Teaching Communicative Grammar to Technical University EFL Learners

N L Baydikova¹, Y S Davidenko¹
¹Department of Foreign Languages, National Research University of Electronic Technology (MIET), Russia

E-mail: nataleon22@list.ru

Abstract. The paper considers communicative approach to grammar as a means to develop the Technical University EFL learners’ ability to communicate with each other focusing on the language meaning rather than on the form. Although the communicative approach is not ideal, it makes the communication in the classroom natural, thus creating conditions for self-realization, motivation and meaningful language acquisition. The paper establishes principles to be applied when teaching grammar communicatively. They concern two aspects: the grammar material itself and the ways it is taught. Grammar material chosen ought to be relevant to communication in real life situations. Greater attention is to be paid to more frequent and important grammar structures. Teaching methods within the framework of communicative approach to grammar should motivate authentic interpersonal interaction with the priority to fluency over accuracy. To illustrate the principles some communicative grammar activities are presented.

1. Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an approach to language teaching that focuses on meaningful and real communication as both a means and the objective of language acquisition. CLT teachers prefer such classroom activities which help their students attain communicative competence in the target language through learner-centered interaction with the help of authentic materials.

We must admit from the very beginning that the communicative approach is not ideal and nowadays it competes with other teaching methods. For example, G. Hadley argues that Communicative approach to FL teaching is losing its dominance and giving way to data-driven learning [1; 99], although he is not quite sure if it is an effective EFL teaching method.

G. Zhou cautions against absolutization of CLT at the expense of other methods: “For different teaching settings, different methods/ methodologies ought to be adopted, ideally, integrated, for they compensate for each other” [2; 801].

Moreover, teachers of EFL often face some problems in applying CLT. As the overview of English language teaching in Bangladesh made by D. Ansarey shows, EFL teachers “whilst aware of the achievements, observe many difficulties in implementing CLT in their classrooms. These difficulties stem from four directions, namely, the teacher, the students, the educational system, and CLT itself” [3; 61].
2. Problem statement

Keeping in mind that CLT has some drawbacks we are certain that it makes the communication in the classroom natural, thus creating conditions for self-realization, motivation and meaningful language acquisition. The essential advantage of CLT is its focus on communication which becomes the goal of foreign language instruction. J. Richards and T. Rodgers stress that CLT “aims to (a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication” [4; 155].

M. Wesche and P. Skehan describe CLT methodologies as different from traditional ones since they involve:

- frequent interaction among students to exchange information and solve problems
- use of authentic (non-pedagogic) texts and communication activities linked to real life contexts
- learner-centered approaches that take into account learners’ backgrounds, language needs, and goals [5; 208].

There are some other features that differentiate earlier traditions in language teaching and the communicative approach.

To start with, CLT approach avoids meaningless situations in the classroom. Meaning is paramount. The approach practices functions and forms in context-rich environments. For instance, when students ask questions to find out some personal information about their peers they communicate real meaning that’s why such activity can be considered a CLT activity.

Secondly, learner’s ability to write and read separate sentences correctly is no longer considered enough. Dissolving the language into fragments and rote learning doesn’t enhance communicative performance. Students should know the functions of different words and structures and apply them in a proficient manner to communicate real meaning.

Thirdly, CLT approach balances fluency and accuracy regarding them both equally important for real life communication. As a rule, learners’ mistakes are left uncorrected during language production.

If a teacher follows the principles of CLT, he or she should be ready to assume new roles in the classroom, those of facilitator and monitor: “Rather than being a model for correct speech and writing and one with primary responsibility of making students produce plenty of error-free sentences, a teacher had to develop a different view of learners’ errors and of her/ his own role in facilitating language learning” [6; 5].

Then, the proponents of CLT believe that “the target language is a vehicle for classroom communication, nor just the object of study” [7; 125]. To learn to communicate students need to practice communication even if it causes difficulty. Native language should be used judiciously.

Next, “methodologists consequently recommend that learners learn to see that failed communication is a joint responsibility and not the fault of speaker or listener. Similarly, successful communication is an accomplishment jointly achieved and acknowledged” [4; 98]. Therefore, cooperation and collaboration should reign in the classroom. Besides, working in small groups increases the amount of communication practice [8].

