The Communicative Classroom: Some Observations on Roles and Tasks[1]

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Según Richards y Lockart, "El rol del profesor dentro del contexto de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje en una clase también puede ser influenciado por el acercamiento o la metodología que sigue el profesor" (1994:101). Por consiguiente, se puede esperar que los roles del profesor (y del estudiante) hayan cambiado durante los últimos veinticinco años, dada la evolución de un acercamiento audiolingual a un énfasis comunicativo en la clase. La preocupación por el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa debiera haber resultado en el abandono del papel autoritario del profesor. Al mismo tiempo esta preocupación debiera haber creado roles más activos para los estudiantes. Una revisión de la literatura ofrece algunas observaciones sobre la naturaleza de estos roles en la era comunicativa y apoya el uso de ciertas actividades que ayudan a reformar dichos roles. Las observaciones ofrecidas sirven para provocar una reflexión acerca de nuestras costumbres pedagógicas dentro de un marco comunicativo.

According to Richards and Lockhart, "The role of a teacher in the context of classroom teaching and learning may also be influenced by the approach or methodology the teacher is following." (1994:101). As such, one would anticipate a redefining of instructor (and learner) roles as approaches to language instruction have shifted in the last quarter century from an audiolingual methodology to an emphasis on communicative language teaching. The increased concern for the development of communicative competence should have lead instructors away from their authoritarian role and likewise provided learners with roles which stress active participation. A review of literature provides some observations on the nature of roles in the communicative era of language instruction and also presents evidence favoring certain tasks which theoretically help realize this reshaping of roles. The observations presented strive to raise our collective consciousness about our pedagogical practices within a communicative framework.

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Introduction

As within all academic disciplines, language pedagogy has enjoyed or at least been subject to various paradigm shifts throughout the course of time. Much like the better mousetrap that the undaunted scientist is always looking to build, those of us involved in language teaching[2] are relentless in our pursuit of a better method, approach, or technique (Higgs 1984). The recognition of inadequacies in our classroom practices - be it through experience, intuition, or empirical investigation - leads us to rethink and modify our classroom behavior. To be sure, change can be a good thing. In the latter half of this century it has moved us from believing that language acquisition occurred as a result of habit formation and overlearning, to current views which underscore the necessity of comprehensible input and opportunities for interaction (e.g., Gass and Varonis 1985; Krashen 1982,1985; Long 1980; Long and Porter 1985; Pica and Doughty 1985a, 1985b; Varonis and Gass 1985).

The former school of thought was pedagogically illustrated through the advance of the Audiolingual Method (ALM)in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. This method, which stressed oral practice through repitition drills and memorization of dialogues, eventually fell subject to harsh criticism. Critics argued that language was not a behavioral response or learned habit, and that errors - to be avoided at all costs in the audiolingual classroomwere perhaps part of and indicative of language development (Corder 1967; Selinker 1972). Moreover, the ALM was generally unsuccessful in teaching communicative proficiency or competence (Savignon 1972). Learners could recite entire dialogues but could not initiate or maintain spontaneous conversation.

Research on second language acquisition and language teaching in the last 25 years has, to a great extent, altered many of our personal and professional philosophies about the language classroom. Undoubtedly at the core of these changes is a pedagogical objective that generally went unreached in the audiolingual classroom: that our students develop some level of communicative proficiency. Indeed, if asked what single word has characterized language teaching in the last two decades, many of us would reply "communicative" or "communication". Likewise, in 1995 many of us would claim to follow a communicative approach to language teaching in our own classrooms, or some approach suggestive of the same; i.e., a natural approach, a proficiency-oriented approach, and so on. The degree to which this has been realized might vary from individual to individual, though we have all probably implemented at least one activity or task that we feel represents a communicative classroom.

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[2]   Note that this article is couched within the context of beginning language instruction and thus any reference to learners should also be taken as beginning language learners.

