

TEACHING THE COMMUNICATIONAL SYLLABUS: THE LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH

Marie-Noelle Ting

The aims of the Communicational Syllabus for Forms IV and V may be briefly stated as: preparing school children to speak and respond, that is to interact, appropriately in the target language at the appropriate time in given, real-life situations. It seems therefore, fairly safe to say that it is a clearly **learner-centred syllabus**, a syllabus in which the learner's ability to draw on his own resources is emphasized. In other words, children who have completed their Form V course should emerge as self-reliant and confident users of the English language in their life outside the classroom.

However, many teachers whose task it is to fulfil the aims of the Communicational Syllabus tend to adopt a **teacher-centred approach**. Many admit to talking a lot, if not too much, in the classroom; others complain of their pupils' unwillingness to express themselves at all, thereby justifying their own eagerness to dominate activities in the classroom; others remark that their pupils generally speak incorrect English and they despair of ever achieving the aims of the syllabus: "There cannot be practice in real-life communication," they say, "as long as our pupils have such a poor command of English grammar."

The purpose of this paper is twofold — to dispel some of the prejudices and misconceptions which are at the root of much concern and anxiety among teachers, as well as to suggest some approaches to the Communicational Syllabus which could render the language teaching operation considerably more satisfying for both teacher and pupil. We will call this approach the **learner-centred approach**. It is presented here in the form of a set of maxims which, it is hoped, will assist all teachers, and especially Upper Secondary School teachers, in their perhaps arduous, but certainly challenging task.

1. **Know your pupils**

Teachers should at all times give a live example of what communication and spoken interaction are. It is, for this reason, essential that teachers know their pupils — their hopes and aspirations, their family background and their general interests.

2. **Bring the outside world into the classroom**

This means, in the first instance, that classroom activities should at all times remain meaningful to teenage learners whose interests tend to centre on current television programmes, music, and the latest favourite actors, rather than on the cost of living, for example. At the same time it seems necessary to devise classroom activities which arouse in the children some awareness of, and some interest in, the world at large. After all, English is, nowadays, an international language and a powerful medium for the dissemination of information in all fields of knowledge. A large number of good quality magazines, which are distributed world-wide, are easily available here. In addition, several English newspapers are published locally. Should pupils be guided to look for, and to acquire information in such publications, they would develop their general knowledge while carrying out language learning activities.

Below is a description of some activities which apply the two precepts just discussed. Each is related to a specific unit of the Communicational Syllabus.

Suggested Activity I

Area Ten: Comments or questions for gleaning further information

The first situation outlined in Area Ten of the Syllabus reads as follows:

You are a reporter with a local newspaper. A celebrity has arrived in Kuala Lumpur and has agreed to give a press conference. He gives a talk about himself and his career. Write questions based on what he says so that you can later ask them to get further information.

In the classroom this task makes heavy demands on the learner, namely:—

- (a) that, as a teenager, he project himself into the rather gloomy future, and see himself as a reporter in a press conference;
- (b) that he imagine what a celebrity has said.

The learner has to meet these demands **before** the classroom activity can really start, because the aim of the activity is in fact to get the learner to prepare questions which he is supposed to ask later. For a single individual, the burden is truly enormous. With a little adjustment, however, the above quoted situation can be turned into a **meaningful activity**, which is workable in the classroom. A step by step description of this activity is presented below:

- Step 1 The teacher stimulates the pupils to agree on the selection of **one** celebrity whom they would like to interview very much. The teacher's task is to arouse pupils' interest in the activity, that is, to motivate them by making it evident that they are really encouraged to talk about something which matters to them.
- Step 2 The class is organised into groups of four pupils each.
- Step 3 Members of one of the groups are asked to play the part of **the celebrity** whom the other groups will be interviewing.
- Step 4 The groups in turn will ask the celebrity questions. Similarly, the members of the celebrity group (the interviewees) will take turns to answer questions.
- Step 5 The activity is carried out. The role of the teacher here is to guide pupils as to the content of the questions to be asked so that the language aims of the lesson are achieved. This should go fairly smoothly. Having chosen **their** celebrity, the pupils should not be lost for ideas. Besides, the teacher can intervene at the right moment to give the desired turn to the interview. It must be emphasized though, that the teacher should influence, but not dominate, the course of events.

