

# THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH: Addressing Frequent Failure

**R**EPORTS ABOUND ON THE PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES OF IMPLEMENTING A communicative approach when teaching English in English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) settings. These settings are the environments in which students have little exposure to English outside the classroom. Some reports attribute the failure of the approach to inadequacies of the teachers themselves. Karavas-Doukas (1996), in her study of 101 local secondary school teachers of English in Greece, concludes that part of the problem stems from the instructors' misunderstanding of the very nature of communicative language teaching (CLT). Thus, she found that even when using textbooks designed for communicative activities, teachers tended to revert to traditional teacher-centered routines. Kumaravadivelu (1993), drawing on teaching experience in India as well as North America, concludes that teacher trainers sometimes simply fail to equip teachers with the skills and techniques they need for implementing CLT in their classrooms.

Often the difficulty is attributed to the EFL environment. Focusing on cultural values that may interfere with CLT in Japan, Stapleton (1995) points out how Confucianism as a belief system is in tension with underlying notions of CLT. For example, Confucianism establishes the superior status and knowledge of the teacher over that of the students, thus elevating the role of the teacher above the students. Similarly, Ellis (1996) raises questions about the basic compatibility of CLT with Vietnamese learners, who have deeply rooted notions about social uses of language. That is, in Vietnam knowing and using the acceptable linguistic forms in interpersonal exchange is highly important. Li (1998), with observations from South Korea, and Leng (1997), reflecting on teaching and learning in China, each report local conditions that are detrimental to CLT methodology. Li observes the scarcity of relevant authentic materials, lack of student prerequisite skills, continued use of traditional examinations, and the absence of new forms of assessment to match CLT priorities. Leng refers to the economic problems that account for overly large classes, teachers' heavy teaching loads and outmoded classroom equipment. She also points out how administrative practices in teacher assessment may even penalize teachers who use communicative techniques in their classes. Thus, it appears that even instructors who are well versed in the theory and fundamentals of communicative language teaching face an uphill battle in EFL settings.

### **Frequent challenges to classroom communication**

In spite of the many challenges to implementing a communicative approach in EFL contexts, there remains a strong rationale for pursuing CLT methodology, especially when instruction envisions learners moving on to use English for further education or career advancement. That is, in EFL settings, most learners outside the classroom lack daily exposure and inclusion in purposeful exchanges in the English medium. These EFL learners are far more dependent upon whatever guided communicative practice they can get in the classroom. It is mainly in the classroom that they can learn, in the words of Larsen-Freeman (2000), "when and how to say what to whom" in English (121). Accordingly, propo-

nents of the CLT approach argue that EFL students are in need of CLT methodology in order to gain facility and confidence in using English. Based on student centeredness, the CLT approach features low profile teacher roles, frequent pair work or small group problem solving, students responding to authentic samples of English, extended exchanges on high interest topics, and the integration of the four basic skills, namely speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The CLT approach discourages extensive teacher-controlled drills, quizzing of memorized material, and extended commentary on forms of English.

In the face of the many adverse conditions that militate against significant and authentic communication among students in EFL classrooms, my own observations in EFL settings have led me to conclude that the most frequent obstacle to CLT is excessive talk on the part of the teacher. This teacher tendency possibly rests upon teachers' own contrary beliefs about how language learning takes place. There may be failure to appreciate the way CLT methodology aims to track the known processes of second language acquisition. Alternatively, excessive teacher talk may simply be the reassertion of old habits that resist change in spite of teacher acknowledgements about the value of CLT activities. Conceivably, lack of preparation time may lead some teachers to fill the class hour with extemporaneous talk about the target language. Whatever the cause, students end up doing less talking. That is, excessive teacher talk hampers the emergence of sustained purposeful student talk.

This is not to deny that the breakdown may indicate a lack of a ready repertoire of CLT techniques, or that classroom conditions are often limiting. I also recognize that some instructors may harbor doubts about their own ability to model the complex sociolinguistics of spoken English. Over time, however, much can be done to alleviate these drawbacks. On the other hand, the teacher talk variable is most immediately accessible to change and clearly under the command of the teacher. I maintain that as teachers self-impose a reasoned and disciplined control of their own talk in the classroom, classroom activities, with a few basic techniques, will move in the direction of meaningful exchange between learners.

