

The Communicational Approach: Its Key Features and Potential

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Abstract

The article begins by tracing the origin of the Communicational Approach (CA), highlighting its indebtedness to both the Structural Approach and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It is followed by a note on the context and the circumstances of CA's development. The term 'Communicational', as explained by N.S. Prabhu, the chief architect of the project, was deliberately chosen to emphasise that in CA, communication serves as the means rather than the end of language teaching, unlike in CLT. To demonstrate the paradigm shift introduced by CA, the central section of this article presents its ten key features. This is followed by examples of critical acclaim for the methodology. The penultimate section evaluates CA's relevance to Indian classrooms through the lenses of sociological analysis and the concept of the 'intact class'. The article concludes by proposing the adoption of CA through a 'Small is Beautiful' approach.

Keywords: Communicational Approach (CA); Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

ORIGIN

As Tickoo (1992) pointed out, in less than ten years following the launch of the S-O-S Approach / the Structural-Oral-Situational Approach or the Structural Approach (SA), in India, its failures started receiving scholarly attention. It came from Morgan (1966-7), Narayanaswamy (1970-1) and Tickoo (1972). Interestingly, twenty years since then, at the Regional Institute of English, Bangalore, which had been set up to promote the use of SA, disappointment with the approach was expressed by its director.

This paved the way for the organisation of ELT seminars focused on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the potential of experimental teaching for developing a new approach. This series of seminars was led chiefly by Keith Johnson, Henry Widdowson, and Christopher Brumfit from Britain, and N.S. Prabhu from the British Council Division, Madras. These seminars happened between 1978 and 1981.

The British specialists focused on the theory and practice of CLT, whereas the Indian specialists including Prabhu and a few innovative classroom teachers made presentations on developing and testing the theory and practice of CA. Periodically, the British specialists made comments on and suggestions for the use of the Communicational Teaching Project (CTP) team. On one such

occasion something extremely significant happened. A paradigm shift was taking shape in the CTP classrooms. And this was observed by none other than the internationally acclaimed doyen of ELT, Professor Christopher Brumfit. He declared that "...actually, a very major paradigm shift within the language teaching world...is at the moment in the process of happening..." (*Regional Institute of English South India Bulletin*, 1981, p. 38) This was the turning point in the development of CA.

As mentioned above, CA was developed via experimental teaching by a combination of specialists like Prabhu and a few classroom teachers to learners at elementary and intermediate levels of English proficiency. It happened over a period of five years, between 1979 and 1984. This was based in seven mother tongue medium schools in Bangalore, Madras and Cuddalore. The project was supported as well as initiated by the Regional Institute of English, Bangalore and completed by the Government of Tamil Nadu and the British Council Division, Madras.

WHAT IS IN A NAME?

In one of the earliest of CTP seminars, Keith Johnson asked the CTP team why they used the term 'communicational', rather than the more

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general 'communicative'. The response of the leader of the project, Prabhu, was this:

We are talking about the difference between communication as *the end*, (in contrast to) communication as *the means*. Communicative teaching in most Western thinking has been teaching for communication, which I claim involves one in some way or other in pre-selection; it is a kind of matching notion and form. Whereas the Bangalore approach is teaching *through* communication; and therefore, the very notion of communication is different." (*Regional Institute of English South India Bulletin: New Approaches to Teaching English*, 1980, p. 164).

KEY FEATURES

1. CA deployed, solely and exclusively, problem-solving activities. These were not mathematical problems. Some of these problems, however, involved arithmetic at a basic level. Further, the problems or tasks were of eighteen types such as Diagrams and formations, Clock faces, Monthly calendars, Maps, School timetables, Age and year of birth, and Distances. (Prabhu, 1987).
2. CA focused learners' conscious attention on 'meaning' or message or thought content. It completely shifted their conscious attention from the grammar or 'form' of the target language to 'meaning'. In other words, "...communicational teaching really leaves the acquisition of target language structure to occur incidentally, unconsciously and unpredictably." (*Regional Institute of English South India: News Letter - Special Series*, 1981, p. 22)
3. It engaged the teacher and the learners pre-eminently in classroom interaction in the target language.
4. CA totally avoided group activities, for they allowed learners to use their mother tongue to solve problems.
5. Using problem-solving activities, teachers maintained the same level of challenge / difficulty at all the stages of a lesson.
6. A lesson in CA consisted of three stages: the pre-task stage, when the teacher demonstrated how to work out the target problem; the task stage, when the learners worked out a parallel problem individually, more or less independently; and the home

task stage, when they solved another similar problem totally independently. It should be noted that 'Pre-task' in CA is not the same as 'Presentation and Practice' in SA, which gives the teacher an opportunity to introduce language items for practice.

7. When learners made grammatical or lexical errors in Communicational Teaching Project (CTP) classes, the teacher provided them with implicit, 'incidental correction', not explicit, 'systematic' correction, unlike in the Structural Approach. In this technique the teacher rephrased the erroneous output by the learner, and avoided teaching the grammatical rule that was broken or the wrong lexical choice or collocation made by the learner.
8. Throughout the CTP course, not just a lesson, the level of 'reasonable challenge' or 'difficulty' was carefully controlled by making the task and the language in which it was couched "difficult but attainable" (Prabhu, 1987, p. 66).
9. The tasks within a sequence in CA were ordered by a common-sense judgement of increasing complexity, challenge or difficulty.
10. Traditionally, the 'syllabus' is a list of what is to be taught. But in CA it is a statement of what is to be done in the classroom. As such, in CA it is an 'operational construct'.