Pedagogical Practices: Some Questions to Consider

Previous discussion aside, the objective here is not to delineate the evolution of various approaches and methods in language teaching or critically examine them. Others, such as Richards and Rogers (1986), and Brown (1987), have already done that and in greater detail than could be provided here. Rather, the discussion is centered within the confines of communicative language teaching (CLT), which has as an objective the development of communicative competence. Specifically, as the title suggests, this article is centrally concerned with the role of the learner in the communicative classroom, and by extension, with the role of the instructor. Some questions to raise include: How have these roles changed with the advent of the "push towards communication" (Higgs and Clifford 1982)? Or better yet, have these roles changed? In essence, have our classroom practices successfully redefined our roles such that the development of communicative competence and language acquisition are facilitated or enhanced? It is not the objective of this essay to investigate these questions empirically, though such a study would be worth pursuing. Rather, in this essay I bring together various perspectives on learner and instructor roles with the objective of leading the reader to analyze and evaluate his own pedagogical practices thus drawing his own conclusions to the questions posed above.

Communicative Language Teaching and Communicative Competence

Before addressing these questions, it is important to define what is meant by communicative language teaching and communicative competence, terms which occupy pages in the literature and provide framework for discussion here. As discussed by Richards and Rogers, communicative language teaching is an approach which aims 1) to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and **2**) to develop procedures for the teaching of the four skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication (1986:66). While there is no single universally accepted model of communicative language teaching nor a single authority, Brown has identified the following four characteristics which would appear to be common to all versions:

1. Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.

2. *Form* is not the primary framework for organizing and sequencing lessons. *Function* is the framework through which forms are taught.

3. Accuracy is secondary to conveying a message. Fluency may take on more importance than accuracy. The ultimate criterion for communicative success is the actual transmission and receiving of intended meaning.

4. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to *use* the language, productively and receptively, in *unrehearsed* contexts (1987:213), (Italics as in original).

Certain points merit comment. As noted, the communicative classroom suggests a subsumed place for grammatical structures under functional categories. Accordingly, overt discussion about language, i.e., grammatical rules, receives less attention. In that fluency rather than accuracy characterizes communicative language teaching, some have interpreted this to mean that grammar and accuracy are not important. This is a misconception. Fluency does not always guarantee successful transmission and interpretation of messages. A certain degree of linguistic accuracy is essential. Nonetheless, communicative language teaching strives to have students use language in unrehearsed contexts. Grammatical errors do not necessarily impede such communication, and as noted earlier, are often evidence of a developing language system through hypothesis-testing (see, for example, Selinker 1992).

A not-so-careful reading of the above definitions already intimates changes in classroom roles for both learners and instructors. Spontaneous and unrehearsed interaction are a far cry from meaningless choral repetition. A discussion about classroom roles, however, should be preceded by reviewing the definition of communicative competence. In her seminal 1983 book, Savignon defined communicative competence as:

"Functional language proficiency; the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning involving interaction between two or more persons belonging to the same (or different) speech community (communities), or between one person and a written or oral text" (1983:303).

Within this construct have been identified four underlying components, the totality of which constitute communicative competence. As first outlined by Canale and Swain (1980) and expanded upon by Savignon (1983), the components are the following:

1) Grammatical Competence: mastery of the linguistic code, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological features of a language and to manipulate these features to form words and sentences.

2) Sociolinguistic Competence: the ability to use language appropriate to a given communicative context, taking into account the roles of the participants, the setting, and the purpose of the interaction.

3) Discourse Competence: the ability to recognize different patterns of discourse, to connect sentences or utterances to an overall theme or topic; the ability to infer the meaning of large units or spoken or written texts.

4) Strategic Competence: the ability to compensate for imperfect knowledge of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse rules or limiting factors in their application such as fatigue, distraction, inattention; the effective use of coping strategies to sustain or enhance communication.

Classroom Roles and Tasks

Having thus established what is meant by communicative language teaching (as operationally defined here) and identified some of the goals of the same, one issue of obvious relevance is that of classroom roles. If, in our classrooms, we stress language function and meaningful use of language while at the same time hope to create a context in which language acquisition is facilitated, we should necessarily re-evaluate our classroom practices. As questioned earlier, have our classroom practices successfully redefined our roles such that the development of communicative competence and language acquisition are facilitated or enhanced?

