

The Communicative Approach in a Japanese context

Walter Carpenter and Russell Moon, Asia University

The focus of this paper is the Communicative Approach to English teaching, in Japan. After outlining the Communicative Approach and its defining characteristics the authors consider how the Communicative Approach applies--or perhaps doesn't apply--to an example of Freshman English teaching at Asia University. In the Summary and Analysis section, the paper expands the scope of the discussion to include a Japanese educational perspective; via the Asia University example, the Communicative Approach is considered within a wider framework, one that takes into account the approach to foreign language learning used by Japanese English teachers.

The Communicative Approach: what is it?

When examining (or researching) the Communicative Approach one encounters various descriptions and acronyms. As one college textbook notes, "Communicative language teaching has become an umbrella term to cover many approaches that purport to be communicative in design." (p. 416, *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*) Thus, a slightly different descriptive label commonly used is, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). And when discussing this type of language teaching in a more general sense, it is sometimes referred to as a communicative approach to foreign language teaching. Additionally the term, Communicative Approach, is sometimes used interchangeably with the "notional-functional" approach to foreign- or second-language teaching.

The approach can be used in the teaching and learning of many different languages and is widely used in many countries. A communicative-oriented way of teaching and learning is often a vital component of many graduate programs in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Foreign and Second Language Education, and Applied Linguistics. Some of the classroom methods used by Communicative Approach practitioners are similar to those found in other approaches and methods of teaching English to non-native English speakers. Yet, there are some unique characteristics that define the Communicative Approach and thus differentiate it from other teaching methodologies.

The Communicative Approach: an attempt at definition

The basis of the Communicative Approach is, as its title implies, a process of active communication based on student-centered learning. It is an effort, essentially, to teach grammar, vocabulary, and unique patterns of the English language by students using English to communicate.

Thus, one of the key assumptions of the Approach: if a student of English actively uses English--for real communication, the English learning experience will be more meaningful than would be the case by doing memory work or through use of "rote" activity routines. Much of the necessary grammar and vocabulary and patterns of language usage is learned by, and thus embedded within, the practice of using the English language for authentic, often practical, and meaningful communication.

The Communicative Approach relies on insights and concepts from second language acquisition (SLA) studies which are, in turn, usually linked to how humans learn their first (mother, or native) language. There exists an assumption (one that is not always recognized, or acknowledged) that because the Communicative Approach is based on “meaningful” communication it is a more natural or “authentic” way of learning another language; when compared with other methods and approaches to language learning it is a more intuitive approach, as it assumes this approach inherently appeals to a universal human desire and need for meaningful communication. [1]

Some Historical and Theoretical Background

In the aftermath of World War Two, and associated in part with the Cold War, both the Grammar-translation and Audio-lingual methods of learning foreign languages were dominant in the field of foreign language studies. Audio-lingual ideas, in turn, were partly a spin off of the theories of behaviorism, often associated with the American psychologist B.F. Skinner and his ideas on language learning. [2]

But Noam Chomsky seriously questioned the theoretical validity of Skinner’s ideas. It was Chomsky’s ideas on generative grammar, together with his notion of Universal Grammar (a grammar that is innately present in humans), that provided the theoretical underpinnings for both the notional-functional syllabus and the communicative approach. [3] The notional-functional syllabus, and the communicative approach, are often presented in contrast to the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) with its emphasis on oral drills, repetition, and accuracy--the formation of desired language habits. [4]

Characteristics of the Communicative Approach

In its quest to develop communicative skills, the Communicative Approach especially emphasizes the use of authentic materials and highly interactive classroom activities. Additionally, the instructor regularly attempts to connect what happens **in** the classroom with what happens **outside** the classroom, to refer to “real life” situations.

A Key **concept**:

--“communicative competence,” (versus grammatical or linguistic competence). [5]
The aim is to develop sufficient proficiency for communicating in the target language.

A Key **goal**:

-- producing communicative competent English speakers (proficiency in the language being studied, i.e. “the target language”).

Some Key **words**:

--authenticity, interactive, meaningful communication.

Some Key **elements**:

--active student participation, and communication--using the target language,
--use of authentic materials,
--consistent attempts to connect what happens **in** the classroom with events **outside** the classroom.

Typical Classroom **Activities**:

- pair work,
- role playing,
- information gap,
- interviews,
- student-produced presentations.

