

My Two Cents About the Communicative Approach

Language learning is rather more like learning to drive a car than it is learning history or literature. An informed teacher uses the communicative approach, which stresses practice over theorizing. Anyone can sit back and take in a lot of input from a book or from a teacher's essay or lecture, process the information, and perhaps use it to passively answer questions on a strictly written exam. There is certainly value in it of course, and indeed practice without any theory is doomed to failure.

Yet the sure-fire path to measured success in language learning is not measured in passively answering questions on a test, but, rather, taking charge and using the language in all the spontaneous forms that daily life presents as a challenge for language skills, and accordingly embracing the language as a tool for solving problems. Let's say that foreign language is English. This entails for example, being able to answer a guest's questions in English, to lead a conversation of small-talk with a visitor in English, or to answer an email quickly and effectively on one's own in English.

A consequence of this approach is that the teacher doesn't do too much talking in the language lesson, for, it is through listening that she finds the fodder for the lesson. That is, observation of the learners' mistakes and guiding students to fitting expressions is the basis for the lesson. This is especially advantageous for motivated learners, who are eager to put their knowledge to use, and, well, 'drive' with the language. It even has a name in typical teacher training courses, and is referred to as 'teacher talking time', or 'TTT' versus 'student talking time', or 'STT.' Scores are given much higher to the teacher who strategically uses 'TTT' to maximum progress in 'STT.' An obvious progression for design of the lessons, then, is that 'TTT' tends naturally to be the largest for absolute beginners of a language, who must first learn the nuts and bolts in order to first develop the ability to take the language into their hands, and then tends to be progressively less and less, for advanced learners, who can proceed to speak or write the language at a steady pace on their own.

The structure of speaking exercises which have designed reflect this school of thought. Indeed lowest-level learners are fed a lot of structure which they are meant to immediately practice, and over time, the language learner develops legs under which their skill can stand on, in order to later on 'walk' with, through life. Advanced learners are meant to use their legs as much as possible, to improve their 'walking' or 'driving' skill. Many schools' embrace of the term 'trainer' rather than 'teacher' for its staff also reflects this philosophy, for, indeed, the students' skills are to be coached into good use. The students' speech is at 'play', whilst the trainer coaches from the sidelines to steer things into the right direction.

Language-learning differs in another way, thus, from other subjects, in that the language learner is never finished. Whilst one could learn enough to answer questions passively on a test correctly more and more through training, it is rather much more impossible to adequately prepare for the complex situations in life and work, which call upon language to do the job. That is to say, a language learner who does not constantly practice his skills readily loses his ability to maneuver into new situations. Practice is thus underscored as all the more important for that reason, to maintain sharpened skill.

It follows, then, that an important aim for lessons which have advanced students at the center, is that the teacher find topics of interest which compel the students to practice and steer their language skills. Without this, there remains much to be desired in the way of the lesson.

That said, in the English language, the tenses could be compared to the trunk of a tree, whilst the vocabulary the leaves which hang from the trunk. Learning the tenses is thus absolutely key to speaking English well and because the German language is more based on article declination in the respective cases, German students can never get enough practice with the tenses. Organization-hungry Germans also often especially appreciate the confidence afforded by saying things correctly and so it's very important to consistently yet discretely correct students and feed them new structure and review what they know.

Jennifer Marie Schneider Granić
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