The academic profession, irrespective of discipline, has historically pre-determined both the instructor role and the learner role in the classroom. Thednstructor is the expert, the authority figure who feeds knowledge and information into his learners. Learners, conversely, willingly allow themselves to be fed this knowledge. He becomes a receptive vessel. As discussed by Lee and VanPatten (1995), this transmitter-receptor relationship in acaaemia has been labeled the Atlas Complex by Finkel and Monk (1983), in reference to Atlas of Greek mythology. Metaphorically, the instructor is Atlas, assuming full responsibility for all that goes on, even at times the success or failure of the students* learning. He supplies motivation, insight, explanations, and so on. The learner supplies very little in these instructor-dominated proceedings. While there is no denying that the instructor is the resident classroom expert in his field, and rightly wants to impart his knowledge, the argument being presented here is that in order to meet the objectives of the communicative classroom a redefining of roles must occur.

Others have likewise echoed the importance and necessity of changing roles in the communicative-oriented classroom. Breen and Candlin describe the learner's role as one of negotiator. They state "The role of learner as negotiator - between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning - emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an independent way" (1980:110).

Insofar as learner roles must change, so must the role of the instructor. Accordingly, Breen and Candlin (1980) delineate two primary roles for the teacher under communicative language teaching. First, the instructor serves to facilitate the communication process between all participants. Second, the instructor acts as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. To this end, the instructor also becomes a resource person and guide.

Similar thoughts are shared by Chaudron, who states that ". . . in recent years a much greater role has been attributed to interactive features of classroom behaviors, such as turn-taking, questioning and answering, negotiation of meaning, and feedback, in contrast to a more traditional view of teaching and learning which conceptualizes

classroom instruction as the conveyance of information from the knowledgeable teacher to the 'empty* and passive learner" (1988:10).

Allwright and Bailey, in their discussion on learning management and interaction management, likewise note that opportunities for the aforementioned are reduced *even* in classrooms where lessons are conducted entirely in the second language if the teacher is "very controlling" (1991:21). Again, the implication here is that classrooms typified by an Atlas complex neither reflect communicative language teaching nor facilitate language acquisition or the development of communicative competence.

The presence of the Atlas complex was no where more apparent than in the audiolingual classroom, where the instructor conducted drills and initiated manipulation of formal features of language. With the waning popularity of the ALM and the subsequent embraced welcome of communicative language teaching, one would anticipate an automatic retooling of instructor-learner roles as carried out in classroom tasks. However, this retooling has perhaps not been as wide-sweeping as believed. Rulon and McCreary (1986) note that despite a growing prevalence of group work in the language classroom, teacher-fronted activities continue to be the norm. Presenting a stronger view, Lee and VanPatten contend that while communicative language teaching "may have caused a major revolution in the way that some people *thought* about language teaching, no major revolution occurred in the day-to-day *practice* of most language teachers" (1995:8). This is a view also held by Savignon, who states "...the preeminence of formative language instruction in U.S. programs leaves considerable room for providing learners with communicative experience..." (1991:39) and "...the amount of language practice in typical classrooms would appear to be quite small" (1991:41).

To be sure, to abandon the very comfortable roles of transmitter and receptor of information is not always easy for instructor and learner. Research on language anxiety has revealed that role-related beliefs about language instruction may be partly responsible for an adherence to traditional roles in that a departure from the same could be anxiety provoking. Young suggests that the following instructor-held beliefs have precluded a redefining of classroom roles: **1**) that some intimidation of students is necessary, 2) that the instructor's role is to correct students constantly, 3) that the instructor cannot have students working in pairs because the class may get out of control, 4) that the instructor should be doing most of the talking, and 5) that the instructor is like a drill sargeant (1994:31). In short, a breaking of traditional roles might initially provoke anxiety for all individuals.

Furthermore, as Brown (1987) underscores, the abandonment of such a role in pursuit of a "communicative" classroom can be exacerbated for the non-native instructor with limited proficiency in the second language. Whereas prepared dialogues, drills, and discussions about rules provide relatively secure and manageable material for the instructor, the prospect of unrehearsed discourse which is not immediately controlled by the instructor can be more intimidating.

While it is true that some instructors have limited language proficiency or feel

uneasy leading discussion that does not center around language *per se,* for others the pursuit of a communicative classroom has been characterized precisely by this type of teacher-lead exchange, often initiated by the open-ended question. In fact, while Brown (1987) suggests that unrehearsed discourse is not under the control of the instructor, I contend that in fact it typically *is* under the instructor's control when traditional roles are in place. Although in an open discussion the instructor is no longer leading drills or presenting information about language rules, his role as authority-figure and expert remains. Even in the best case scenario, where content rather than language constitutes topic of discussion, the instructor will retain his traditional role. This was the finding in a study by Rulon and McCreary (1986) which examined negotiation of content in both teacher-fronted and small-group interactions. Results of their study revealed that when working to complete an outline of a lecture shown on videotape, students in the teacher-fronted group ultimately listened to the instructor give a second lecture about the recorded lecture. That is, rather than negotiate the content of the lecture, all participants assumed their traditional roles and the instructor became responsible for the final product. The students became the empty vessels and the instructor the transmitter of information.