AN IMMEDIATE REACTION

At the beginning of the project, the champions of the age-old SA and of the more recent Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) saw CA as a threat. So, Prabhu reassured them that actually CA grew out of SA and CLT and that he stood on the shoulders of the inventors of SA and CLT. He further explained that one of CA's pillars, namely constructing the target language structures in the mind of the learner, came from SA, while another pillar, namely the primacy of 'meaning', came from CLT.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The primary sources of information on the first three years of CTP are the newsletters and bulletins of the Regional Institute of English (RIE), Bangalore. But these were not as easily accessible as international publications such as journals, newsletters and books. Further, RIE's publications contained only the project materials and seminar inputs produced in the first three

years of the project. Therefore, Prabhu came out with a comprehensive report on the project titled *Second Language Pedagogy* (1987). This is rated by Willis and Willis (Carter & Nunan, 2001), as “the best” of all the documents of the task-based approaches.

Along the same line, Tickoo recorded his praise in full measure for the documentation of the project materials in the following words: “The Procedural Syllabus (another name for CA) has a definite edge over both the Process Syllabus and the Retrospective Syllabus in that it has a respectable stockpile of over four hundred tested “tasks” and a number of usable insights ...” (Taraniyya, 1992). Furthermore, the book captures, among other things, the background and rationale for CTP, the theoretical principles and procedures of CA, transcriptions of a few project lessons, and the official evaluation report by Alan Berretta and Alan Davies.

FAVOURABLE PERCEPTIONS

Beretta and Davies, strictly applying evaluation standards and procedures, and occasionally pointing out some of the weaknesses of the project, made this overall appreciative assessment: “we regard the results as being, on the whole, positive and conclude that they provide tentative support for the CTP claim that grammar construction can take place through a focus on meaning alone” (Beretta & Davies, 1985, p. 126). Following this conclusion, the ELT specialists globally started paying more and closer attention to CTP and CA. For example, Tony Howatt praised the project’s “promise” (1984).

Following the publication of Prabhu’s *Second Language Pedagogy*, the diffusion of information about CTP occurred admirably all over the English-speaking world. In an unusually clear and glowing tribute, Rod Ellis recorded his appreciation for CA as a really, fully new innovation: “...in the absolute sense, it (an innovation) can constitute a completely new idea. There are probably very few completely new pedagogic ideas, although arguably Prabhu’s Communicational Teaching Project constituted one at the time” (Ellis, 2003, pp. 320-321). With more such praise for the project from internationally acknowledged specialists such as David Nunan (1989), CA found a place on ELT’s world map.

NEED FOR A SOCIOLOGICAL SCRUTINY

Following this, in India a few ELT specialists, such as Francis Peter who had produced his doctoral dissertation titled *English for the Disadvantaged* (Bharathidasan University: 1997), observed that so far ELT approaches had been tested for their suitability for particular countries / cultures from the view-points of Structural Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Applied Linguistics, Psychology, Anthropology etc., but not of Sociology. As in India, where the society is stratified in terms of castes / communities / tribes, we should evaluate any new method in sociological terms as well. Therefore, they felt that before CA is adopted / adapted in this country, it should be checked for its suitability to the needs of socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged learners in India.

MOST RECENT ASSESSMENT

Close scrutiny of the sociological and educational research, in relation to the CTP literature, reveals two things. Firstly, Prabhu did not believe in the value of specially constituted Control and Experimental groups of students as in positivistic research. The reason is that the results produced by such research paradigms are not readily extendible to real-life classes, because the student composition of real-life classes is significantly different from the class composition of Control / Experimental groups. This is why, for CTP, Prabhu took the classes as they were, “intact”, in all the seven schools.

Secondly, all the project schools being regional language medium schools, they admitted by and large socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged learners. Since CA was developed in such schools, and the results were “positive”, as the British specialists have observed, the conclusion of the prospective adopters / adaptors of CA in India can be that this method will meet the ELT needs of the underprivileged learners as well as others adequately. It is also important to note that CTP chose the problems or tasks or texts of any of its four hundred and odd tasks neither in favour of the advantaged learners nor in favour of the disadvantaged learners. This neutrality is another factor, in addition to its development in Indian schools of regional language medium education, in favour of CA.

CONCLUSION - THE FUTURE OF CA

What does the future hold for CA? How could ELT institutions in India make use of CA? To keep in view the present scenario, it is worth remembering that the S-O-S Approach has been in use in most states of India, in varying degree of adherence to the original, for more than six decades. The Functional-Notional Approach, an early version of CLT, has been in use in West Bengal (WB) for about three decades. Therefore, in almost all the states' school education departments there must undoubtedly be a wish, if not a drive, to adopt a new methodology, especially one developed in India, adequately appreciated locally and globally, such as CA.

In this situation, it is desirable to introduce CA in one or two innovation-friendly states such as TN and WB. It is safer to adopt any new methodology including CA, with Prabhu's words of caution in mind. He said large scale implementations adopting the Centre-Periphery Model and using the Madras Snow Ball strategy will end up in diluting the methodology and ultimately in failing to teach the target language. It is therefore wiser to try out a new methodology in a handful of schools for about five years and allow the diffusion of this innovation to take its own course, in a slow and steady manner, to another set of five or ten schools for another five years and so on. Only this "Small is Beautiful" approach will work in schools such as the Regional Language Medium Schools which the CA deployed. Although the size and speed of this style of adoption may not be as attractive as typical Educational Administrators in India might like, the success of this kind of adoption is as assured as the success of its development using the CTP initiative.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author expresses his sincere gratitude to Mr. Alan Maley OBE, former Director of the British Council Division for South India, and Prof. T.S. Arulkumar, Trainer for the British Council's Cambridge University Examinations, for their critical observations and corrections on this article.

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