Suggested Activity II

Area 16: Gleaning of information from various sources and presentation of the information gathered, in an organized way.

This activity requires students to have at their disposal copies of various magazines published in English and currently available in this country (for example, Time, Newsweek, Asiaweek, The Far Eastern Economic Review). These magazines should be fairly recent, or at any rate issued over a definite period of time, for example, the past three to six months.

- Step 1 The teacher comes into the classroom with copies of the magazines in question and announces her intention to carry out a project on "Gleaning information from given magazines on certain topics to be agreed upon in class." The teacher gives a variety of topics from which the pupils must choose. Topics such as Education, Medicine, Cancer Research, Atomic Energy, Sport, Fashion, Housing, Living Conditions, are recommended. The teacher should then describe the procedure of the activity.
- Step 2 The class is divided into groups of four pupils each. Each group is assigned one particular topic of research
- Step 3 The magazines are distributed and each group starts on its research. The members collect and select relevant information from the printed matter they have in hand. A fair amount of free discussion should take place at this stage as members of the group may not agree on the selection. Students should be left to interact freely if the discussion does in fact revolve around the topic.
- Step 4 When the teacher considers that sufficient information has been collected, groups are asked to prepare a report on the information they have gathered on their particular topic.
- Step 5 A representative from each group is asked to orally present the report prepared by the members of his team.

Because this activity involves project work, it must be carried out over several periods. It is a motivating activity and is very workable in the classroom as it assigns learners a specific and simple task with the props of the written word. At the same time, it forces them to read as well as to interact with one another. It induces them to really communicate with one another as the purpose of their free discussion is to close any 'opinion gap' that may exist between members of a group. Finally, it does ensure maximum and meaningful participation in the lesson, a point on which it is now time to expand.

3. Aim for maximum learner participation in the classroom

With a little judicious management by the teacher, all learners, even in large classes, can be given a task to perform and thus take an active part in learning activities rather than sit, listen and dream. Both of the activities mentioned above illustrate what classroom management involves. In both cases it is recommended that the class be organized in groups. In **Activity I** the lesson develops as class work; that is, the groups do not really work independently. Group division, however, permits an orderly distribution of duties and tasks. **Activity II**, on the other hand, is an example of group work in the stricter sense of the term. In this case, each group of pupils is assigned a task which they have to perform on their own. The role of the teacher is that of an adviser who goes from group to group. The workability of this method, however, depends largely on the nature of the task given. It is essential that some visual stimulus be given such as cards, printed text, maps. At the same time, the task should lead to some well-defined activity such as reading.

Simple and short activities can be carried out in group work, too. The Seven-Family Game is an example. It is played by a group of four who have to ask each other questions for the specific purpose of collecting cards. Another example is drawing figures according to certain directions. In this case, the leader of the group receives from the teacher a card on which instructions are given. He reads them to the members of his team who draw accordingly.

We must not forget also that while group work is an excellent way of stimulating interaction among learners, the teacher herself who acts as a guide, going from group to group, may interact very effectively with the pupils.

4. Be faithful to your aims of developing "Communicative Ability" in learners

Many anxious teachers must be asking themselves, "What do we do with mistakes then?" Such teachers assume, quite rightly, that activities in which learners work independently, under the **relaxed control** of the teacher, are a passport to errors. It cannot be denied that learners do make mistakes when they are given a chance to practise using the target language. After all, learners who do not make mistakes are not really learners any more, are they? At the same time it is agreed that group work is not the right kind of classroom activity for the correction of errors when the teaching aim is **communication practice**. On the one hand, it is the teacher's responsibility to train pupils to speak correct English; on the other hand, to use the language in real-life situations. This does not necessarily mean that both duties must be carried out simultaneously. It is suggested that at times when communication activities are being carried out the correction of errors should be de-emphasized. Errors may be attended to at some other time and with some other suitably designed activity. In this way, not only will learners be given the opportunity to practise using the language, but they will gradually free themselves of the paralyzing fear of making mistakes. So, let them express themselves freely, but do observe them, and do reserve time for remedial work.

To reiterate, with the **learner-centred approach**, teaching the Communicational Syllabus involves training pupils to become self-reliant users of the English language while adopting a fresh view of the teacher's role in the classroom — the subtle and deeply influential role of guide and adviser.