### **Case Study on EFL Classrooms**

My recent semester teaching EFL as a Fulbright Scholar at a university in one of the emirates on the Persian Gulf gave me fresh opportunity to investigate the notions and practice of EFL instructors. Here most of the 75 instructors giving English instruction to both male and female Arabic-speaking students were from surrounding countries, most having obtained their highest qualification from Western institutions. I was privileged to be an observer of many of these colleagues' classes and an informal interviewer about my observations. Also, while teaching my own two English classes, I was able to administer questionnaires to my colleagues and a large number of students to gain further insight into local perspectives on teaching and learning English in this EFL context. The questionnaires were exploratory and wide-ranging. They were but one means of exploring local notions and habits regarding teaching and learning English.

The 75 instructors were based in two different divisions of the university. The majority were instructors in the English Teaching Unit that provided approximately 15 hours of English instruction per week to sections of first-year students over a period of two or three semesters. All entering students, except a few that had already obtained a score of 500 on a practice TOEFL exam, had to complete these courses. The classes in the English Teaching Unit were composed of students of similar majors. Textbook materials were chosen for topical relevance for the students planning to study engineering, science, social studies, and business. Other instructors were members of the English Department and taught the courses constituting a major in English. The major consisted of both language and literature, although my in-class observation was limited to the language courses. I personally taught and observed classes in both the Teaching Unit and the English Department.

As reported from other EFL situations, I found even in my own classes an initial pull toward what seemed to be a default position of traditional teacher-fronted, form-focused instruction, with the result being a more passive student role. That is, students' customary reliance upon teacher initiative countered my efforts to make them independent learners. Although the students had had in secondary

schools several years of English lessons from curricula with a distinctly CLT orientation, they seemed restless and distracted in the roles I assigned. Classes I observed, taught by both native and non-native English speakers, while displaying the instructors' able facility in English, largely assumed teacher-centered activity. For example, I witnessed large portions of class time devoted to the instructor's analysis and commentary on students' written errors, extended explanations on usage and vocabulary, and volleys of teacher-initiated exchanges yielding only short responses from students, often in chorus.

Often while observing my colleagues' classes, after every 30 seconds I ticked on a worksheet whether the communication at that instant was coming from the instructor or the students, whether there was silence, or whether other kinds of activities were taking place. Doing this for periods of 30 minutes or more at a time provided an approximation of the amount of class time consumed by instructors' talk versus that of the students. Upon adding up these notations on class activities, I found that, typically, instructors were speaking anywhere from two to five times more often than all their students combined. I also observed that in whole class activities, student utterances more often consisted of just one-, two-, or three-word utterances. Occurrences of extended student discourse of several sentences or more were infrequent except in the case of their asking questions or delivering prepared speeches. In eleven observed classes, each lasting either 60 or 90 minutes, eight classes gave a portion of the time to group activity. The group activity in five of these cases averaged just 5 minutes; other classes devoted 12, 20, and 35 minutes to group work. Spontaneous student communication dramatically rose when class activity shifted to these small groups—albeit, not always in the target language.

### **Exploring instructor beliefs**

In an effort to uncover some of the instructors' operating beliefs, I administered a questionnaire to which instructors responded anonymously. The questionnaire consisted of 24 statements about beliefs and practices followed by Likert scales to elicit respondents' level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. The questionnaire was distributed

to 75 instructors of English, nearly all of whom had at least a Master's degree in English, education, or applied linguistics. Of the 41 who completed and returned the questionnaire, 20 identified themselves as native speakers of Arabic, 14 as native speakers of English, and 7 chose not to specify their first language. Of the 41 respondents, 30 taught in the Teaching Unit, and 11 worked for the English Department. On average, these 41 instructors had taught at the university for nearly 6 years.

