

Teodor HREHOVČÍK

SECONDARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

The present paper is based on the surveys carried out within two diploma theses submitted and defended at WSP in 1998. One of them was entitled Secondary In-Service Teachers and the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching written by Monika Oziębło, and the other named Methods and Techniques of Teaching Language Functions by Krzysztof Jucha. Both papers were written as sole dissertations under my supervision and, among other objectives, were aiming at collecting information on how teachers of English working at secondary schools in the Rzeszów area perceived and applied the principles of a communicative approach.

The main research method used were questionnaires for teachers and students. Their role was to compare the selected principles of a communicative language teaching with a real situation at schools confirmed by the respondents. The hypothesis behind the probe was that in-service teachers of English in Polish schools declare in vast majority the use of a communicative approach to language teaching in their everyday work but in reality they are not familiar with what communicative language teaching defined in theoretical sources is. They are convinced that when they teach language for communication they also follow the principles of a communicative approach.

The responses to the set of questionnaire items formulated in accordance with the acknowledged principles of the approach proved the above hypothesis to a significant extent. The results were also proved and cross-checked by students' answers.

Introduction

The term *Communicative Language Teaching* became fashionable and frequently used in the theory of foreign language teaching from the mid-1970s and beginning of 1980s. It was at about the time when sociolinguists began writing about the importance of *semantics* and of a *theory of communication*. They claimed that attention to semantics gave the learner a variety of behavioural, linguistic, and paralinguistic alternatives to convey a message. In addition, communicative theory put emphasis on the fact that every speech act

takes place in a specific social situation, and that the partners of communication have their specific sociological background. In consequence, this sociological situation is then reflected in the selection of formal or informal language, and the selection of lexical and grammatical units. Thus, the objective of this new approach to foreign language teaching has become the development of communicative competence. The syllabus underlying this concept has been named a *notional or notional functional syllabus*, and the term *language functions* has become one of the key elements.

In recent years, there has been a dynamic development in theoretical thinking and practical application of the above ideas in many, especially European countries. Basic terminology has been accurately defined, and the new approach has adopted features of a teaching method. Practising language teachers began to speak about communicative language teaching as about something very up-to-date. The word “*communicative*” especially caused a strong inclination to associate it with the primary function of language being a tool of communication. Without knowing at least the most important characteristics of communicative teaching, a great number of in-service foreign language teachers claim that the way how they teach a language is communicative. In order to prove this hypothesis, two small-scale surveys have been carried out in a Polish environment.

Survey I

A check-list for secondary school English teachers has been designed with the aim to find out what teachers think the communicative approach is, how they perceive it, and how they follow its characteristics in their classes.

The questions contained in the questionnaire were carefully formulated respecting the main principles of communicative language teaching as defined in theoretical sources (e.g. Littlewood 1981). Fifty in-service teachers were asked the below set of questions. The words in *italics* indicate the principle the designer had in mind when formulating the check-list items. In order to provide a transparent overview of the results, each questionnaire item is extended by the results achieved.

1. Do you think that you use *authentic language* (i.e. language that is used in a real context) during the lesson?

Yes: 84 % *No: 6 %* *To some extent: 10%*

2. Do you implement *interaction activities* (activities aiming at communicating with one another) with your students?

Yes: 40 % *No: 10 %* ***To some extent: 50%***

3. Do you introduce activities presenting the *social context* of the communicative event?
Yes: 14 % No: 78 % To some extent: 8%
4. Do you follow the concept of *meaningful language practice* (i.e. practice involving relating language to a situation)?
Yes: 50 % No: 10 % To some extent: 40%
5. Do you act as an *advisor* (offering advice and answering questions) during communicative activities?
Yes: 80 % No: 4 % To some extent: 16%
6. Do you choose topics and vocabulary that are *relevant* to the students' interests?
Yes: 6 % No: 84 % To some extent: 10%
7. Do you create a proper *atmosphere* and establish situations likely to promote communication?
Yes: 50 % No: 0 % To some extent: 50%
8. Do you provide *feedback* to the learners after each activity (telling them how successful their performance has been)?
Yes: 60 % No: 28 % To some extent: 22%
9. Do you use *one word dialogues* (giving possibility to communicate even with a limited vocabulary)?
Yes: 84 % No: 6 % To some extent: 10%
10. Do the students have an opportunity to *express their ideas and opinions in the target language* ?
Yes: 8 % No: 86 % To some extent: 6%
11. Do your students *work in pairs or in small groups* to maximise the amount of communicative practice?
Yes: 8 % No: 82 % To some extent: 10%
12. Do the students dare to make *free utterances* even though they are uncertain whether these are correct or not?
Yes: 10 % No: 60 % To some extent: 30%