So, we fully agree with J. Basta that communicative approach through cooperation and collaboration targets both social skills and academic performance: “Cooperative language learning provides students with the necessary social and academic skills, promoting productivity and achievement, which are also the aims of communicative language teaching” [9; 125].

And finally, “the grammar and vocabulary that the students learn should follow from the function, situational context and the roles of the interlocutors” [7; 128]. Why not use a real text, find examples of a particular word or grammatical pattern and discuss why it has been used applying the so-called inductive approach to language learning?

So we have described the general principles of communicative foreign language teaching. Grammar instruction is an integral part of FLT. Thus, the purpose of the study is to establish some specific principles of teaching communicative grammar and to illustrate them with teaching materials and methods.
3. Findings

Communicative meaning-focused learner-centered grammar instruction requires application of the following principles.

1. The material taught is to be selected in accordance with its communicative relevance and frequency.

2. Teaching methods should involve students into meaningful communication in real-life contexts.

Where the teaching materials are concerned, along with sticking to authentic texts and intuitively selecting from them relevant patterns of language use it might make sense to choose the most frequent grammar features (such as verb aspect/ tense forms, modal verbs, comparisons with adjectives and adverbs, etc.) with the help of corpora. Frequency information or corpus linguistic studies help to “provide a more solid basis than relying only on intuition and accepted practice” [10; 201].

Indeed, D. Biber and R. Reppen conducted a study of the frequency of the aspects: simple, perfect, and progressive in four registers (conversation, fiction, news, and academic). The research showed that “simple-aspect verb phrases are more than 20 times as common as progressive in conversation” [Ibid.; 204].

What is more, “The Frequency of The Twelve Verb Tenses in Academic Papers Written by Native Speakers” was studied by U. Alzuhairy, University of Central Florida. This study showed that the top five most used verb forms by native speakers in academic written assignments are: 1. Present Simple 2. Past Simple 3. Present Perfect 4. Future Simple 5. Present Progressive [11; 30]. Therefore, it is only logical to allocate more time in the classroom to practicing these verb forms.

Where methods of teaching are concerned, within the framework of communicative approach to grammar there is a wide range of tasks, activities and techniques developed by different educators. But all of them have something in common. They are designed to engage EFL learners in meaningful communicative interaction during which the students are to use certain grammatical structures.

According to D. Newby, in the framework of communicative approach to grammar “language is seen not as a formal system but as a means of communicating messages between human beings in actual contexts. It follows from this that language is redefined as a set of skills, grammar being seen as a way of expressing certain types of meanings through grammatical forms. Meaningfulness and contextual appropriacy are stressed and formal correctness is given less prominence” [12; 151].

Let’s study such methods in more detail. Grammar work in the EFL class usually goes through several stages. P. Ur suggests four basic stages: presentation, isolation and explanation, practice and test [13; 7].

In this paper we focus on the practice stage which in its turn comprises two major types of grammar activities: pre-communicative and communicative ones. As O. Rojas states, “the pre-communicative activities are designed for learners to practice specific parts of discourse, not discourse as a whole. They prepare the ground for actual spontaneous communication” [14; 178].

It means that students deal with separate words, word combinations, phrases, sentences. The focus of their attention is on the form of the utterance rather than on the content. Among traditional exercises we can name such types as matching, blank filling, word building, sentence constructing. Pre-communicative activities are aimed at certain grammar skills and lay the foundation for freer communication.

Judging by the name, pre-communicative activities lack some of the features characteristic of real communication situations (spontaneity, natural speed, freedom in choosing language means). But to fulfill the role of preparatory stage in building communicative competence they should reflect in some way natural language usage. While doing pre-communicative exercises students should keep in mind the pragmatic function of the grammar phenomenon studied. We agree with D. H. Brown who states that “language techniques are designed to engage learners into pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus, but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes” [15; 43].
Quizzes can be a good example of a pre-communicative grammar exercise allowing students to acquire the grammar form in conjunction with its pragmatic function. Working on the topic *Modern Technologies in our Life* we offered the students of National Research University of Electronic Technology (MIET) a quiz *Are you smartphone addicted?*

We used a variety of classroom activities to make the students practice Present Simple affirmative and interrogative forms.

