

Authentic Material and the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching

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Let us think of a child learning her mother tongue. She is surrounded by people who speak to her and are happy even if she speaks a few broken words. Everybody applauds and celebrates her mistakes. The world of the child is rich with language! Can we build bridges from the child's world to the classroom? Can we apply the principles of natural language learning to language teaching in the classroom? Can we use what the child sees and does in her early years, in her culturally rich environment?

Communicative Language Teaching was born out a desire to bring about a change in the traditional approaches to Language Teaching. It aims at bringing language learning closer to the life, the identity and culture of the child. The following chart captures the key principles of difference between traditional and communicative approach to language teaching.

Traditional Approach	Examples	Communicative Approach	Examples
The focus is on grammar		The focus is communication	
Grammar is taught through learning rules and practicing sentences	Learning about countable and uncountable nouns. Filling in the blanks.	Grammar is acquired by communicating in groups in the classroom. The communication uses cultural materials and tools.	You are going to have the pre-wedding ceremony of your cousin's wedding at your house. Your parents and you will be cooking. Talk to your grandparents and parents and make a list of things you need
The focus is on learning the skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.	Listening Tasks with fill in the blanks. Speaking Tasks of repeating dialogues	The focus is on doing tasks which integrate the four skills and create opportunities for thinking. The focus is on tasks that happen in social settings.	A task which involves watching TV news about a road accident, talking about your experiences, collecting information about the causes of accidents through a survey which you conduct on family and friends. Then writing a letter to the editor about the cause of accidents.
The focus is on accuracy	Mistakes in pronunciation, spelling and grammar are penalised.	The focus is on fluency. In our cultural and social settings children are encouraged to participate and the focus is never on the mistakes they make	Mistakes are considered as a part of the learning process. Games and play which are cultural artefacts allow children to use language without fear. Observe the signboards of shops around you. What do they contain? Play name-place-thing to describe the things they contain.

Key Components of a Communicative Approach Classroom

A typical classroom under the communicative approach is one where students are engaged in talking to each other in groups or pairs, while the teacher moves around from group to group helping the students. In short it is a learner-centred classroom. The teacher is a facilitator and a learner. She plans the communicative tasks for the students with the objective of providing them a rich language environment closely mirroring their lives and cultures at home. The atmosphere of the classroom is friendly, and non-threatening because the students are not afraid of being punished for making mistakes. Moreover they are talking to their peers in the first round and then, after gaining confidence presenting their group work to the whole class. This leads to a safe environment for children to practice their language.

The Teacher's Role in a Communicative Language Teaching Classroom

The teacher's role in a communicative classroom is very important. Based on the objectives of the lesson, she plans the activities that students can do in the classroom. These are based on the following principles:

- a. Students need plenty of opportunities to talk about the theme or the topic. Pictures, visits to places, small stories, pamphlets or advertisements can be triggers to help children begin talking about a topic. Role play also helps to reduce fear and hesitation.
- b. Students need opportunities to read and think, discuss and make notes before presenting ideas. Reading needs to be focused so questions, small comments or pictures help children understand the purpose of a text. This further helps them to think and respond to the requirements of the task.
- c. The activities mirror the children's homes and social life, their culture in order to bridge the distance between the world of the child's home and the world of the classroom.
- d. Writing can be taught as a process not as a product.
- e. Grammar can be taught through a combination of the inductive and deductive approach by helping children to give examples and then deduce rules.

Let us now see how a teacher's plans her teaching and the resources she uses:

A teacher divides the children into groups, then she gives them this task. What is she trying to revise or teach?

Let us see below.

i. Talk Group Work on a shared experiences

The teacher divides the students into group and gives them the task. She ask them to talk with each other, share their experience of losing things. They also discuss how they recovered them. Then they do the task which is given below:

Your group was playing in the playground. While playing one of you has lost his favourite ball, pen, wallet, toy, game or any other thing. You have to describe it to the person in charge of the lost and found department. Mention the colour, size, shape, what is it made of, use, day and date of buying, whether scratched or damaged etc.

ii. Role play based on group work

The teacher divides the students into groups and gives them the following task.

One person from each group will play the role of the student who lost something. In the first presentation the teacher acts as the in charge of the lost and found department. The teacher asks pointed questions about colour, size etc. to the student to help the student describe vividly. From the second presentation onwards a volunteer from the students plays the part of the in charge.

iii. Brainstorming and writing

The teacher writes the words collected from the two discussions above on the board. She discusses different sentence starters for a notice. She distributes a sample notice from the school notice board. She discusses the layout of a Notice. She then asks the students to write a Lost and Found Notice describing the lost item and help each group.

iv. Building bridges from the known to the unknown through pictures

Next the teacher selects words from the list which are used both as adjectives and verbs: torn, scratched, broken, injured etc. and helps children to draw a picture of an accident from the newspaper. She then introduces them to

the use of past participles as adjectives and nouns.