An Example of an Asia University Freshman English Class [6]

Each class is structured around a PowerPoint slide show, which has the advantage of allowing the students to understand the underlying outline and flow of the lesson as it was intended by the teacher. The slide show also adds a reading component to the lecture, which is useful for students who have difficulty unpacking the verbal instructions they are given in class. [7]

Warm-up

The class session begins with a warm-up period of casual questions (for example, “How do you feel?” “What is the weather like today?” or “What time did you depart your house this morning?”) which are directed towards the entire class. Class discipline is lax during this time, and allows for late arrivals to easily enter the classroom; it allows late students to get settled into their desks and allows for greeting their classmates without disturbing the lesson proper.

During the warm-up period, once the class has absorbed the gist of a particular question, individual students are then randomly selected to answer the question. By the process of first being presented with a question before a respondent is chosen, the students remain alert because they are never sure when they will be called upon to answer. Selected questions are based on the functional and grammatical objectives of the current unit being studied in the textbook, and are sometimes tied to topical themes such as upcoming holidays. Coinciding with the arrival of the last of the late students (approximately five minutes into the class period), the question and answer period comes to an end.

The Lesson

In contrast to the warm-up period, the lesson is highly structured. It centers on something from the textbook though it may also focus on supplemental activities (such as games, videos, and conversations activities) that were created by the teacher or the textbook publisher and which help reinforce the objectives of the current unit.

At the beginning of the lesson proper, students are instructed to open their textbooks to a certain page. This is a familiar ritual; students know that the permitted looseness and jocularity of the warm-up period is now over. With books open, the lesson often begins with choral repetition of vocabulary items, intended to both focus their minds and to reacquaint their mouths with the sounds, rhythms and accents of English. The repetition also helps to lower the affective filter of Japanese students, who feel more at ease when working in unison with their classmates.

Textbook Exercises and Homework

After a brief introduction by the teacher on a point of English usage, students complete short grammar, vocabulary, and listening exercises from their textbook or from a handout. Upon completion of the exercise, answers are reviewed and to ensure they are on task, individual students are asked questions about the exercise.

Though the class is regularly assigned homework, which also focuses on completion of exercises, there are reasons why all exercises are not assigned as homework and are, rather, done in class. The reasons:

- The teacher can address questions that arise during the completion of the exercise. (Though it should be noted that Japanese students rarely ask questions.) “Questions” that need to be answered can be noted simply by looking over the students’ shoulders as they work and observing their reactions to doing difficult exercises. Though it could be argued that this type of in-class work is wasted time, and is time that would be better spent on communicative activities, it is very helpful to observe students while they work, especially Japanese student--who are by cultural conditioning reluctant to raise questions.
- Many students simply do not actually and personally complete much of the class work assigned as homework; plagiarizing of homework assignments is fairly wide-spread. Thus, in-class work ensures that each student spends at least some time each week focusing on the fundamentals of grammar and vocabulary.
- The third and most important reason, in terms of communicative work, is that in-class exercises help lay a foundation for communicative activities, introduced towards the end of a notional-functional textbook unit. After some weeks of this pattern—multiple grammar, vocabulary and listening exercises followed by a communicative activity that engages the same skills acquired during the exercises—students understand that the class work does not merely prepare them for a test, but also trains them for a meaningful language exchange that is rewarding, both in its own right and in terms of class participation points.

The primary emphasis of class work is language fundamentals, as described above, using both teacher-produced and textbook handouts. However some other activities are more communicative-oriented. The following is a summary of these other activities.

Conversation Pair Work

Using highly structured conversation models—essentially dialogues with gaps for student input—students take the initial steps of making conversation in English. As confidence and ability grow, the number of gaps is increased so that students are providing more and more of their own input.

Dictogloss

Students listen to a short monologue on a particular topic read aloud by the teacher. Working in groups, the students then attempt to reconstruct what the teacher said by writing it down. During this process the teacher rereads the monologue several times while answering student questions. At the end of the activity students write the monologue on the board as the teacher makes corrections and reviews relevant language points.

Role-play activities

Students assume the roles of people outside of the classroom environment (e.g., waiter and customer, doctor and patient, friends discussing plans) and attempt to have a conversation based on conversational frames and situational background provided by the teacher. Props are often used during these activities because they increase the realism of the role-play and allow the students to more easily slip into character.

Video

For each textbook unit, students watch 2 to 3, 4-minute videos based on textbook themes and then answer questions about the videos. The video material is presented in the “sit-com” format with recurring characters. This differs markedly from textbook listening activities, since the narrative structure of the videos allows students to build understanding about the characters throughout the semester, and it is this understanding that aids in language comprehension as students try to understand the video dialogue using their prior knowledge of character and narrative.

Games

Language themed games are played throughout the semester, sometimes as a needed departure from business-as-usual, but also to build community and reinforce previously learned material with energy and enthusiasm. Three or four times each semester, students play Word-Up, a board game designed for ESL students that reviews various language skills, but is otherwise not associated with the textbook. Students also play Jeopardy style games and other game show variations, typically for test review.

