Practicing Communicative Competence in the Classroom for Libyan Schools

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Abstract

This paper deals with practicing the Communicative Approach as one of the modern approaches in teaching a foreign language in the classroom for Libyan schools. It presents the language through situations, and shows how communicative competence can be practiced in Libyan schools. They study also demonstrates some useful suggestions for teachers of communicative language teaching, and discussing some communicative activities to help learners construct efficient output by applying this method to the target learners, which is the Libyan context and ending with a conclusion that shows important findings.

Introduction

The target context of this paper is the Libyan high school and university learners, learners of English department in particular. These learners lack the language competence and real life situation after finishing their study at school. Although they complete their education and obtain the sought degrees, they cannot use the language properly. This is also due to their limited use of the practical English.

The reason beyond choosing this title is that Libyan schools and universities don't provide special communicative classes for the learners or conversation classes to improve their communicative skills, however, teachers follow teaching grammar translation method. This does not mean, yet, that grammar, structures and patterns of language can no longer be taught, but that they will be taught more extensively with meanings and functions (cf.Holliday, 1994).

 Because the communicative approach opens up a wider perspective on language learning, it makes us more aware that it is not enough to teach Libyan learners how to handle the structures of the foreign language, but they must also develop strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in real life situations. Therefore, we would like to

highlight the benefits of using CLT for providing more opportunities for learners to communicate by using this method. Consequently this means we need communicative competence when interacting in actual communication. But what is the meaning of communicative competence?

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence means the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of language in order to form grammatically correct sentences, but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom. It includes knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language, knowledge of rules of speaking (i.e. knowing how to begin and end a conversation, knowing what topics may be talked about in different types of speech events), knowing how to use and respond to different types of speech acts (requests, apologies, thanks and invitations). Furthermore, it is important to know how to use language appropriately (Canale, 1983).

Now we can understand that linguistic competence (the knowledge of language) is only one part of communicative competence. According to Savughon (1983) as quoted in Kara (1992) communicative competence is defined as follows:

> Functional language proficiency: the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning involving interaction between two or more persons belonging to the same (or different) speech community, or between one person and written or oral text.

Hence, it can be stated that the desired outcome of the language learning process is the ability to communicate competently.

Areas of communicative competence

Communicative competence is made up of four competence areas: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

Grammatical competence according to Canale (1983) is the knowledge of the features of vocabulary, rules of words and sentences formation, pronunciation, spelling, rules of morphology, syntax and semantics. Grammatical competence asks what words we use. How do we put them into

phrases and sentences? So such competence focuses directly on the knowledge and skill required to understand and express accurately the literal meaning of utterances.

Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge to interpret the social meaning of the choice of linguistic varieties and to use language with appropriate social meaning for the communicative situation. Sociolinguistic competence asks which words and phrases fit a particular setting and situation. How can we express a specific attitude (authority, friendliness, respect) when we need to? Accordingly, this competence focuses on knowing how to use language appropriately by taking into consideration the social meaning. For example, formal and informal ways of greeting (Canale, 1983):

  "Hello, good morning teacher"

  "Hi, how are you? To his friend"

Discourse competence is the knowledge to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve unified spoken or written texts. Discourse competence asks how are words, phrases and sentences put together to create conversations and speeches? This unity is achieved through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. Cohesion is the lexical relationship between different sentences. It deals with how utterances are liked structurally and facilitates interpretation of a text. Some of the cohesion devices are pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions…etc. For example:

   A: Is Mona going to school tomorrow?

   B: Yes, she is.

There is a link between Mona and she, and also between is…going and is, which means the sentences are cohesive.

Coherence, on the other hand, refers to the relationship among the different meanings in a text such as communicative functions, for example (Canale, 1983):

   A: That's the telephone.

   B: I'm in the kitchen.

Despite the fact that there is no apparent signal of cohesion among these utterances, they do form a coherent discourse to the extent that A's first utterance functions as a request, B's reply functions as an excuse for not complying with A's request and that A's final remark is an acceptance of B's excuse.

Strategic competence is the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication and to enhance the effectiveness of

communication. Strategic competence asks how we can express our ideas if we don't know the name of something or the right verb form to use. When one doesn't remember a grammatical form or term, one compensatory strategy that can be used is paraphrasing. For example: If the learner doesn't know the term 'cigarette', he/she might try to paraphrase it in such as 'he is smoking something'. Therefore, such strategies should be used when the learner faces some breakdowns in communication (based on Canale's theory, 1983).

Useful suggestions for Libyan teacher's to follow in the class
As the emphasis of the CLT is 'communication', so the main task of the teachers is to teach students how to communicate in English efficiently.
The teacher facilitates communication in the classroom. One of his major responsibilities is to establish situations likely to promote communication. This means that the teacher creates some activities, he/she acts as an advisor answering learners' questions and monitoring their performance. In other words, watching how the learners use the language to their strengths and weaknesses. However, the teacher must aim to coordinate the activities, so that they form a coherent progression, leading towards a greater communicative ability.
The teacher might be a 'co-communicator' participating in the communicative activity along with learners. In this role, he/she can stimulate and present new language. Learners are asked to imagine themselves in situations outside the classroom, like (buying food at the market) where they and the teacher engage communicating together in the language (Larsen, 2000).
Our experience as being teachers for the last few years shows that a successful teacher should create a classroom atmosphere that is interesting and friendly. Teachers should provide some communicative activities for the Libyan learners to practice in the classroom.
Communicative activities used by teachers
In real life as we talk in order to tell people things they do not already know, or to find out things from other people, we are communicating. In the same way, teachers in classrooms can produce a similar need to communicate by using communicative activities. Communicative activities refer to the techniques used in class. Littlewood (1981) states that when teachers provide more communicative activities in the classroom, learners' production of English language will be more efficient.