Think: Why has the teacher asked them to talk, discuss, think more and more about a description and then write a notice?

Materials and Resources commonly used for Communicative Language Teaching

- Pictures are used for finding the differences, describing things, sequencing a story etc.
- Role play cards help children to produce the language as they give hints and clues.
- Authentic materials like posters, wrappers, labels, advertisements help children to connect with things they already know

Advertisement
Line 1: Emotional Appeal
Line 2: Description which is colourful (exaggerated?)
Line 3: Some facts
90% Emotional Appeal 10 % facts
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Using newspaper reports and advertisements

It all began with reading a small extract of a news item on the condition of student hostels run by the government to teachers of Class VII. The teachers reread the piece which was accompanied by a very touching picture of a student in a hostel. Then they wrote a report about the condition of student hostels. The teachers then did a role play: a press conference figuring the health commissioner and the hostel manager and a grieved parent. They reexamined their reports and shared, added and subtracted, editing and reediting their report.

The next step was to provide them with an advertisement of the child rights organisation, CRY asking for donations. We compared how the report and the advertisement were different in their structure. What is the proportion of fact and opinion in the two?

Teachers analysed the advertisement and the newspaper report side by side. The slow revealing

of the structure of the two led to a deeper understanding. The activity ended with watching a very touching advertisement. After this the writing of reports and advertisements was easy!

In their reflection and feedback sheets participants reflected on why they now believed that authentic materials should be used in the classroom and how communicative tasks help the teaching of writing. They also outlined a framework for their use in the classroom.

Using newspaper pictures in the classroom for process writing

In the same capacity building workshop on Communicative Language Teaching and the use of authentic materials, participants were given random pictures from newspapers which showed people and things. The number of pictures were three times the number of participants. The pictures were then mixed and separated into bunches of three. The three pictures given to each participant were as dissimilar as possible. The participants had to create a story using the three pictures and share it with the entire group. After the presentation there was a discussion on the elements/ structure of a story. Many of the stories written by the participants were not stories in the real sense because the element of conflict and character were missing. Some stories were copies of films which had ‘too facile’ resolutions, too easy a change of heart. There was a discussion around the structure and elements of a story. The language of a story was discussed. The participants then wrote their stories again with a lot of sharing and discussion as they worked.

Reflections of the participants

The participants felt that authentic materials must be used for teaching writing because they connect with the real world. Use of authentic materials enriches children’s vocabularies, and enhances creative writing and analytical thinking. They felt using authentic materials with the process approach created a complete experience which was both entertaining and educative. Both teacher and student would benefit, as students like interactive activities to help build higher order thinking skills. Children will have an ‘aha’ moment when they are able to interpret what they read outside and connect it to the classroom. It creates the continuum of authenticity by connecting the world of the classroom with the world of the home and street.

We culled the following principles for teaching writing as a process using authentic materials under the communicative approach which uses writing samples from the real world in different genres like: reports, advertisements, posters etc.

1. Language learning happens when there is an environment of the language around us, we are immersed in the environment of the language which is available in all the authentic materials around us. We need someone to help us notice, engage us in doing things with language and also to create opportunities for using the language.
2. Languages cannot be learnt by constant correction, mistakes are stepping stones to language learning.
3. We need to be given opportunities for using language while doing meaningful tasks in a continuum with multiple confidence building opportunities.

But what made my day was the letter reproduced below:

Respected madam,

I was fortunate to attend the last session on, 'The effective use Of Authentic Materials in the Class room.' Today I taught the 7th Graders Report Writing with reference to a newspaper report. It was so effective that it did not take much time for a lengthy explanation. I read each and every line and asked them to distinguish facts and opinions. The structure of the report—introduction, content and solution part was also done in the same way as you did in the workshop. Ma'am the result is amazing. I am really grateful to you for introducing that activity. Like a student, I am eagerly awaiting the next session.

Warm regards

References:

Bedadur, N. 2016, February, **Using Authentic Literature to Teach Writing: Pedagogy that Transforms Classroom Practice**, Fortell Issue 34. <http://www.fortell.org/content/using-authentic-literature-teach-writing-pedagogy-transforms-classroom-practice>

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