Summary and Analysis

It is interesting to observe that some of what is described in the example resembles both the Audio-lingual and the Grammar-Translation methods. An important characteristic of a Grammar-Translation method is its emphasis on literacy.

Indeed an important and recurring element in the example is the skill of reading. The instructor consistently appeals to and relies on the students' ability to read English. From an analytical perspective, it is important to note that literacy--reading--is not one of the skills or abilities that typically is emphasized in a Communicative-based classroom. Perhaps, because reading is looked upon as a foundational (therefore, basic) skill, it is easily overlooked and thus not fully utilized by non-Japanese English teachers working in Japan. The tendency to overlook the fundamental importance of reading English by Japanese students might be even more apparent if a teacher has been trained in, and is oriented toward, a Communicative Approach.

Another point regarding reading and the need to recognize and appreciate its importance: skill in reading the printed word is one of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) that is most emphasized in the Japanese public classroom. This emphasis on reading is, partly, a result of the method used to teach English in the public schools--the Grammar Translation method.

Though the primary emphasis of the classroom example probably would not be described as communicative, some of the activities are communicative. The activities which can be considered to be the most communicative (also the one that are the most student-centered) are the pair-work and the role-play activities. Additionally, in the role play activities, the use of props assists the students in assuming their assigned roles and helps them in their attempts to speak English.

In addition to the appeal to literacy (versus verbal communication), there are several other differences between the classroom as described in the example and a more Communicative Approach-oriented taught classroom that will be explored more fully: a sparse use of authentic materials (in particular, reading materials) and a teacher- (versus student-) centered teaching method. Additional comments will also be offered on the connections between technology and interaction, and on the structure of the classroom (the organization and pace of learning).

Authentic Materials

With the exception the textbook (and related handouts), nearly all the materials used in the example appear to be teacher-designed and teacher-produced. Though the use of authentic materials (especially reading and listening materials) fulfills an important role in a communicative classroom, there are some important advantages gained when materials are custom designed.

For instance, since the teacher produces his materials they can, therefore, more easily and precisely match, and satisfy, students' abilities and needs. Also, as seen in the example, because the instructor has developed unique materials (in particular, the PowerPoint presentations) he is able to more effectively match the pace of the presentation together with the ability of the class to absorb the information being presented.

Furthermore, by creating his own materials, the instructor ensures that the material harmonize with the information in the textbook being used by his students. This is especially useful for the times when he wants to reinforce, expand, or re-visit something from the textbook.

Teacher Centered versus Student Centered

A central tenet of the Communicative-Approach is that the classroom, ideally, is student-centered. The goal is for the language learner to be the central focus of the classroom. Thus, the classroom is highly interactive; the classroom assumes an active, consistent, use of English by the learner. "Throwing out a one-way communication line is no longer sufficient." (p. 416, *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*) The role of the teacher, thus, will typically vary from one activity to another, and from one class session to the next. Ideally, the teacher is an organizer, an advisor, and a facilitator of communication.

Yet, in the example, the students are dependent on the teacher. From the beginning of class, till the end, nearly everything is initiated by, and directed by, the teacher. However, typically, students in the example (perhaps, this is especially noticeable at the lower ability levels) are comfortable with this style of classroom management.

A Structured Classroom Environment

An assumption of the Communicative Approach is that communicatively competent learners are able to easily express their views or ideas. (*Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*, pages 415 and 416) Again, the classroom example diverges from the Communicative Approach model. Though some of the classroom exercises are communicative ones, the students typically “fill in the missing gap” conversation with appropriate, pre-learned, words or phrases.

Finally, one of the most important advantages in teaching within a highly structured framework--and why it may be seen as a comfortable one for the students--is due to its familiarity. That is, a high degree of structure, under the direct control of the teacher, is also a common characteristic in a Grammar Translation-oriented classroom. [8] Because a Grammar-translation oriented method emphasizes rules of grammar and memorization, it also resembles the instructional style used in Japan’s cram schools to prepare students for important tests. The high school entrance examination and the university admission test are probably the two most important tests for Japanese students. [9]

A comment of classroom interaction, and technology

In the example provided the use of PowerPoint presentations and other computer display software are important. By using these visual presentations, the teacher is able to, rely on and appeal to, the students’ reading skills. Moreover, the presentations also provide viable and effective substitutes for personal interaction. By being able to read, and re-read if necessary, the students are more likely to understand the presentation, and are thus probably less likely to make a mistake. This last point (a fear of being “wrong”) is--as many non-Japanese English teachers have observed--an important consideration when for non-Japanese English teachers in Japan.