As noted, to abandon traditional roles is understandably difficult for the instructor as well as for the learner. As evidenced in the Rulon and McCreary (1986) study, even when classroom communication turns toward meaningful content, our change in behavior is oftentimes in our minds and not in our practices.

Lee and VanPatten (1995), in discussing tasks and roles, argue that instructors often allow traditional roles to determine the type of classroom task. This is clearly illustrated in the Rulon and McCreary (1986) study. However, modifications in the task will result in changes in roles as well; i.e., tasks can dictate roles. In the case of the open-ended question, if the task is re-designed, the roles will also change.

As an illustration, Lee and VanPatten (1995) note how traditional open-ended discussion activities (e.g., "Contrast the traditional roles that men and women played in the family structure with contemporary ones and discuss how they've changed.") often result in silence or fragmented responses which the instructor reconstructs to provide an answer. Thus, the instructor becomes responsible for the outcome. Moreover, Lee and VanPatten underscore how this type of activity is often disguised vocabulary and grammar practice rather than an exploration of the topic itself (1995:15).

In an alternative version of the same task, they exemplify how the task converts the instructor into a designer and planner, and the learners become builders or co-workers. All learners become responsible for generating information and contributing to the task, both individually and in pair work. The final outcome is successfully arrived at via intermediate steps that not only enrich the discussion but also alter the roles (1995:15)

While some instructors might short-sightedly view the communicative era of language teaching as the open-door to whole-class discussions, for others it has become the gate-way for group work. Indeed, as noted by Pica and Doughty (1985a) small-group

interaction has become one of the primary components of the communicative approach to language teaching. In the last 15 years, a number of researchers have become increasingly more concerned with the relative contribution that pair or group work offers with regard to second language development. This interest in the role of interaction is seen in the writings of Allwright (1984), Brooks (1992a, 1992b), Doughty and Pica (1986), Duff (1986), Ellis (1984), Long (1980), Long and Porter (1985), Pica and Doughty (1985a, 1985b), and Rulon and McCreary (1986), among others. Central to much of this research is whether or not interaction maximizes opportunities for learners "to experience comprehension of input, feedback on production and interlanguage modification", i.e., to negotiate the meaning of each other's message such that comprehension is mutual (Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun 1993:17). From a theoretical perspective, some have argued that language development is facilitated through social interaction in the classroom in that such interaction results in increased comprehensible input for the learner (for example, Long 1980, 1983). If in fact language acquisition and/or the development of communicative competence is aided by interaction, one must question what type of interaction, i.e., what type of task, is most likely to create roles that best enhance the aforementioned. Simply having students complete traditional mechanical activities in pairs neither maximizes opportunities for negotiation of meaning or content nor modifies roles. In such a scenario, the instructor is merely stepping out of the interaction and turning his role over to one of the students in each dyad or group. Consequently, traditional roles are merely transposed rather than changed.

Likewise, an activity which requires students to discuss a topic in groups is again a shifting rather than a changing of roles and will not guarantee the desired results, i.e., that all students are interacting, sharing ideas, and negotiating meaning. The same inadequacies and shortcomings of the open-ended discussion format found in teacher - fronted interaction will surface in a small group as well: there will be minimal participation, not all students will contribute, etc. In short, without specific goals and/or some sort of structure to guide them, learners do not really move beyond traditional roles.

