TECHNIQUES IN DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE LINGUISTIC SKILLS

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Abstract

The communicative approach to language teaching includes designing tasks and techniques oriented towards the communicative competence that implies interaction among learners in authentic communicative situations and contexts. Tailoring a lesson is a dynamic approach that offers teachers the possibility of using different, resourceful pedagogical techniques and assessing their students' outcomes. A series of questions should be considered when projecting the techniques, among which: Is the technique appropriate for the students' actual needs?, Is there a positive, lively way of presenting the technique?, Is there adequate feedback on students' performance?. Techniques can range from free techniques to techniques designed around the different types of intelligences. What matters is to achieve harmonious English Second Language communication.

Key words*: communicative approach, communicative competence, English Second Language, language learning, strategies*

1. Introduction

Designing techniques in the process of language learning must be approached from two essential perspectives, as Brown (2002) mentions: principled teaching (principles that give shape to the suitable approach to language learning and teaching) and contexts of learning (our students' age, proficiency, goals in language learning). When we start to draw the techniques we are going to implement during classes, we have to project the classroom activities onto these two main aspects. Our choices, as teachers, concerning the strategies and procedures that we apply in the classroom are emphasized by these two important factors and by the curriculum, the objectives that we plan for our lessons, and the classroom management variables.

The students must develop their skills and strategies so that they are able to communicate efficiently and effectively in specific situations. They must learn to self-evaluate during the learning process, to identify their success and to be conscious of the social function of the language. Communicative language teaching has had a great impact on methodology and syllabus design and has highlighted the role that tasks have within the curriculum. Tailoring a lesson is not respecting a set of rigid principles. The use of innovative techniques and the feedback that is received from the students provide the teacher with a new perspective and other ingenious strategies for the next lessons. As Brown (2002) considers, "a principled approach to language teaching encourages the language teacher to engage in a carefully crafted process of diagnosis, treatment, and assessment".

2. Defining the term 'technique'

In order to speak about techniques and their impact on communicative language teaching (CLT) we have to offer some definitions of the words that can replace the word *technique*. Using the word *technique* we refer to a large "variety of exercises, activities, or tasks used in the language classroom for realizing lesson objectives" (Brown, 2001). There are other terms that are considered to be synonymous by some linguists, but we have to underline some nuances between them.

In the recent studies on second language lessons, syllabus, materials, *task* is the term that defines the communicative activities used in the classroom and the large use of the term *task-based* has substituted the older word *communicative*. Crookes and Chaudron (2001) make the distinction between *task* and *activity*. For controlled and freer types of learning procedures, they use *activity* as a larger term whereas *task* refers to "a separable element of a lesson that is primarily geared to practicing language presented earlier (or otherwise learned), usually involving students working with each other, to achieve a specific objective". What mainly defines the task is its emphasis on the authentic role of language for creating meaningful communicative goals. We can also make use of terms such as: *procedure* (techniques and actions that take place during teaching determined by the choice of a particular method), *practice, behaviour* or *strategy*, words that refer more or less to what we call *technique*.

A lesson may consist of several techniques that can be divided according to different criteria. Many linguists have tried to categorize techniques into areas such as teaching speaking, listening,

reading and writing, and have classified techniques according to various criteria. Techniques can be viewed from different perspectives and can be chosen according to various criteria:

- Dynamic / Static (role-play vs. presentation)

- Techniques to develop different types of intelligences: body, social, intellectual, etc.

- Bottom-up / Top-down (recognizing details vs. analyzing discourse structure)

- Group techniques (simulations, interviews, brainstorming, jigsaw, decision making, opinion exchange)

- Interactive techniques (role-plays, games, brainstorming, problem solving, etc.)

In the study *Integrated Skills in the ESL/EFL Classroom*, Oxford (2001) compared teaching English as a second language with woven tapestry. "The tapestry is woven from many strands, such as the characteristics of the teacher, the student, the setting and the relevant languages... This strand also includes associated or related skills such as knowledge of vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, syntax, meaning, and usage. The skill strand of the tapestry leads to optimal English as a second language/English as a foreign language communication when the skills are interwoven during instruction". It is Rebecca Oxford that differentiated between two major categories of strategies: *direct strategies* and *indirect strategies*.