Responses to two questionnaire items directly pertain to the instructor's understanding of their classroom role. First, instructors were asked to respond to the statement, "Generally, instructors must correct most errors students make in speaking and writing so that the errors do not become a permanent habit." In response, 9 chose "I strongly agree," 15 "I tend to agree," 14 "I tend to disagree," 2 "I strongly disagree," and 1 claimed to be uncertain. Thus, 24, or 59%, indicated they agreed to some extent that they must correct most student errors. Second, the instructors expressed their level of agreement with the statement, "In first-year courses, an English language instructor should devote most of the class time to giving explanations, examples, and error correction." Here, 5 chose "I strongly agree," 9 selected "I tend to agree," 19 indicated "I tend to disagree," and 5 answered "I strongly disagree." The other 3 respondents indicated they were uncertain. Therefore, on this item, 14, or 34%, revealed that they believed they must use most of the class time for giving explanations, examples, and correction. Ten of the 24 who indicated they ought to correct most of their students' errors were among the 14 who saw their role as that of giving explanations, examples, and error correction. One other questionnaire item explored the instructors' use of group work in their lessons. The statement was as follows: "Most of the lessons I teach for enhancing students' English language proficiency include at least a 10-minute period of paired or sub-group activities led by the students themselves." Just 15 of the 41 responding instructors claimed that this was their own practice.

That 59% and 34% of the 41 respondents admittedly hold positions on their classroom roles that translate into extensive teacher talk is consistent with the teacher-centeredness I observed in the classrooms. In fact, the most

common class activities I observed were reinforcement of textbook explanations and analysis of student errors. Regarding teachers' focus on student errors, Stevick (1996, 155, 200) concludes from past studies, that constant correction inhibits students and constrains both the content and forms of students' expression. In summarizing a concern of Silent Way proponents, Stevick writes "the more the teacher talks and explains, the less internal work the learner is likely to do" (221). In my study I suspected the scarcity of authentic communication among learners in the classrooms stemmed in part from instructors' beliefs about handling student mistakes.

One can conclude that teacher talk, a variable obviously subject to teacher control, and the beliefs that sustain this activity, are the primary variables to focus on in helping teachers implement CLT methodology in their classrooms. Unquestionably, teacher talk is essential for initiating learning activities, setting standards, assessing performances, and providing some forms of feedback. Instructors, however, too often seem compelled to promote learning by their own extended talk. One can only guess the extent to which this variable of teacher talk limits the realization of authentic communication among students in the classrooms.

### **The students' perception**

Data from a similar questionnaire administered to students in the same context were even more decisive. A total of 181 Arabic-speaking students, mostly in their first year at the university, were administered another Likert-scale questionnaire on perspectives and habits in language learning. One statement of immediate relevance was as follows: "If English instructors do not correct most of the errors students make in speaking and writing, the students will not make much progress in English." In response, 86 students indicated that they strongly agreed; 50 responded that they tended to agree; just 12 indicated a tendency toward disagreement; and 8 replied that they strongly disagreed. The other 25 claimed not to know. Thus, 136 of 181, or 75% of these students, appear to believe that their teachers ought to regularly correct most of their mistakes. Interestingly, there was a striking statistical difference ( $p < .0005$ ) between males and females in the replies to this item with 87.5%

of the 104 women agreeing with the statement, versus just 58.4% of the 77 male students. Whatever the reason for that difference, a clear majority of these students believe it is the duty of the instructor to identify and correct most of their errors. With many instructors inclined to think similarly, the shared perspective perpetuates an atmosphere in which the instructor is the dominant speaker. So, on the one hand, the questionnaire revealed a major obstacle to meaningful communication in the classroom.

On the other hand, the questionnaire uncovered the fact that the majority of participating students had a positive view of grouped activity in the classroom. In response to the statement, "It is usually a waste of time to be put in small groups to do group assignments during class," 103 of the 181 students disagreed, 48 agreed, and 30 indicated they did not know. Also, in response to the statement, "Small group work in class with classmates (e.g., for 20 or 30 minutes at a time) is usually a good use of class time for improving my English," 128 of the 178 respondents agreed, 27 disagreed, and 23 said they did not know. Clearly, most students viewed small group work with little involvement of their instructor as a beneficial experience.

### **Suggested response**

The reported observations and questionnaire data suggest a need for teachers to reflect on their own past second-language learning and that of their own second-language learners. Teachers must strive to sift through the many claims they have encountered about language learning and determine what in fact they themselves hold to be most descriptive of the process. As Pajares (1992) points out, it is beliefs more than mere knowledge or awareness that establish the roles teachers assume in the classroom. Teacher *acknowledgements* about CLT are not necessarily what inform their classroom behavior. Rather, their classroom conduct rests on their *beliefs*. Once teachers identify their operating beliefs about how a second language is learned, they can compare those formulations with prevailing theory on the matter.

