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Using a teacher-fronted format in the communicative classroom

John Daly *

キーワード:
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Perhaps the best-known of the modern approaches to language learning is the communicative approach. An approach is a way of looking at teaching and learning. Underlying any language teaching approach is a theoretical view of what language is, and of how it can be learnt. An approach gives rise to methods, the way of teaching something, which use classroom activities or techniques to help learners learn.

The theoretical view underpinning the communicative approach is the idea that learning language successfully happens when there is a need to communicate real meaning. When learners are involved in real communication, proponents claim, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language.

Classroom activities that are designed in accordance with communicative approach guidelines are characterized by trying to produce meaningful and real communication. Practicing question forms by asking learners to find out information from their classmates is an example of a communicative approach activity, as it involves meaningful communication. Such activities, often referred to as "tasks", tend to be learner-centered, with the students working together in pairs or groups of three or four, while the teacher moves on the periphery, playing the role of facilitator.

Traditional approaches to language learning, on the other hand, advocated lessons that were teacher-centered, where activity in the class centered on the teacher. The teacher's role was that of instructor, the source of information which the students have come to receive. One such approach was the aural-oral approach (audiolinguai method), popular in the 1960s and '70s.

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Classroom activity is typically a Presentation - Practice - Production (PPP) lesson, where the teacher leads the activity and provides necessary information, usually in a whole-class arrangement. The teacher is in control, deciding what language will be produced, by whom, and when.

In contrast to this traditional role of the teacher as instructor, modern approaches to language learning prefer to cast the teacher in the role of facilitator. The job of the facilitator is to help the learners to learn for themselves. Facilitating involves providing the learners with necessary resources, information and support in order for learners to complete a task. For example, a teacher facilitates a group discussion on environmental problems by asking learners to list, for homework, things that they do that are harmful or helpful to the environment. In class, he sets up the groups, provides them with a list of useful vocabulary and functional phrases, and has them begin the discussion. While the learners speak among themselves, he moves from group to group, answering language questions that may arise, and helping to move forward discussions that may have bogged down. Facilitation is important in developing learner-centered work, supporting learners who are engaged in communicative activities.

Another way in which modern approaches differ from the traditional is in the concept of Teacher Talking Time (TTT), which is the time that teachers, rather than learners, spend talking in class. In a traditional classroom, prevalent in Japan and other Asian countries, it is the teacher who speaks most of the time, while students listen and receive instruction. However, a key element of many modern approaches is to reduce the amount of TTT as much as possible, which will allow learners opportunities to speak, and, it is argued, learn from speaking. Teachers in modern training programs are advised not to talk too much, and to maximize student talking time, which the students need in order to acquire the language. Thus, a teacher monitoring students who are working in pairs or groups will probably do fairly little talking, limiting themselves to offering language help when requested. The same teacher presenting points of grammar, though, will probably talk more, as they explain and check understanding.

Monitor is another role assigned to teachers following a communicative approach in their classrooms. To monitor is to watch and listen to learners while they are doing an activity, but not to lead them in the activity. Teachers monitor to find out what problems the learners are having, and to identify the type of errors learners make as they produce language. For example, as students in pairs practice a short dialogue simultaneously, the teacher walks around the class monitoring for difficulties, then talks to the whole class afterwards about common mistakes.

The relative value of TTT and student talking time is a complex area. Learners need to produce language in real-time conversation, giving them and the teacher a chance to notice vocabulary, grammar, and functional points that need more instruction and practice. However, they also need input from an effective language user in order to expand vocabulary and strengthen their hold on language already studied, and the teacher may be one of the main sources of this input.

Foreign teachers, trained to follow modern approaches to language teaching and learning, and believing in the value of their application, enter classrooms in Japan full of students not accustomed to such approaches. Traditionally, the teaching of EFL in Japan and other East Asian countries has been dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method.
and an emphasis on rote memory. These traditional language teaching approaches have resulted in a number of typical learning styles in East Asian countries, one of the most popular being an analytic learning style. In most Japanese high school English classes, for instance, the students read new words aloud, imitating the teacher. The teacher explains the entire text sentence by sentence, analyzing many of the more difficult grammar structures, rhetoric, and style for the students, who listen, take notes, and answer questions. In East Asian countries, most students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners. They, therefore, find it normal to engage in modes of learning which are teacher-centered and in which they receive knowledge rather than discover it for themselves.