A. *Direct Strategies:*

    - *Memory Strategies* (grouping, associating, semantic mapping);

    - *Cognitive Strategies* (recognizing and using formulas, reasoning deductively, translating);

    - *Compensation Strategies* (using linguistic clues, using mime or gesture)

B. *Indirect Strategies:*

    - *Metacognitive Strategies* (overviewing and linking with already known material, setting goals and objectives);

    - *Affective Strategies* (using music, making positive statements);

    Social Strategies (developing cultural understanding, cooperating with others)

3. Techniques in classroom practice

Grammar teaching has been a controversial issue along the years, but at the same time we cannot ignore its important role in knowing grammatical rules and how to use the language to achieve communicative competence. When we select the grammatical items for our classes we should take into consideration the students' needs and aims in studying English. Also, we have to think how we are going to teach the selected items: deductively or inductively, then choose the appropriate techniques, strategies according to the criteria that we think more suitable for our students. We have to develop our techniques of designing tasks for our students that hint at the negotiation of meaning and involve them in real-life contexts. In order to have a complete image of grammar we should underline two other dimensions that go hand in hand with it: semantics and pragmatics, that is, the meaning and association of words and the use of language in specific contexts. Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) point out several grammar techniques that require certain resources according to social, semantic or discourse factors (Table 1).

Table 1. *Grammar techniques and resources*

Factors	Technique	Resources
social	dynamic interactional techniques (e.g. dramatization)	socially-oriented activities (e.g. skits, role-play)
semantic	Listening and responding; demonstration; illustration; static techniques	Objects such as pictures, realia, graphs
discourse	Text generation and manipulation; explanation	Linguistic objects and activities such as songs, problems, stories

In teaching grammar we can make use of techniques that help students develop accuracy within facile, communicative language during dynamic and motivating lessons.

- *Role-play* (Students work in pairs and role-play an interview about some programmes that they watched the previous night: radio news, cultural programme, a TV show, a film, an art exhibition etc. Students pay attention to the past tense forms: affirmatives, questions, negatives.)

- *Illustration by pictures* (For example, students practice in pairs the perfect forms of the modal verbs looking at eight pictures presenting different situations. They answer the

questions: *What do you think has happened? / What should the people have done differently?* making inferences).

- *Telling stories* (the teacher invites the students to create a story paying attention to a specific grammar issue). For example, students read some short stories of Sherlock Holmes and they retell the stories using as many adjectives as they can in order to describe the atmosphere of the stories. They have to use comparatives and superlatives when needed. They can work individually or in groups.

Teaching vocabulary can be approached from many directions according to different strategies. We can use various vocabulary learning strategies (as Oxford presented them, 2001).

- *Cognitive strategies* involve mental actions that are used in practicing (recognizing words, structures, repeating, recombining) and analyzing (transformation, reasoning, transferring).

- *Metacognitive strategies* imply planning the learning process, establishing the goals, observing the production and the understanding, assessing the results and the learning process. Learners have to know what procedures are to be used in the tasks in order to perform them successfully. This type of strategies helps students focus on what they learn and keep control of their learning process and progress.

- *Social strategies* require cooperation with other students and the teacher. Learners act in a particular environment empathizing with the others, developing cultural understanding, and being aware of others' thoughts and feelings.

- *Affective strategies* lower students' anxiety by listening to music and relax and encouraging them to take risks wisely. They gain control over their emotions by putting into practice different affective techniques.

Designing the suitable techniques for our class means to make use of the above strategies in order to create a dynamic atmosphere that helps our students to develop all their skills and abilities. Teachers can use a variety of possibilities: realia, word-building, matching words (words to words, sentence to pictures), guessing from context, using songs or short scenes from a film, etc. Using *memory strategies* students can *place new words into a context.* This also matches the linguistic type of intelligence. Students create sentences for their own documentary using words that refer to disasters: *avalanches, cyclones, droughts, landslides, floods*. They imagine that they work for a TV channel and they have to speak about these phenomena in a documentary that should last for no more than 15 minutes. Using *imagery* students relate new language information to concepts by means of meaningful visual imagery, in mind or in a drawing. This is helpful for the visual type of intelligence, too. Students think of some illustrative drawings for some *idioms*

(lay one's cards on the table, paint the town red, a storm in a teacup, as cool as a cucumber) and work in pairs.

Using *cognitive strategies* such as *summarizing* learners structure the new input and show what they have understood by summarizing a longer original passage/chapter.

Metacognitive strategies such as *identifying the purpose of a language task* help students understand the purpose of the task. They read a poem, pay attention to the figures of speech that the writer uses and make a list of visual, auditory, tactile or kinesthetic images.

Students may be engaged in different actions when listening. If listening was traditionally perceived as a passive course of action, recently listening is seen as a more dynamic and interpretative process in which the participants exchange messages in an interpersonal space. Meanings appear in contexts and are created by the listeners through interpreting meaning.