Conclusions

Though the classroom example in this paper is from only one of the two authors of this paper, both of the authors’ Freshman English classes are somewhat similar. Indeed there are some noticeable similarities. One of the similarities: within the context of a familiar and well-rehearsed routine, most of the students can and do perform satisfactorily. However, at the point when something new, and non-rehearsed, is being introduced, the teacher needs to proceed slowly, and carefully.

Based on the example provided, it is not realistic (or necessary) to arrive at generalizations regarding the effectiveness, appropriateness, or validity of using a Communicative Approach in a Japanese university classroom setting. However, there are certain aspects of the example that do indicate a pattern, student attitudes or behaviors regularly observed, when teaching English in a Japanese context: the fear of making a mistake, for example.

This fear of—or, aversion to--committing an error often prevents Japanese students from fully participating in the type of verbal exercises that characterize a Communicative Approach to teaching English. A central tenet of a communicative-based classroom is interactivity, thus a strong aversion to “making mistakes” can be an impediment if a teacher attempts to encourage a highly interactive classroom.

When considering the Grammar-translation method and its influence on Asia University students, the method can be viewed in both positive, and negative, terms. On the positive side, due to its emphasis on reading, the skill of reading is a foundation upon which Asia University Freshman English teachers can potentially build. On the negative side, the Grammar-translation method inculcates and reinforces an aversion to making mistakes; it helps foster a false notion in students’ minds that there exists one, and probably only one, “correct” language solution.

Thus, it is possible that some of the foundational concepts of the communicative approach--authenticity (reading materials, in particular) meaningful learning (often self-directed), highly interactive exercises, and practical communication in the target language,--will not be fully realized in many Asia University Freshman English classes. Moreover, when viewing the Communicative Approach from an ideal or “pure” perspective, it is open to question whether the Communicative Approach, allowing for some possible exceptions, is appropriate--or necessary--when teaching English in Japan.

Finally, as discussed earlier (in the Summary and Analysis section), if reading is made to be an important and regular part of the classroom, Japanese students will probably feel more “at home,” since reading is typically their strongest skill (in terms of English). Additionally, if reading is emphasized, then their English learning experience at Asia University might bear some resemblance to their previous experience of learning English in Japanese secondary schools.

Notes

Note 1. There are potential problems, however, when one thinks (or assumes) that the Communicative Approach is based on “meaningful” communication--and therefore is somehow a more natural, intuitive, approach to teaching and learning English. This point perhaps seems even more obvious when comparing a communicative-oriented classroom to one that functions along the lines of the Grammar-translation method. However, for many of the students who are studying English as a foreign or a second language for the first time, in a classroom environment, the entire process may seem contrived, and artificial, no matter what method or approach is being used.

Asia University students, if they have only been taught English in the Japanese public school system, probably have little or no prior experience with English learning based on the Communicative Approach. Their previous experience of English learning has taken place in a Grammar-translation oriented classroom. Undoubtedly, for these students--upon finding themselves thrust into a communicative-based classroom and being taught, in English and only in English, by a native-English speaking teacher--the learning experience does not feel natural; certainly, the experience is not intuitive.

Note 2. B.F. Skinner’s ideas on how behaviorism applies to language learning are discussed in his book, *Verbal Behavior* (1957).

Note 3. This is one of the reasons why both--the notional-functional syllabus and the communicative--approaches are sometimes associated with Noam Chomsky. The book that helped initially help establish Chomsky’s reputation was *Syntactic Structures*--published the same year as Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior*: 1957.

Note 4. The historical narrative (the one presented in this paper) to summarize the history and defining attributes of the Communicative Approach, probably seems logical and straightforward. However this is only one way to tell the story. It is also possible to consider the Communicative Approach to teaching English without any reference to either B.F. Skinner’s or Noam Chomsky’s ideas.

For instance, in one well-established college textbook, *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction* (Second Edition), the Communicative Approach is found in the “Teaching Methodologies” section of the text. The Communicative Approach is listed and explained after discussing several other teaching methods: Grammar Translation, the Direct, and the Audio Lingual. Behaviorism and behaviorist learning theories are mentioned only briefly, almost a side-note, when referring to the underlying and theoretical justifications for using an audio-lingual approach during the 1950s. (*Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*, pages 414-17) In this account there is no mention of either Skinner or Chomsky.

