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Language Classroom Considerations Using the Communicative Approach

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Because English is one of the leading languages used in international trade and communication, English education in Japan's universities needs to help learners communicate in the world's lingua franca if they are going to be equal partners in the global arena. This paper discusses classroom implications for instructors who use the communicative approach (CA). Since communication skills in learning a second language begin in the classroom, instructors who assume a facilitative role will be better able to

encourage the development of such English skills. The focus of this paper is on simple acts which increase facilitation and on suggestions that increase student use of and confidence in learning English.

英語は、国際的な取り引きや交渉でもっともよく使われる言語の一つである。日本の大学で将来国際的な場で対等な交渉のできる人材を育てようというとき、そこで行われる英語教育は、学生が世界の共通語でコミュニケーションができるよう、英語の運用能力の開発に手助けをするものである必要がある。本論文では、communicative approach (CA)による英語の授業を取り上げ、教師へのいくつかの助言をする。授業で第二言語の運用能力を身につけさせるとき、教師の役割は、学生の言いたいことを外国語で表現するための仲介者(facilitator)であり、そうすることでよりうまく学生の英語コミュニケーション能力を伸ばしてやることができる。本論文の焦点は次の二点、①教師がどうすればうまく仲介者の役を果たせるかを簡単な例で示し、②学生がもっと頻繁に、自信をもって英語を使うようになるためにはどうすればいいか、具体的方策を提言する。

As globalization becomes more of a reality and countries rely more heavily on each other, there is an increased need for people to be able to communicate in a common language. Currently, English is one of the leading languages used in international trade and communication (Lam, 2002). However, a professor of international political economics at an international business school in Switzerland was recently quoted in *The Japan Times* as saying, "Japan's linguistic barrier impedes it from 'connecting' to the outside world" (Lehmann, 2002). Consequently, there seems to be a general perception that Japanese people need to improve their ability to communicate in the world's lingua franca if they are going to be equal partners

in the global arena. As such, English education in Japan needs to help learners function in a world that is becoming smaller through globalization. The English classroom is where this communicative ability starts.

Because the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho*) is decentralizing, Japanese universities are becoming increasingly competitive. As the Japanese university system evolves into smaller self-sustaining entities, competition demands that language departments offer the best education possible. There are various theories on teaching English as a foreign language, but as the name implies, the communicative approach (CA), also known as communicative language teaching (CLT), is best suited to facilitating student communication in the classroom.

CA is a method of teaching English as a foreign language which assumes that “the goal of language teaching is learner ability to communicate” (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 8). Using CA, instructors “help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language” (Richards & Rodgers, 1998, p. 68). A recent study concluded “most of the tenets of the communicative approach are supported” (Menking, 2001, p. 26) by post-secondary English instructors in Shimane prefecture in Japan. Theoretically, then, through CA Japanese L2 learners should be motivated to equip themselves with better language skills that will enable them to make a contribution to the global society.

The Student-Centered Classroom

Communication skills in learning a second language begin in the classroom. Thus, a student-centered classroom allows students to improve their foreign language performance since the learners have ample time and a variety of opportunities

to practice the language as a living language rather than as a theoretical study. Using CA, real communication is emulated by bringing authentic situations into the classroom so that students can improve their communicative skills. This does not imply, however, that students of English as a foreign language need to be near perfect before they encounter other speakers of English.

The use of personal ideas, one tenet of CA, allows learners to personalize and internalize what is being learned. This leads to higher motivation to participate in conversations, and thereby more active learning. If learners actively participate in classroom discussions and conversations, they try harder to develop their L2 language skills. Instructors who facilitate and encourage communication among their students in the classroom allow those students to more actively determine the pace and direction of the class than in classrooms where the instructors utilize a lecture format. The native English teachers in Shimane were asked if they have had to change their teaching style because the Japanese students are more accustomed to lecture-style instruction. While one-third agreed, another one-third either disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating many students may be accustomed to various teaching styles, including CA.

The facilitative role of an instructor can be as simple as answering a question about grammar or word choice. Facilitation also occurs when students are given background information about a topic so that they can better understand what they are discussing. An important role of the facilitating instructor is to give L2 learners direction or guidance when they are at a loss on how to proceed in a conversation activity. On the other hand, a facilitator also needs to know when to allow the students to struggle during the communication process, since this enables them to deduce their own answers. In the labor to achieve, solid learning takes place.

The Attitudes of Students

The attitudes of students can hinder their growth in their communicative ability. Students are often concerned about making mistakes in the classroom. This phenomenon can be seen on an almost daily basis. For example, students often ask for reassurance before giving answers in front of other students. Although the students' answers are usually correct, they lack confidence. As facilitators, instructors can provide reassurance. This, in turn, will slowly build the confidence of the students so they can communicate in English. Although students may be concerned about making mistakes, it may also be beneficial to remind them of all the situations in which they might use English in the future. In the majority of cases, they will be conversing with other non-native English speakers who also may not have perfect English. As long as the language of the L2 learners is intelligible, they will be able to converse with others. This is not to say that learners should not strive for grammatically and phonetically correct English, but rather that an over-emphasis on correct English can deter students from attempting to communicate.

Through facilitation, instructors can also help students express their opinions. Typically, as they progress to the second, third, and fourth years of college, students gradually become more at ease in expressing opinions. Like any skill in life, students gain confidence as they become more comfortable with expressing their opinions. Classroom experience shows that most students have opinions about topics that interest them. It is important for facilitators to have topics of interest for the students. This can be accomplished by either having the students bring topics or materials to class or by the instructor having an understanding of what college students generally read, watch, and do.

Using facilitation, the classroom instructor can encourage students as they develop their English skills to better express themselves through facial expressions and body language. Both are part of any authentic utterance and contribute to understanding in face-to-face communication. Observing students outside of the classroom, it is obvious that students use facial expressions and body language in their normal interactions with others. Instructors may find it helpful to gently remind the learners that others may not clearly understand what they are conveying unless some appropriate body or facial expressions are used. By demonstrating this in class, perhaps in an exaggerated manner, the instructor can emphasize the importance of gestures, inflection, tone of voice, and general delivery.

Through facilitation in the language classroom, students' tension will often decrease. By understanding the personal concerns of students, instructors may be able to avoid situations that could cause students to lose confidence in learning English. Utilizing activities that create a sense of classroom community will help decrease feelings of vulnerability in the students. Emphasizing that it is okay to be different and to therefore have different opinions will also reassure students.

Conclusion

Using the communicative approach (CA) to teach English in Japanese university classrooms will better enable students to develop the communication skills that are needed in the global arena. Communication skills begin in a student-centered classroom when instructors encourage students to participate in discussions. As facilitators, instructors help students develop their English communication skills. By utilizing tenets of CA,

instructors increase students' ability to communicate in English through the expression of both their ideas and their opinions. In order for this to happen, however, instructors, as facilitators, need to help students overcome their lack of confidence in speaking English. As their confidence increases, students will be better equipped to participate in international dialogues.

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