13. Do the students try to express their *problems and feelings in the target language* in spite of language difficulties?
Yes: 4 % No: 90 % To some extent: 6 %
14. Are the *materials* likely to interest, challenge and personally involve the learners?
Yes: 26 % No: 4 % To some extent: 70 %
15. Are the *objectives primarily communicative*?
Yes: 18 % No: 64 % To some extent: 18 %
16. Do the materials provide *good models of authentic and natural language use*, i.e. are the meaning, form and use coherently related in context?
Yes: 16 % No: 70 % To some extent: 14 %

In an effort to draw a picture of the current situation in schools, based on the results of the probe, the above-listed responses have been summed up and defined under the two major headings: (1) the areas where the teachers' practice seems to be in significant *contradiction* with the requirements of communicative language teaching, and (2) the areas where school practice is in *conformity* with the requirements of the present-day teaching methods.

- 1) The analysis of the answers falling into the "No" group shows that there are three questionnaire items with highly negative responses which have one common feature, i.e. they deal with the behaviour of the learners in the classroom, namely (a) the students do not use the target language for communicating their feelings and problems (item 14), (b) they do not express their ideas and opinions in that language (item 10), which may be explained by the fact that (c) they do not use the target language when they are uncertain about the correctness of their utterances (item 12). This finding clearly indicates that there is still a large gap between a (prescribed) language practice and the actual use of the foreign language in class. The target language is not used for responding to "different types of speech acts" (Richards, 1992:63), but rather for fulfilling artificial didactic tasks. Such a conclusion may be supported by the other responses of the interviewed teachers, which also provide some explanation of possible reasons. The teachers claim that the materials they use in class do not provide good models of authentic and natural language use (item 16), that they are only partly relevant to the learners' interests (item 14), and, which is even worse, the teachers themselves do not choose topics and vocabulary that are relevant to the students' interests (item 6). The students are not used to working in pairs or small groups (item 11), which consequently, excludes any opportunity to present the social context of

the communicative event (item 3). It is then not surprising that the objectives of language teaching are not primarily communicative (item 15).

- 2) The positive responses of the teachers show that they are aware of the general didactic principles and that they themselves prefer authentic language during the lesson (item 1), that they partly relate this language to a situation (item 4), and that they provide possibilities to communicate even with a limited vocabulary (item 9). They offer advice and answer questions during communicative activities (item 5), and occasionally provide feedback to the learners about their performances (item 8). They are also aware (to a certain extent) of the importance of creating a proper atmosphere in the classroom (item 7), and of the importance of interaction activities (item 2).

According to the responses of the given questionnaire, the majority (42,6 %) of the interviewed secondary school English teachers in the Rzeszów area do not follow the principles of communicative teaching (consciously or subconsciously), 34,7 % of the respondents are inclined to use communicative methods, and 22,7 % only to a certain extent.

Survey II

The focus in this survey is primarily on teaching language functions and the methods that should lead to achieving communicative competence in learners. Through a set of questions for teachers and (as a cross-check) for learners, the situation in selected Polish grammar schools was examined. Altogether 100 questionnaires were filled in by students and 20 by teachers. The questions formulated for teachers and learners correlate in their content, but those intended for the learners are more explicit in form.

The questionnaire for teachers (Based on Richards 1992:65)

1. Do you think that the *grammar and vocabulary* you teach your learners can help them to communicate easily in a target language?
Yes: 80 % **No: 5 %** **To some extent: 15 %**
2. Do you teach your learners how to begin and end *conversation*?
Yes: 90 % **No: 0 %** **To some extent: 10 %**
3. Do you teach how to use and respond to different types of *speech acts*, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations?
Yes: 50 % **No: 15 %** **To some extent: 35 %**

4. Do you instruct your learners how to use *language appropriately*, i.e. how to behave towards a speaker whose role has a higher status as a teacher or policeman?
Yes: 15 % No: 60 % To some extent: 35 %
5. Do you teach what to talk about and how to talk to different people in a different *situation in speech event*, e.g. which address form should be used?
Yes: 100 % No: 0 % To some extent: 0 %
6. Do you teach what *intonation* should be used for a particular occasion?
Yes: 10 % No: 60 % To some extent: 30 %

The questionnaire for learners

1. Do you think the *grammar and vocabulary* you possess can allow you to communicate easily in a target language?
Yes: 20 % No: 5 % To some extent: 75 %

2. Do you know how to begin and end conversation?
Yes: 43 % No: 15 % To some extent: 42 %

For example, how to say goodbye to a friend you will see again soon?