Note 5. The phrase “communicative competence” (first introduced by Dell Hymes) is intended to contrast practical, “real-life,” authentic communication, with Noam Chomsky’s theory of “linguistic competence.” Misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the phrase, communicative competence, is not uncommon even among teachers. One textbook explains communicative competence this way: “Merely knowing how to produce a grammatically correct sentence is not enough. A communicatively competent person must also know how to produce an appropriate, natural, and socially acceptable utterance in all contexts of communication.” (p. 416, *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction*)

Note 6. The example is from a typical Asia University Freshman English (FE) Class taught by Russell Moon. During the 2007-2008 academic year Russell’s FE classes included Business 8, International Relations 10, and Law 13.

The Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University employs a modified version of the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) guidelines. Based on the CELE adapted guidelines, students in the example provided would be described as Novice-Mid to Novice-High (plus). Their motivation to study English is typically influenced by future plans to travel abroad, and job prospects; levels of motivation range from low to high, though most of the students gravitate toward the lower end of the motivation spectrum.

Japanese university students often spend much more time in the classroom (compared to their North American and European counterparts) and many of them spend three to four hours (or more) commuting between their homes and the University. Thus it is not surprising when their long daily commutes--and resulting weariness--combined with their hectic schedules, will sometimes negatively influence their language learning readiness.

Note 7. For those unfamiliar with CAI (computer assisted instruction), the main purpose of PowerPoint is to visually display pictures and words in a sequence and a pace chosen by the lecturer. The same effect can be achieved, with more labor and time, using a blackboard and picture placards.

PowerPoint slide shows and other computer display software are important aspects of the lesson's visual presentation component. The display screen in the front of the classroom is a large television set, connected to a laptop computer. The computer's advantage over a blackboard/whiteboard is that it can rapidly display printed text to students, whose reading skills are typically much better than their listening skills. Thus, most questions are first presented aurally. After two or three repetitions the questions are then visually presented on the computer display. This routine is especially helpful when students are being introduced to something new. Finally, the use of computer-assisted displays also allows for easy preparation and display of photos, drawings, diagrams, and videos.

Note 8. English teaching in Japanese public schools, as noted elsewhere in this paper, is based on a Grammar-translation method. Japanese teachers of English, beginning with the first year of junior high school (middle school), typically emphasize memorization, learning rules of grammar, and literacy (reading), versus using English as a tool of Communication.

However many Japanese students are aware of, and have been exposed to, a more communicative-oriented style of using English; there are of course some programs which are intended, for a brief period of time, to bring Japanese students face-to-face with native-English speaking teachers. Probably the best known one is the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) program, sponsored by the Japanese government. These teachers (or JETs), and other teachers brought to Japan by similar JET-like programs, almost always fulfill an adjunct-type role, supplementing the instruction of the day-to-day Japanese English teacher. Typically they are assigned to a school for a full academic year (but often less than a year). Each teacher is treated as a scarce, valuable resource, be shared among all the Japanese English teachers. Thus, seldom do they have an opportunity to teach for an extended period of time in any one class, or group of classes. Rather these teachers "make the rounds" so that, over the course of their time at their assigned schools, they will have had an opportunity to interact with all of the school's students and English teachers, for only a limited and brief period of time.

Additionally there are some other attempts underway in Japanese public schools, toward more a communicative-oriented approach to learning English. However, these efforts are not uniform throughout the country and they are often limited to

elementary schools and kindergartens. It is important to note, in the context of this paper, that these additional efforts toward a more communicative-like approach are *not typical* of regular English classes found in the secondary schools of Japan. Thus even now, in 2008, all Japanese secondary school students (with some possible, rare, exceptions) beginning in junior high school (middle school) are taught English in a Grammar Translation-oriented classroom.

Note 9. Most Japanese students who study English in a Japanese school public school do so with the aim of scoring well on the (usually) mandatory University entrance Exams. Therefore, with rare exceptions, all Japanese public school teachers (as well as all cram school teachers) are “Teaching for the Test.” The first test of major importance is the high school placement test, administered in the final year of Junior High School (grade nine, in the American system). The next important test(s) is the Japanese university entrance examination, taken in the final year of high school.

Though it is not uncommon for native English-speaking teachers to entertain a negative attitude toward a system, or approach to learning, which is primarily devoted to scoring well on an exam--this type of negativity is uncommon in Japan. Indeed, “teaching for the test” is what students and their parents, and administrators, *expect* from their teachers. The dynamic of teaching for the test is arguably one of the most important reasons why teachers in Japan emphasize grammar rules and memorization in learning English. The final goal: a high score, achieved by a “correctness” that can be easily and quickly scored, measured, and quantified.

In many Japanese high schools, students fully complete their required coursework in two years, rather than the allowed three years. The reason: together with their teachers, they invest the entirety (or most) of their final, third, year of high school in *preparing for the test*, Japanese university entrance examinations.

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