There is a mismatch, then, between what the foreign teacher wants to do in the classroom and what the Japanese learner expects him to do. There is something of a culture clash, too, as the Japanese, who value the group above the individual and typically strive for group harmony, find their class being broken up into pairs and groups. To reconcile these differences, the teacher can choose to follow what has been called an “eclectic approach”.

In an eclectic approach, teachers select techniques and activities from a variety of language teaching approaches and methodologies. The teacher decides what methodology or approach to use depending on the aims of the lesson and the needs of the learners in the group. A typical lesson might combine elements from various sources such as the communicative approach, e.g., in communication gap activities; the lexical approach, e.g., focusing on lexical chunks in reading; and the structural-situational approach, e.g., establishing a clear context for the presentation of new structures.

What I would like to advocate here, in the spirit of the eclectic approach, is the inclusion in communicative classrooms of techniques from traditional approaches. Specifically, considering the educational background of our students, and the culture in which they have grown up, I would advocate the use of teacher-centered activity, sometimes called teacher-fronted, which evokes the image of the teacher in front of a class of students, who are looking at, listening to, and interacting with him. This traditional classroom format, in combination with modern techniques for eliciting meaningful communication, will, it seems to me, contribute to making a classroom environment best-suited to lessons that will be enjoyable and beneficial to the student.

In the second part of this paper, I present eight ideas for how the teacher can increase the amount of teacher-fronted classroom activity while remaining true to the ideals of modern learner-centered approaches. They are presented alphabetically.

1. Anecdote

A teacher with competence in Japanese will, in the course of everyday living, make discoveries of an equivalence between an expression in Japanese and one in English. For example, the teacher, watching a television drama in which a man and woman are having an argument, hears the woman angrily say "知らないわけではないでしょう". The teacher realizes instantly that in the same situation in English, the woman would have said "Don't tell me you don't know." The teacher then can bring this anecdote into class, tell the class how he was watching TV and saw this program, what the story was about, and finish by giving the class the Japanese-English equiva-
ence.

The expression thus introduced will most likely lead to a related expression and new teaching point. In this case, this English expression will suggest another which, though containing exactly the same words, is spoken with different intonation, giving the Japanese equivalent “知らないで!” This can be a springboard into a mini-lesson on how intonation changes meaning in English.

2. Dictation

Dictation is a language learning device that has been used for centuries. Communicative variations on the traditional dictation style, where the teacher reads a text and the students write it, have been developed. One is Dictation Drawing, where students show their understanding of what the teacher is saying by drawing a picture according to his directions. Another is Dictogloss, a classroom dictation activity where learners are required to reconstruct a short text by listening and noting down key words, which are then used as a basis for reconstruction. The teacher reads a short text to the class, who just listen. The teacher reads the text again, and the learners take notes. Then, in groups, the learners reconstruct the text. Dictogloss is a multiple skills activity, one in which learners practice listening, writing and speaking (by working in groups) and use vocabulary and grammar to complete the task.

Davis and Rinvolucr’s *Dictation* is full of ideas for using this technique in the classroom, though not all are done in a teacher-fronted format. To take one example, “The teacher’s Autobiography”, the teacher prepares a few sets of four statements each about himself, three of which are true, and one false. The students listen three times, and then write only the one sentence that they believe is false. They compare their choices with classmates, and then the teacher reads out the false statements. This type of dictation allows the whole class to focus on the teacher, motivated to listen carefully by the quiz-like nature of the task.

3. Drilling

A drill is a classroom technique used to practice new language. It involves the teacher modeling a word or a sentence and the learners repeating it, or altering it according to cues given by the teacher. Drilling is rejected by some communicative teachers due to a possible lack of communicative quality and its highly controlled, teacher-centered nature.

However, there are also advantages to drilling, such as offering learners an opportunity to practice pronunciation in a non-threatening way. It can be a useful diagnostic tool, informing the teacher how well the students understand something by the extent of their ability to repeat it. Drilling is tiring, however, and should be done in short segments.

