

TEACHING COMMUNICATION THROUGH COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to propose a combination of teaching procedures and techniques that, while involving the student in communication from the very first lesson, will help him to master the structures of the language. It is based on the assumption that no group of students shares the same learning strategies, however brilliant or scientific they may seem to us.

Consequently, we suggest procedures —communicative oral presentation, guided/free oral communicative training— that could be defined as thoroughly communicative side by side with others that belong to more traditional approaches to language teaching —structural explanation, controlled practice. We believe that it is such a combination what will enable our students to communicate both successfully and accurately.

KEY WORDS

English language Teaching Methodology. A Communicative Approach.

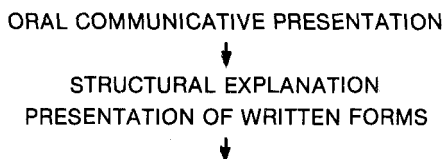
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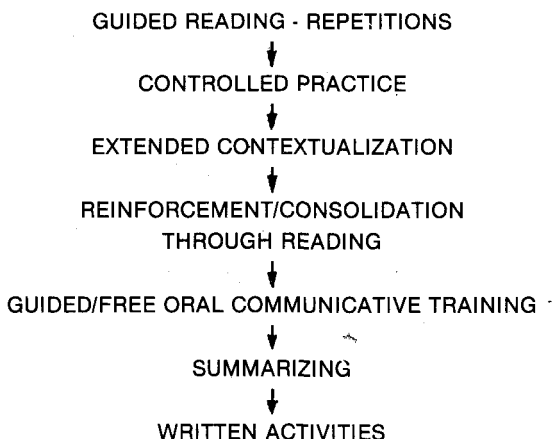
We believe that a communicative approach to language teaching involves far more than the adoption of new criteria for the selection of the language items to be taught. A truly communicative approach should be backed up by a methodology which is itself communicative as well. We must, therefore, teach communication through communication: we have to teach communication by communicating with our students, and they should learn to communicate by doing exactly that. This means that, when presenting a new communicative function, the teacher should perform it himself first, that is, if he is to teach his students to talk about likes, he should start by talking to them about his own and other people's likes, then proceed to ask them what they themselves like, to engage them finally in some sort of activity —pair work, role-playing— which will give them the opportunity to carry on talking about their own likes in genuine communicative settings. Thus, they will learn to do things by doing them, one of the most relevant principles underlying any realistic attempt at learning anything.

However, this is obviously not as simple as it may sound. In fact, being able to understand the teacher while, during the initial presentation, he says or does something is not enough; quite a few other steps will have to be covered before the student can do the same. He will have to assimilate the language that the teacher has used, and only when he has done so, will he be able to use it with accuracy, fluency and self-confidence. The students must consequently undergo some sort of precommunicative drilling before they can attempt really communicative tasks. Besides this, and since not much is known as yet about the learning strategies used by the individual student, we don't discourage teachers from helping their students understand the linguistic patterns that they will be asked to produce by giving them some brief explanation, in their mother tongue if necessary, about their components or structure before they start any kind of practice. On the contrary, we are convinced that quite a few students will undoubtedly benefit from it.

A SUGGESTED NINE-PHASE PLAN

Finally, although we are well aware that no approach, teaching procedure or technique, however good, can be dogmatically forced on any teacher, that it is his responsibility to adopt the ones he considers best suited to the attitude, needs and abilities of his particular group of students, and, why not, to his own personality and teaching style, we would like to recommend the following steps and procedures for the teaching of most lessons:





STEP ONE: ORAL COMMUNICATIVE PRESENTATION

Before proceeding to the presentation of the functional and/or structural content of any new lesson, tell the students to close their books.

When introducing a new communicative function try, if at all feasible, to perform it yourself.

During any sort of presentation repeat each utterance two or three times, but always at normal conversational speed.

If you want to call your students' attention to any one word or segment of a sentence, isolate it, but never slow down the pronunciation of a whole utterance.

Whenever possible, use visuals to convey the meaning of new words: real objects, actions, flashcards, etc.

If the students can't grasp the meaning of any one word or sentence, you can translate it, but don't do so until you have given them the opportunity of guessing it by means of visual aids or from its context.

Remember that it is always useful to repeat a short presentation passage at least two or three times.

Make sure that the students understand everything you say. You can check their comprehension by means of:

- true/false statements to which they must respond simply with 'yes' or 'no'.
- simple yes/no or wh-questions.

STEP TWO: STRUCTURAL EXPLANATION + PRESENTATION OF WRITTEN FORMS

Once you have introduced orally a new function, grammatical pattern or lexical item,

write some of the sentences used in the presentation phase on the board and draw your students' attention to their structure and components. For this you can:

- use coloured chalks
- underline relevant words or endings
- draw arrows to show relationships.

This should normally suffice, otherwise, you can contrast them with L1 equivalents or give a brief grammatical explanation.

STEP THREE: GUIDED READING + REPETITIONS

Use the sentences written on the board to teach your students how to read and pronounce new words, practise intonation patterns or develop their reading ability.

When teaching them to read, repeat each sentence several times, isolating new words if necessary, and pointing at or underlining the words being read. With isolated words you could even underline syllables. This will help the students link sound and spelling. Then ask them to repeat each sentence or isolated word after you while they read them.