Here are some activities for teachers to use inside the classroom: the teacher asks the students to be divided into small groups. One member of each group is given a picture story with six pictures on it with no words, the student with the story shows the first picture to his group and they try to tell what will happen in the second picture, the first student will tell them weather its correct or not. Then he shows them the next picture and they try to predict what they think it will happen in the next picture, until they finish all the pictures and then they will tell the whole story. After that the students can take turns to give opportunity to other students to communicate. So by applying this activities in Libyan schools, the students can communicate using the language inside the class with each other encouraged by communicative interaction.

Although, the number of students in Libyan classroom is very big (40-60) at universities and (30-40) at schools, but it might help them in their communicative competence, by telling the story, so they can use different tenses in different pictures to tell the whole story to each other. The principle underlying them is that the teachers structure the situation, so that learners share information and process it. Such activities include guessing game and problem solving.

In guessing game activities the teacher asks students to choose one student to stand in the middle of the class, this student will know information which the class must discover the student might choose anything like a concrete object (chair), and keep it a secret for himself. While the other students may ask: is it (big; small)? , is it made of (wood; metal)? The roles of the knower and discoverer may be reversed (Littlewod, 1981). Here in this kind of activity, the student will discover a lot of vocabulary by asking them whether the object is big or small, for instance, when each student asks different questions, they will introduce different words from each other, we have the belief that practicing this activity in Libyan schools will be useful, nevertheless, it needs good control from the teacher because of the large number of students.

After viewing this kind of communicative activities, we can see that they provide intensive and interesting language practice. However, the most characteristic feature of such activities is that as students are working in groups or pairs, they have a chance to communicate in the foreign language.

A role play activity is a way of bringing situations from real life into the classroom, where the students are asked to behave as if the situation really occurred in real life, and try to act what might really happen in the situation.

For example, the teacher might ask one of the students to imagine a role as a farmer or doctor and to act like him while other students ask him/her questions about his/her daily routine as a farmer or doctor. So role plays give students a test of real life. Larsen (2000) in this connection states that:

> "Role plays are very important in CLT because they give students an opportunity to practice communicating in different social contexts and in different social roles."

Other useful activities where students can share skills and knowledge and experience in discussing a situation (e.g. the factory is polluting the area; a decision must be taken to close it or keep it open). Then after giving their opinions and discussing, they can reach an end by voting. So a role play and simulation (discussion) are two types of social interaction activities, which create different forms of interaction in the classroom (Littlewood, 1981).

In any activity, when a teacher divides students into groups to play a guessing game for instance, he/she should move from a group to another to give advice to answer questions.

In our experience as teachers we think that error correction should be taken into consideration, because most of all Libyan learners don't like to be corrected, they will feel embarrassed and they will think that the whole class will laugh at them, as a result, this will make them hesitate and feel shy and never attempt to use the language again. Therefore, teachers in teaching CLT should let the learners speak naturally and ignore the error then they come back to it later or just repeat the same sentence in the right way, so the learner can understand his error.

One of the most important activities is to give students opportunity to listen to the real language use in an authentic communication. For example, at the end of the class time the teacher uses the last few minutes to give them homework. They are asked to listen to a conversation between two political candidates on the radio. Then they have to write their prediction of who they think will win the election and why they think so. They should read this to their classmates at the beginning of the next class.

Applying this activity to Libyans' schools is very difficult. However, with about forty-five minutes for each lesson will not enable the teacher to arrange his students into groups and apply the syllabus. Besides, most of all our schools don't contain listening laps or recorders; these may need to make an adaptation for the whole schools system of teaching (syllabus).

Nevertheless, despite these problems, the communicative approach has contributed many ideas that have helped in the analysis of teaching the language of interaction.

It is believed that in Libyan context, through all previous activities, learners can develop their ability to produce language forms in a right way, and to convey meanings within the foreign language.

Conclusion

In this study, the essential purpose of language teaching is communication. As a result, using CLT in classroom in Libyan schools will lead to better production of communicative ability for the target learners. This paper found out that CLT has shown that it has two major versions connected with teaching language as communication.

The weak version of the CLT relates more to students communicating with the teacher and with each other to practice the language forms which have been presented, that the process of learning CLT is between the teacher and the student. While the strong version of the CLT relates more to the way in which the student communicates with the text, so the role of the teacher here seems to be not important, and students can achieve their goal according to their direct relationship with the text.

To summarize, this research demonstrates that the weak CLT can be used in Libyan schools. Whereas the strong CLT can not be used because the students can not depend on themselves, they completely rely on teachers. To conclude, it is believed that practice will lead to the development of communicative language ability.

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