Here are two ways in which drilling can be useful in a communicative approach. Students who are given a list of questions to ask a classmate in pair work often simply look at their paper and read the questions instead of looking at their partner and asking from memory, which is better for language acquisition. Having the students repeat the questions after the teacher as a class before starting the pair work will give them the confidence to speak without reading, making the subsequent pair work more conducive to language acquisition.

The second suggestion gives students the chance to focus on form before doing a pair work activity. The students are given the task to get information from each other using the form “Do you know...?”. A substitution drill done before-
hand would produce more accurate use of the target form in the pair work. The teacher gives the cue “The bank closes at.....(what time?)”, to which the students respond, “Do you know what time the bank closes?” Similarly, to the cue “The nearest post office is...(where?)”, the students respond, “Do you know where the nearest post office is?” When the response is strong enough, the teacher can leave them to begin the pair work, with some confidence that the work will be done with greater accuracy and thus with greater possibility of acquisition.

4. Feedback

One teacher role that is promoted in modern approaches is that of monitor. As students engage in pair or group work, the teacher moves around the classroom, listening in to their conversations and noting points to present to the class afterwards as feedback. Putting those points on the board and commenting on them as students take notes puts the teacher in the traditional role of instructor, with which the students are comfortable. The content of that instruction, because it comes from the communicative difficulties that the students were having, adds learner-centered and meaningful elements to this traditional role. The students are being taught what they have demonstrated to be language that they want and need.

The teacher, by reviewing these notes with the class in later lessons, and using them perhaps as the basis for new activities, shows the students the importance and usefulness of their efforts in pair work, gives them a larger role in determining the content of class work, and makes the class more meaningful and relevant to them.

This is an example of a delayed correction technique, which is a correction a teacher makes some time after a learner has made an error. This is usually done to avoid interrupting the fluency practice of pair and group work.

5. Modeling pair work

After setting up an activity, and explaining how it is to be done, the teacher can demonstrate the activity with one or several students. Not only will this ensure that the students know what to do, but also, by showing them the possibility of interesting and enjoyable conversational interaction, it will motivate them to make an active effort to participate. As with all teacher-fronted activity, it gives the students an opportunity to listen to natural, spontaneous conversation.

In an activity based on the topic of sports, for example, in response to a question such as “Have you ever gone snowboarding?” from a student, the teacher might reply, “No, I haven’t. But I’ve gone skiing. The first time I went skiing.....”. In this way, the teacher can show the students how to extend their answers by giving more information. He can, by sharing his own personal experiences, encourage the students to share theirs, and, perhaps most importantly, demonstrate to the students that they are indeed engaging in meaningful conversation here, and not simply the practice of language forms.

In classes with a sufficiently small number of students, the teacher, as he moves from group to group, can briefly join in, providing not only linguistic input, but also the personal contact that students hope to have with their foreign teachers.

6. Questioning

Display questions are questions you ask to see if the person you are speaking to knows the answer. In the classroom, this normally means questions teachers ask learners to see if they understand or remember something. For example, the teacher asks a learner ‘What is the opposite of
leave?" Display questions can be compared to referential questions, which are questions you ask because you don’t know the answer; for example, “What time did you leave the house this morning?”

Display questions clearly lack the communicative quality and authenticity of referential questions, but they can be an important tool in the classroom, not only for the teacher to be able to check and test their learners, but also as a source of listening practice. Referential questions, however, are of more value to meaningful communication.

Initiation-response-feedback, or IRF, is a pattern of discussion between the teacher and learner that takes referential questions one step further. The teacher initiates, the learner responds, the teacher gives feedback. This approach to the exchange of information in the classroom can provide a useful framework for developing meaningful communication in a controlled form. For example, there is opportunity for authentic input in an IRF dialogue as simple as: “How many brothers have you got?” “Three” “Three! Wow, that’s a big family.”

The teacher can, of course, extend this exchange further with another question, but care must be taken not to stay with one student for too long, because other students may lose interest. To avoid this problem, the teacher can encourage the other students to extend the conversation with questions (How old are your brothers?) or comments (“I have three sisters!”) of their own. The whole class can be involved by having them repeat chorally the questions that individuals suggest.