You may also find it useful to write phonemic transcriptions underneath each sentence or certain words. The students will thus be reminded of the pronunciation they have repeatedly heard before. This will also help them, with hardly any effort, become familiar with phonemic symbols, enabling them, especially when studying by themselves at home, to refer to or consult the correct pronunciation of any given word. It is advisable, however, to write phonemic transcriptions with coloured chalks to help the students distinguish at first sight spelling from pronunciation.

Once they can read new words or sentences, ask them to repeat them a few more times, especially those that they may need for any succeeding communicative training or controlled practice. As far as we know this is the simplest and best way to help them memorize new lexical items.

When doing repetition work you can begin by asking the whole class to repeat in chorus, then you can ask for individual repetitions and check pronunciation. If this is not correct, ask again for a few more collective ones. Remember that the intonation of a sentence is as important for communicative purposes as the pronunciation of any of its elements.

STEP FOUR: CONTROLLED PRACTICE

After a few repetitions have been done, you can, if you think it necessary or convenient, do some pattern drilling, but remember that this sort of mechanical practice should not take more than a few minutes (2 or 3 at the very most).

We recommend that most of the controlled practice should be done by means of

questions or requests made by the teacher to his students or by the students themselves to their classmates or to the teacher. Both the questions and the requests should be as authentic as possible.

a. Teacher-Student questions/requests:

Go round the class asking as many students as possible. When asking or requesting anything from a student, be careful to avoid embarrassing silences. Help them give the expected answer if necessary and move on to another student.

b. Student-Student questions/requests:

Get your students to ask each other questions. Provide them with the content of each question, e.g.

Teacher: John, do you like pop music?

John: Yes, I do.

Teacher: Good. Now, what about Mary?

Ask her.

John: Mary, do you like pop music?

Mary: Yes, I do.

Teacher: Good. Now, what about jazz?

Mary, ask Peter.

Mary: Peter, do you like jazz?

STEP FIVE: EXTENDED CONTEXTUALIZATION

An extended contextualization of the functions or structures already presented and practised in authentic or simulated communicative situations can be done now by means of the dialogues or narrative passages included as presentation material in each lesson. The students will thus be able to see them performed by other people in other settings.

When presenting any dialogue from the book, first describe the situation clearly, giving as many details as you think relevant or necessary: speakers, place, etc. Then dramatize it. You can:

- use different voices for each speaker
- have some students mime the action while you say their parts
- use puppets
- write the speakers' names on the board and point at them to help your students know who is speaking.

STEP SIX: REINFORCEMENT/CONSOLIDATION THROUGH READING

This is the usually long-hoped-for moment when, at last!, you can tell your students to open their books. Their reading of the dialogue or narrative passage just presented orally

will undoubtedly reinforce their understanding of the structures or communicative formulae that they will be putting to use again, and, as important, they will have the possibility of working at their own pace after the intensive oral training that they have received up to now.

This reading can be done in silence, but, especially until they have become familiar with the written forms of most words, it might be advisable that you read it first with your students following it in their books silently or reading it aloud after you as well. This done, though, let them take their time to read it again at their leisure.

STEP SEVEN: GUIDED/FREE ORAL COMMUNICATIVE TRAINING (DIAGNOSIS)

Make sure, before any sort of communicative activity begins, that everyone knows what he is expected to do. You can provide them with a model yourself and/or call on a couple of the more able students to come to the front of the class and perform it.

While the students are practising in pairs or small groups go round the class and check their performance by listening to them, but don't interrupt them unless you are asked for help. Take notes though.

Diagnosis:

Once each activity has gone on for a reasonable length of time, you can ask some couples/groups to come to the front of the class and carry it out again there. This will give you the opportunity to check general progress. Besides, some students love 'acting', so why not let them?

STEP EIGHT: SUMMARIZING

Summarizing what the students are supposed to have learned in each class is not always necessary, but it is indeed never useless. Anyhow, if not a thorough revision of all the items presented in one class, what you shouldn't fail to do is to comment on the mistakes the students may have made during the activities done simultaneously in pairs or small groups.

STEP NINE: WRITTEN ACTIVITIES

When setting them as homework, be sure that every student knows what he is expected to do. Explain them clearly and, if possible, give one or two examples.

PRONUNCIATION PRACTICE

No specific place has been allocated in the preceding teaching plan for this sort of practice. There is, of course, one reason: it is pedagogically unadvisable to interrupt the learning of something to do something else, however important it may be. Two choices are left: the beginning and the end of each teaching period. However, it doesn't seem ap-

appropriate, unless the students are really well motivated and conscious of the long-term usefulness of it, to start a lesson with this sort of activity. The last minutes of each class appear then as the least inconvenient time.

There are certain lessons, though, in which the specific phonemes selected to be practised are taken from words used in the main functions or structures included in them. In these cases, the most suitable time to devote to this practice is, obviously, step 3 of the recommended teaching plan.

As regards how this practice can best be done, unfortunately there is no ready-made answer catering for all cases; it all depends really on the particular phonemes to be practised. However, let us recommend the following suggestions:

- use discrimination exercises to help your students distinguish similar sounds.
- draw diagrams to help them articulate new sounds.
- above all, let them hear properly before asking them to repeat anything, and be a good model! Remember that the acquisition of a good pronunciation is mainly based on the imitation of a good model.

A FINAL SUGGESTION

At the beginning of each class collect and, if at all feasible, correct on the board a few samples of any homework you may have set, focusing your students' attention on those common mistakes that can be easily anticipated. This will help establish the desirable continuity with the preceding class.