The first activity implied pair work on the basis of target structure imitation (*Do you often check your Smartphone?*). The students asked each other the questions of the quiz and filled in the table with their answers (Table 1).

After filling in the table the students paired up with a new partner thus receiving a motive to share information with someone who hadn’t yet heard it. Each student in a pair gave a report of his smartphone addiction level using the adverbs of frequency: *I often check my Smartphone*. So the model structures given in the quiz (interrogative sentences) underwent transformation into the affirmative type.

Then the students of each pair exchanged the quiz results (the tables filled) and paired up with another partner. This time the students altered the quiz questions into the 3d Person Singular asking each other about the phone habits of their former partners: *Does Pete often check his smartphone?* In fact, the students had only to substitute the auxiliary in the model structures of the quiz.

The last pair swap allowed the learners to drill the 3d Person Singular affirmative giving an account of their former partner’s phone habits: *Pete often checks his smartphone*. The model structures of the quiz were transformed in the terms of word-order and morpheme -s.

So doing the pre-communicative activities the students changed their partners three times and had an opportunity to interact in different communicative contexts and to apply four target structures.

Pre-communicative activities were controlled and accuracy-oriented due to the fulfilment of the following criteria.
1. The activities are done in the order of target grammar structure complexity.
2. While practising the target structure the students have a grammar model to work with.
3. The techniques underlying the activities are: imitation, substitution and transformation of the model structure.

**Table 1. Are you smartphone addicted?**

| No. | Questions                                                                 | Answers (yes/ sometimes/ no) |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1.  | Do you check your Smartphone every other minute even in the class/meeting? |                              |
| 2.  | Do you feel uncomfortable if recently taken photograph/video is not shared |                              |
| 3.  | Do you check your Smartphone right after getting up in the morning?       |                              |
| 4.  | Do you always have your Smartphone with you?                              |                              |
| 5.  | Do you feel nervous when your mobile is out of the coverage?              |                              |
| 6.  | Do you feel that you are paralyzed without your Smartphone?               |                              |
| 7.  | Do you prefer Smartphone over your friends when you are with them somewhere? |                              |
| 8.  | Do you often walk in the wrong direction or take a wrong bus, while you are busy with your phone? |                              |
| 9.  | Do you often buy over-size jeans, so that your Smartphone can rest perfectly in pocket? |                              |
| 10. | Do you eat checking your Smartphone?                                      |                              |
Communicative activities simulate real-life verbal interaction and thus require students to express their own ideas and thoughts or to represent some given information to others. Such activities comprise drama [16], discussions [17], role plays [18], case studies [19], brainstorming activities, etc. Students respond spontaneously and concentrate mainly on the meaning of the discourse, but not on its outer form. Communicative activities proper are free in terms of vocabulary and structure choice and more fluency-oriented than pre-communicative ones.

Communicative exercises on the topic Modern Technologies in our Life (subtopic Smartphone Addiction) might contain such small-group, pair or individual tasks:

1. Roleplay. A psychologist tries to prove to his client that smartphone addiction leads to high levels of loneliness, depression and anxiety.
2. Discussion. Express your opinion on the problem of smartphone overuse.
3. Case study. Listen to the story of a depressed teen girl and say how smartphone addiction affects mental health.
4. Brainstorming activity. Give some tips to those who want to break free of compulsive smartphone use.
5. Storytelling. Tell a story from real life to demonstrate the existence of smartphone addiction. Prove that the mania is real.

Together with pre-communicative exercises these communicative activities will make students’ speech motivated, accurate and fluent.

4. Conclusions

Communicative approach to grammar is a means to develop the Technical University EFL learners’ ability to interact with each other in context rich environments. Although the communicative approach is not ideal, it has some advantages. It makes classroom communication natural, creates conditions for self-realization, motivation and meaningful language acquisition.

The paper establishes principles to be applied when teaching grammar communicatively.

1. The material taught is to be selected in accordance with its communicative relevance.
2. Teaching methods should involve students into meaningful communication in real-life contexts. To illustrate the principles some communicative grammar activities are presented.

Communicative approach to grammar teaching and learning simulates real-life interaction, motivates authentic communication between students, implies the use of language for meaningful purposes and gives priority to fluency over accuracy.

5. References

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