One widely shared portrayal of second language acquisition for teachers to consider is often referred to as learner interlanguage. This refers to the learner's imperfect but evolving

representation of the target language at any point in the acquisition journey. Brown (2000) summarizes this acquisition process as "the creative construction of a system in which learners are consciously testing hypotheses about the target language from a number of possible sources of knowledge..." (215). What teachers say in class about the target language or about mistakes is only one of the sources and not necessarily the most important one. Brown further explains, "By a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, learners slowly and tediously succeed in establishing closer and closer approximations to the system used by native speakers..." (215). This trial and error process, according to the theory, pertains to all aspects of second language mastery, that is, the phonology, syntax, lexis, and social conventions of language use. Thus, while there remains a place for formal linguistic explanation and correction on the part of the teacher, the CLT approach assumes that a student's interlanguage development is benefited most by uninterrupted trial and error, along with attentiveness to the responses of interlocutors. It is through all of these acts of communication and feedback in the target language that students gain facility in the language. Inevitably, students will exhibit shortcomings, ups and downs, unpredictable sensitivity to contexts, and only gradual improvement on the road to mastery. It is, however, this experience with the target language that ensures progress.

Teachers inclined to talk excessively in the classroom may benefit from in-service training to facilitate their introspection and experimentation and to reorient their beliefs. However, as Pajares (1992) points out, some teachers are more inclined to question and alter their beliefs in the face of firsthand classroom evidence rather than in response to secondhand acquisition theory given them by trainers. For such teachers, having them experiment with basic CLT techniques and urging them to reduce their teacher talk and observe the resulting student performance might help them reconsider their beliefs about how students learn.

In-service training can also broaden teachers' repertoire of techniques for furthering in-class communication between students, and it can help teachers explore how some ESL/EFL textbooks can be adapted to serve as a springboard for communicative activities. With less



proficient learners, for example, teachers can explore ways to use magazine pictures, personal photographs, cancelled postage stamps, and even road signs, bumper stickers, and advertisements for communicative purposes. At the intermediate level, as in my own classes, teachers can have students explain some frequently misunderstood aspects of their culture. Or, they can have students report on both the process and findings of assigned internet searches. They can have students brainstorm controversial topics for class discussion and prepare pro or con positions as part of moderated panels. They can have students prepare two-minute oral news reports from notes on assigned topics and reply to their classmates' questions. Teachers can have small groups of students formulate solutions to real local social problems and present their ideas to classmates in writing or orally. Teachers working with advanced students can challenge them to draw upon their own experience and specialties to teach each other. With all these activities, the teacher's role is to select or design appropriate classroom tasks that contain relevant topics and to serve as a resource as needed.

A final area of in-service assistance to teachers who wish to move closer to a communicative approach is to have them consider ways to reorient their students as to the roles they and their teachers should assume in the classroom. Results of the student questionnaire indicate that most students are fond of small group activities in the classroom and feel they are beneficial. However, as reported earlier, some students may view a good teacher as one who constantly corrects the spoken and written errors of students. Thus, as Deckert (1987) points out, teachers face the challenge of helping students adjust their expectations about who does what in the classroom. This negotiation between teacher and students promises a high level of classroom interaction in its own right.

In conclusion, CLT in EFL settings need not be elusive; teachers can take the first critical step toward raising the level of authentic classroom communication by sharply reducing the amount of talking they do. To take this step, however, presupposes the belief on their part that real communication promises a greater payoff than extensive teacher commentary and frequent corrective intervention. The teacher, of course, needs to acquire facility for

adapting textbooks, creating communicative tasks, and providing selective, useful feedback to students on their performances. Granted, the reorientation may come slowly as students overcome old expectations and new insecurities and as entire programs accommodate to the changes being made in the classroom. During this process of gradual pedagogical and curricular change, however, teachers can find encouragement in knowing they are not expected to attain some ideal CLT standard. Lesson by lesson, activity by activity, teachers can gradually increase the degree of meaningful interaction between their students. What English teachers need, however, is administrative assurance that their less dominant role in the classroom is not a sign of negligence or loss of control, but rather a sign of informed belief that students learn best by using language for purposeful communication.

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