Overcoming Common Problems Related to Communicative Methodology

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Introduction

English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) teachers are often faced with the challenging tasks of making our classes meaningful, practical and, yes, even fun for our students. In planning course curriculum for the year, it can be exciting to modify past curriculum or experiment with a new plan that can make teaching easier or more interesting for all. Unfortunately, there are recurring problems that need consideration and planning to overcome potential pitfalls to realizing our curriculums full potential. In this paper, six problematic areas in the Japanese university EFL classroom context are identified and a few suggestions offered to combat these weaknesses. Although there are more areas of concern than the six discussed here, these are believed to be the most critical to the success of the course.

Provide Adequate Feedback

Today's communicative methodology is learner-centered and emphasizes fluency over accuracy. Although fluency is much needed, it does, however, create a problem of providing enough concrete feedback for learners to correct their mistakes and keep focused on the immediate classroom task(s) at hand. Students often do not receive enough feedback as to how they are doing throughout the course. This results in loss of motivation and interest. Despite what students may say, they prefer and expect to receive some kind of concrete feedback as to how they are progressing in the course. Feedback can be the traditional test or weekly quiz but students can also benefit from "real time" feedback which requires them, for instance, to write their answers on the blackboard or collaborate with a partner. In sum, learners need a constant stream of feedback big or small that can keep them motivated and learning as opposed to a assessing them with a single final semester test.

Clarify Goals

Another weakness of a solely communicative approach is that it is a collection of principles that are loosely bundled together (Van Lier 1988:72) offering the learner little or no direction. Some teachers give a class syllabus on the first day that seldom gets used. Students can benefit more if they know specifically on a class-by-class basis what language they trying to practice and in what context. Rather than practice language for the sake of language, learners can be kept motivated and interested if, for example, they know that they will be practicing the past perfect or within a specific context such as language used in a hotel. The teacher can even write the lesson goal on the blackboard on a daily basis. All of this kind localized goal setting is more explicit and lets students know what they are expected to do. In sum, it is useful to set small achievable goals on a daily basis and make learners aware of how they are to accomplish these goals.

Have Consistency in Teaching Style

Communicative methodology is great for requiring our students to produce language albeit in a somewhat loose fashion. But, it also creates a division in teaching style. At some stages, we are expected to be strict about certain aspects such as regular attendance and punctuality. On the other hand, we often have to assume the role of friend-coach to make our learners feel compelled to speak

and not be afraid of making mistakes. This creates a stark contrast between the teacher who can fail and the teacher that wishes to encourage speaking and, necessarily, making mistakes. Learners may feel betrayed if they score poorly on a test but do well in classroom tasks. As second or foreign language teachers, it is crucial that we maintain awareness of our "style" of teaching. It often helps to observe a colleague's class or have a trusted colleague observe your own. You may find some useful insights into your own lessons. For instance, I once had a colleague observe my own class, and he observed that I occasionally changed my English grammar to a Japanese grammar style, "On the blackboard, write your answers please." This usage was inconsistent with the goals of the course. It may feel uncomfortable to be critiqued or observed. However, if we do not become more aware of our teaching style and inconsistencies, we will have difficulty in continuing to grow professionally.

Lessons Need a Routine or Framework

There is a fine line between in communicative methodology between giving students too much responsibility to speak freely in class and not enough. The communicative approach in its pure form advocates making students speak as much as possible. However, language is also a routine and learners need a framework in which they can feel comfortable in taking that risk to speak out in front of others. A useful framework often presented by many teacher trainers is:

- Warm-up
- Presentation
- Controlled practice
- Free practice
- Feedback

Many current EFL textbooks adopt this kind of curricula. Below is an example how each phase can be done in a 90 minute lesson.

Topic: Hotel reservations
Language functions: making reservations, asking, expressing opinion

- *Warm-up:* The teacher asks students (in pairs) to think of 3 "hotel words" such as lobby or front desk and write them on the blackboard. The teacher then goes over each word explaining any difficult points and just trying to frame the context.
- *Presentation:* Learners listen to a short dialogue between a hotel clerk and customer. Then, they repeat it with the teacher aloud to raise awareness and practice pronunciation
- *Controlled practice:* Students practice the same conversation above substituting some words if they wish. After 10 minutes, learners close their books and can volunteer to perform the memorized dialogue. With books still closed, the teacher plays the same dialogue from the tape again allowing learners to gain additional confidence.
- *Free practice:* The teacher gives a hotel information gap exercise to each pair. Students are now required to freely practice the same language and are sufficiently empowered to do so.
- *Feedback:* The teacher goes over any problematic phrases, pronunciation difficulties or even acts out the drama with the students by changing the dialogue in "real time".

Have Cultural Awareness

We know that culture plays an important role in the day-to-day classroom activities. It is important for the teacher to recognize potential negative culturally based perceptions of their learners and vice versa. In Japan, for instance, it is not uncommon to be met with silent expressionless students. It is possible for the novice instructor to interpret this negatively as a lack of interest. This is a cultural interpretation that may play a detrimental role in classroom methodology. Silence is a cultural value that is relative to Western and Japanese cultures. Humor, teasing and silence are also highly diverse culturally so the teacher must be self-aware when using humor or teasing to induce students to perform or simply react. An instructor does not necessarily have to be interculturally competent to be an effective teacher however. It may be more effective if

the instructor adopts a consistent style of instruction to allow learners to adapt within the bounds of their own personalities without being coerced to behave outside their own cultural values.

Be Clear About Student-Teacher Relationship

ESL teachers are often faced with choosing the kind of relationship they wish to establish with their students. Some prefer a strict division between the student-teacher relationship while others prefer a friend-coach relationship. Communicative methodology encourages the latter. Many students misinterpret this as tacit approval to pursue undesirable behavior such as cutting class or turning in late homework. To avoid this, it is important to clearly express not only the course requirements but one's own personal philosophy to assessing learners. For instance, students need to know from the first class that you will not accept late homework assignments or poor attendance, but that they will be allowed to make up tests and quizzes. By explicitly stressing this kind of seemingly trivial information, the teacher can save a lot of valuable class time and create a more productive atmosphere.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by being consistent, explicit and offering immediate feedback, there are fewer opportunities for learners to consistently misinterpret the goals of a course curriculum. While a communicative methodology is an excellent tool for increasing fluency, used exclusively, it also creates recurring problems that need to be addressed and counterbalanced with different methodology. Overcoming these common recurring problems that plague our courses can free the instructor to become more creative while allowing learners to become more competent in the target language.

Reference

- Van Lier, L. (1988). The Classroom and the Language Learner. Longman: New York.