Goodbye. It was nice talking to you.

See you later. 86%

How would you welcome somebody who was introduced to you for the first time in your life?

Hello, pleased to meet you.

Hi, how are things going? 83%

3. Do you know how to use and respond to different types of *speech acts* such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations?
Yes: 40 % No: 16 % To some extent: 44 %

For example, how would you ask somebody to do something for you?

Do you want to help me?

Can I ask you for a favour? 52%

4. Do you know to use *language appropriately*, i.e. how to behave towards a speaker whose role has a higher status?
Yes: 20 % No: 27 % To some extent: 53 %

For example, how would you thank a teacher for help with homework?
 Thank you very much. It was very kind of you. **57%**
 Thanks a lot for your help.

5. Do you know what to talk about and how to talk to different people in a different *situation in speech event*?
Yes: 42 % **No: 18 %** **To some extent: 40 %**

For example, which form should be used to address an older neighbour of yours named Mark Brown?

Mr. Brown **90%**
 Brown
 Mark
 Sir Brown

Do you know what *intonation* should be used for a particular occasion?
Yes: 30 % **No: 25 %** **To some extent: 45 %**

For example, which intonation would you use when you are conveying information that is completely new to a speaker?
 rising
 falling **28%**
 static.

In analysing the responses in the two inquires, interesting, and, in some respect, surprising results have been achieved.

Question 1 The results have revealed a big discrepancy between the opinions of teachers and learners. While only 20 % of the students are confident in their *grammar and vocabulary* for communication purposes, as many as 80 % of the teachers think that their learners should be able to communicate in a target language with the grammar and vocabulary they possess.

Question 2 A better correlation between the responses of the teachers and the students is seen in their opinions on *conversational skills*. 90 % of the teachers claim that they teach their students how to begin and end conversation, 43 % of the students admit that they know that technique, and 42 % partly. This finding has been confirmed in the attached exercise on the practical application of this skill (86% – 83%).

- Question 3** The responses of the teachers to the question that is fundamental for teaching language communicatively are disappointing, but at the same time they are in accordance with the results of Survey 1. The fact that only 50 % of respondents teach their learners how to use and respond to different types of *speech acts* is then reflected in the students answers. Only 40 % of the students feel fully competent in using language for expressing requests, apologies, thanks, invitations, etc., and 44 % to some extent. This finding is documented in the results of the exercise (52 %).
- Question 4** As many as 60 % of the teachers admit that they do not instruct their students on how to use language in different *social situations*. In Survey 1, it was 78 % of the respondents who never “introduced activities presenting the social context of the communicative event”. Surprisingly enough, 53 % of the students claim that they have *some* knowledge about how to behave towards a speaker whose role has a higher social status. The same was confirmed in the attached exercise (57 %). The fact that only 3 teachers out of 20 pay some attention to the sociolinguistic aspect of language teaching should also be a warning signal.
- Question 5** Although the former finding sounds discouraging, one important sociological phenomenon turned out to be positive. All teachers (100 %) claim that they teach *forms of addressing people* to their students, and the students feel competent in that respect (42 %), or partly competent (40 %). The attached exercise was successfully answered by 90 % of the students.
- Question 6** The position of teachers in relation to the teaching of *intonation* is worth a special study and research. The fact that only 2 teachers out of 20 (10 %) teach what intonation should be used for a particular occasion deserves special attention. 60 % of the respondents do not deal with intonation at all, and 30 % to some extent. Only 30 % of the students’ answers were positive, and 45 % of them partly positive. The 28 % correct answers in the attached exercise correspond to the former figure.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Survey 1 results has shown that the typical principles of communicative language teaching, as defined in theoretical sources, are not implemented by secondary school English teachers in the schools taking part in the probe. The teachers observe general didactic rules but tend to non-communicative patterns of interaction, to traditional foreign language teaching methods. The same conclusion may be derived after the analysis of Survey 2 dealing with more specific elements of a communicative approach. A deficiency in teaching speech acts (language functions), sociolinguistic aspects of language usage, and the neglect of teaching intonation patterns provide sufficient evidence to document the above finding.

Although the data received in this study are far from being representative, they appear to conform to a few similar investigations carried out in different environment. “These studies demonstrate the importance of validation theory against what actually happens in the classroom” (Nunan 1987:136).

The reasons behind the current situation and an eventual remedy are not in the focus of this paper and deserve a special classroom-based research, an empirical investigation rather than theoretical speculation.

References

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