As suggested, at times many of us believe that because our students work in pairs our classrooms are communicative. However, some of these group activities—as noted above - might push the borders of meaningless or futility in that they do not allow for genuine communication, defined as "... a continuous process of expression, interpretation, and negotitation [of meaning]" (Savignon 1983:8). There are, however, certain group communication tasks which are more likely to present the learner with different roles, roles which require him to be a negotiator, a co-worker, a partner, a builder, etc. In establishing a taxonomy of task types, Pica and her colleagues (1993) utilize two primary features in their analysis: interactional activity and communication goal. Reviewing how "task" has been characterized in the literature, they conclude that salient in most definitions is: **1**) that tasks are oriented towards goals, and **2**) that participants take an active role in working towards that outcome. They further elaborate on these two features by creating subcategories. Specifically, interactional activity is separated

into 1) interactant relationships and 2) interaction requirements. The former refers to the type of role a learner occupies within a task (e.g., holder or supplier of information) while the latter refers to whether obligations to request or supply information are required or optional. Communication goal is likewise broken down into 1) goal orientation (i.e., do participants have collaborative or independent goals?) and **2**) outcome options (i.e., how many acceptable task outcomes are available in meeting the goal?).

According to the typology created by Pica *et al.* (1993), the extent to which these conditions are present for a given task help determine how that task promotes opportunities for comprehension of input, feeback on production, and interlanguage modification. Thus, a jigsaw task - a collaborative listening task in which participants must select and share information in order to make a decision or complete an assignment - is the type of task which maximizes learner opportunities for negotiation of meaning to occur. It is during a jigsaw task that each interactant holds a different portion of information to be exchanged. Additionally, both participants are required to request and supply information, and they both work towards the same goal. Finally, there is only one acceptable outcome available.

Unlike the unsuccessful group tasks described earlier, in a jigsaw task learners are required to participate as they work towards their goal. Moreover, they become active in the exchange, assuming roles of holder, requester, and supplier of information. They step out of their traditional empty vessel role and work together. (See Brooks 1992a for further discussion.)

Although the jigsaw task is the task type that meets the conditions for maximal negotiation of meaning to occur, other tasks do increase this opportunity and certainly move learners into new roles. For example, the information-gap task is similar to the jigsaw task except that each learner has a fixed role, either supplier of information pr requester of information. While the information-gap restricts the flow of information unidirectionally, it does, nonetheless, create roles that allow for communicative exchange as has been discussed throughout. (See Doughty & Pica 1986 for further discussion.)

The discussion thus far has intimated that teacher - fronted tasks or instructor-learner exchanges do little to create appropriate roles within a communicative language teaching framework. The shortcomings of the open-ended question, in tandem with the promotion of certain paired/group task types, suggest that instructors need relenquish their position in front of the class. Certainly in many instances this abandonment is appropriate, as is the careful consideration of what we have our students do when working in small groups. However, at times our position in front of the class can remain secure. As noted earlier, Breen and Candlin state that in the communicative classroom the learner acts as negotiator, thereby contributing and interacting within the group such that he learns "in an independent way " (1980:110). If viewed as a participant within that group, the instructor then becomes a resource person or guide. This is illustrated by Lee and VanPatten (1995) in their treatment of a listening comprehension activity. As they note, lexical items are often "practiced" via a listening task which requires students to check

words off of a list or acknowledge comprehension in some way. Characteristically, in such an activity the instructor will repeat the passage or items two or more times automatically, thereby imposing his traditional role on to the task. The instructor assumes that the learners will not comprehend and thus repeats herself. In this instance, the instructor takes responsibility for comprehension and learning. In the real-world, however, the interlocutor is responsible for signaling a lack of comprehension via requests for repitition, clarification, and so on. If the classroom task allows the learner to engage in this type of interaction, then the instructor's role becomes one of resource person. He provides information when requested. Consequently, a reanalysis of even the most common and traditional activities can result in a modified task which changes how learners and instructors interact.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout this article it has been suggested that communicative language teaching has not always been realized effectively according to the tenets of its definition. This is often revealed in the type of behavior (i.e., tasks) in which we engage, and by extension in the roles we assume and give to our students. Attempts to make our classrooms communicative—while genuine on the part of the instructor—sometime fall short of such a goal. To illustrate, we ask some personalized questions before class or have learners complete meaningless activities in pairs that do not foster the development of communicative competence. In essence, we often forget the definition of communication (i.e., the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning) and view speaking practice as communication. The observations made here have been presented with the intention to raise our consciousness about appropriate learner and instructor roles in the communicative classroom and also how to assume those roles through the tasks we implement. Language teaching has taken great strides in the years following the audiolingual period, though at times a réévaluation of current practices is necessary so that further distance can be travelled.

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