the primary goal but the scaffolding instrument to reach goals.

6. Professors must plan their activities posting that all of the students are capable of learning a second language but their developmental sequence processes will be different.

Since students begin their high school journey, teachers have the great responsibility to help them become communicatively competent. As it is theoretical supported, teaching grammar

inductively more than necessary is part of the whole process. Obviously, as second language student learns the language in a formal environment, grammar can be used as a source to develop communicative competence to provide learners with the opportunity to develop accuracy.

Recommendations

It is suggested to use the repeated input of a grammar item as the strategy. When teaching it inductively, just one grammar presentation is not enough; therefore, within context, the structure should be repeated by using different activities and exercises to make students acquire the rule more than learn it.

Following a review of some common methodological inaccuracies in the second language teaching high school classrooms, the next step is to introduce thinkable suggestions to make students be able to develop competence in the four skills by using activities that involve pre-, while- and final-stages in an attempt to make available integrated learning environments, using different topics, and raise awareness by providing a reason for learning. That reason is the need of competence in real life once they become part of the labor force. The while-grammar stage should reinforce the new grammar point by providing meaningful input through contextual examples, pictures, and texts.

Certainly, inductive reasoning in second language teaching is considered and proved to be effective to the approach of some rules and generalizations. However, both inductive and deductive classes are necessary in a formal environment without promoting memorization. The following situation exemplifies the relevant use of grammar: In first language acquisition, a child, who learns most of his native grammatical rules inductively, needs deductive explanation of certain details of the language to achieve a level of correctness, then how a second language

learner might not get explanations when his first language interference will lead him to constant comparison of structures.

Teaching grammar whether inductively or deductively is part of the second language learning process. In his book "*Principles and Practice in Second Language acquisition",* Krashen (1987) explains that grammar permits students' monitoring of errors when speaking the second language and it does not affect fluency because monitoring might occur even before the sentence is spoken. He also says that knowing conscious rules for a student who is learning a second language does not affect fluency because conscious knowledge does not initiate utterances (p. 86-88).

The answer being searched here is what teaching approach could be functional to help students learn English in high school. Taking into account that learning a second language in a formal environment means acquiring a new set of rules that differs from the ones already established in the students' brain, it is necessary to use the basis of the new language to teach it meaningfully: structure. Teaching grammar then may not be considered to be the issue but how to teach it.

It is relevant to mention that there is a transition in the pedagogical model in Costa Rica from the communicative approach to the Action Oriented Approach. Currently, the role of teachers is based on being facilitators who provide effective feedback in the process of learning and the acquisition and refinement of general and communicative competences as a continuous process at school and in the world beyond school.

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