Another variation on the questioning theme is that of chain questioning. The student to whom the first question was posed asks the same question to another student, who, in turn, asks another.

The teacher can provide the feedback to the responses, which, done in the spirit of meaningful communication, is likely to introduce a variety of language forms as input for the students to comprehend. Such chain questioning can provide at least ten minutes of whole class interaction, a format which Japanese, culturally inclined to group rather than individual activity, find satisfying and enjoyable.

7. Teacher instead of CD

Using a compact disc in the classroom allows the teacher to expose the students to a variety of accents and types of speaker. The CD, therefore, is a valuable resource not to be overlooked. One other resource not to be overlooked, however, is the teacher’s own voice. Telling a story, real or imagined, with the aid of pictures, props, book, or alone, the native speaker of English is a valued resource to the Japanese. Their presence is a selling point of the Japanese college. From the Japanese students’ point of view, what’s the point of having a native speaker in the class if students are going to be spending most of their time talking to other students in pairs and groups?

Language acquisition theories emphasize the importance of comprehensible input, which is language just beyond the competence of the learner, one level above the learners’ present level. It is language input that can be understood by listeners despite their not understanding all the words and structures in it. According to Krashen’s theory of language acquisition, giving learners this kind of input provides the ideal conditions for acquisition to happen.

The most important and accessible input for learners is that of the teacher. When teachers are talking in classes, they are providing opportunities for learners to develop their comprehension by putting to use natural learning strategies such
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as guessing words from context and inferring meaning. Teachers, who know best the competence of their students, can optimize this opportunity by choosing the right levels of complexity of vocabulary and structures, and speed of delivery, in their talk.

Students can be active listeners by asking questions, making comments, or taking notes, depending on the nature of the talk. They can be trained to ask for clarification (Excuse me, what does that word mean?) or repetition (Could you say that again, please?). After listening, they can talk, in Japanese at lower levels, with a classmate, recalling what they have understood. The volume of their talk will give the teacher a good indication of how well he has been understood, better than comprehension questions, to which not all students have a chance to reply.

8. Using Japanese

The question of whether or not to use Japanese in an English Conversation class is a complex one. Advocates of an English-only policy argue that for most students the classroom is the only opportunity they have for exposure to English. They cite Krashen’s argument that languages are learned most effectively when learners are exposed to lots of comprehensible input in contexts of real communication, and that the teacher is most often the only model for the students and therefore their main source of input. For the teacher to use Japanese would be a waste of opportunity for the students.

However, limited use of Japanese can be beneficial to the learners. Allowing a student to ask the teacher for the English equivalent of a Japanese idea that she wants to express allows true learning opportunities to arise. Students are more likely to remember words that they have the desire and immediate need to know; by letting them ask, in the course of a pair work activity, for example, how to say some Japanese expression in English, we are helping them to acquire language that they are ready to learn.

Japanese can also be used in teacher-fronted classroom activity. To test the students’ memory and comprehension, the teacher can say English expressions and have the students provide the Japanese. To the teacher’s “It’s none of your business”, for example, the students respond “君に関係ない”; to “You scared me!”, they respond “びっくりした!”. To check their ability to produce the English expression, the teacher can provide the prompts in Japanese.

This is similar to the mental activity that low-level learners of a foreign language naturally engage in, trying to recall the foreign language equivalent of the native language idea they have in mind to say. To ban it from the classroom on theoretical grounds seems unreasonable. Plus, students seem to enjoy it.

Conclusion

Modern approaches to language teaching and learning stress the importance of engaging learners in meaningful communication in a pair or small group format. These approaches differ from traditional approaches which placed the teacher in a position of control at the center of classroom activity. The educational background and cultural upbringing of Japanese college students make them comfortable in such a teacher-fronted whole class environment, which can make the introduction and efficacy of pair and group work problematic. A solution to the problem may be found in the adoption of an eclectic approach, which makes use of the best features of the traditional and modern approaches. Teacher-fronted activities can be conducted in a communicative, mean-
ingful way that will make the students’ classroom experience enjoyable and useful, and provide a satisfying balance with the pair and group work activities necessary for language acquisition.

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