Bottom-up exercises can include recognizing details in the speech stream; *top-down exercises* help students identify the speaker or the topic, analyze discourse structure or make inferences. *Interactive exercises* are helpful for students to use context to build listening expectations or to discriminate between registers of speech and tones of voice.

Listeners use different types of strategies to understand the messages and to be efficient in learning: metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies. "Metacognitive strategies are important because they oversee, regulate or direct the language learning process. Cognitive strategies manipulate the material to be learned or apply a specific technique to a listening task. Socio-affective strategies describe the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower anxiety" (Vandergrift). When dealing with teaching speaking we have to mention three important functions: *talk as interaction* (opening and closing conversations, choosing topics, making small talk, recounting personal incidents and experiences), *talk as transaction* (problem-solving exercises, controversial statements), *talk as performance* (public declarations, speeches or different types of presentations in front of the classmates). There are some important features that help the students achieve the goal of a conversation and they consist in brainstorming the necessary words for the students to be prepared for conversation, using conversation starters in order to activate authentic communication, videotaping the students' practices without teacher's involvement or engaging the students in an active self- and peer feedback when reviewing tapes.

A complex reading activity includes all the techniques and types of reading in three important stages: pre-reading (activating the students' prior knowledge, clarifying the cultural content necessary to understand the text, using a variety of strategies), while-reading (making them aware

of certain linguistic, grammatical or discourse structures, looking for key words) and post-reading (identifying the writer's purpose, extending the idea, creating a piece of writing, creating a power-point presentation/ a trailer). Reading should be seen as a dynamic process in which the students are able to decode the meanings of the texts through different strategies: *bottom-up* or *top-down* strategies. To achieve understanding of the text readers should carry out several activities that focus not only on reading, but on speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary and the cultural context, too. Approaching teaching reading implies to make use of both *bottom-up* strategies and *top-down* strategies.

- *Bottom-up* strategies*:* the students identify different linguistic patterns, such as morphemes, syllables, words, phrases, grammatical structures, discourse markers. The students' attention is drawn to specific elements of the text.

- *Top-down* strategies*:* the students use their prior knowledge to comprehend the text. The focus is on the content and the extensive reading, the latter engaging them in reading longer texts for general comprehension.

Teaching writing implies careful attention that should be oriented toward the content, coherence, personal approach and revising. For a coherent writing process there are four essential stages that encourage students to organize and share their ideas: *planning* and *drafting* when the process is activated and *revising* and *editing* when the process is terminated. Assessing and post-writing are also valuable for checking comprehension and possible continuation of the process as homework assignment. The writing stage can encourage students to read a passage and try to predict what is going to happen next, to brainstorm ideas around a topic , to build semantic fields that help learners' imagination and develop a large range of associations or to write freely and quickly some ideas about the topic. We can make use of a variety of techniques according to the objectives that we propose to attain. If we use *controlled techniques* then students can be offered different drills: fill in the gaps with the appropriate words ('flocked', 'blaze', 'hapless') and choose the correspondents for them ('large fire', 'come together in a group', 'unfortunate'); underline the correct word from a series of pairs (thrilling/frightening, humdrum/unique); use the prompts to make up dialogues (turn off lights/ appliances / not in use); change the sentences from the active to the passive voice. *Free techniques* engage students in *descriptive compositions* (for example, students read an interesting article about Greece – 'The perfect trip: The Dodecanese Islands' and they create a power-point presentation imagining they work for a travel agency), *narrative compositions* (for example stories - there are four or five groups and each group has to complete a different task; students read a fragment of Chapter 11 – 'Castle Rock' – from 'Lord of the Flies', by William Golding and each group has a different task: group 1 – to write a *diary*

page written by one of the characters, group 2 – to imagine a *limerick*, group 3 – to draw a *comic strip* rendering the main events of the story, group 4 – to write an *acrostic poem* from a given word: lord, castle, etc., group 5 – to compose a *hip-hop stanza*, using as an inspiration source www.flocabulary.com.), *role-plays*, *interviews*.

Conclusions

Communicative language teaching facilitates communication and interaction among students and helps them deal with real-life situations, exchange ideas and communicate their thoughts and feelings, and achieve a more comprehensive understanding of their interlocutors' behaviours and cultural background. In order to make our learners interpret and produce spoken or written discourse, we have to teach them how to develop their competences and how to put them into practice. It is important for our students to go beyond the level of theory and offer them suitable techniques that help them use a grammatical structure in a particular context, learn new vocabulary through authentic materials, sharpen their awareness of different cultural backgrounds by understanding the contextualized situations in which participants interact, improve speaking and writing skills with emphasis on real-life situations, or develop different strategies (metacognitive, cognitive and social-affective) to negotiate meanings.

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