

## Teaching for Communication in Algerian Secondary Schools: Strategy for Building Fluency and Accuracy through Motivational Communicative Activities.

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### المخلص:

يحظى موضوع مادة القواعد بأهمية كبيرة في مجال تعليمية اللغات. وقد آثار هذا الموضوع اهتماما لدى الباحثين الذين اختاروا الطريقة العصرية التواصلية في تدريس القواعد.

حاولنا في دراستنا تبين دور تعليم القواعد بطريقة تواصلية ومدى نجاعتها في خلق الدافع لدى المتعلم بعد ان كان دورها محدودا في الطريقة التقليدية.

Key words: Communicative Grammar , Learner-Centered Method, Teacher- Centered Method.

Over the past few years, there has been an increasing concern with the words “communication” and “communicative”. In an Arabic and French –speaking community like Algeria, English teachers find it extremely difficult to bridge the gap between artificial use of language and genuine communication outside the classroom. Consequently, students, no matter how long they study English , whether they study it for six weeks or six years, will find themselves eventually in the real world, outside the classroom, to discover they don’t know how to use the language they have been learning. Therefore; it is important to offer a context or an environment in which the teacher can test the learners’ spontaneity and creativity.

Indeed, it is one thing to know about a language-verb forms, vocabulary items, basic grammatical patterns, and the like- and quite another to know how to use it effectively in a conversational exchange with a native speaker. Therefore, communicative competence is the aim of language learning. Foreign language methodologists concerned with the need for spontaneous, meaningful language use in the acquisition of a second language have made the distinction between linguistic competence and communicative competence. Linguistic competence

may be defined as the mastery of the sound system and basic structural patterns of a language. Communicative competence may be defined as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting-that is, in a spontaneous transaction involving one or more other persons.<sup>(1)</sup>

In this sense, instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning. When we learn a language naturalistically, we do so by focusing primarily on what we want to say, i.e., meaning rather than on how we say it i.e., form. Instruction needs to cater to this capacity for learning naturally by creating contexts in which learners focus on message content first. Language learning is a natural response to communicative needs. Therefore, we should try to ensure that learners are always aware of the communicative value of what they are learning. For example, we should help them to relate the language to the social contexts in which it is spoken; we should create communicative contexts in the classroom; learners should be helped to use the language for expressing their own personal needs and their own personality.

To achieve communicative competence, teachers should select a series of communicative tasks designed to create learning opportunities of a general nature. In this task-based teaching, teacher and students both function as communicators and view the second language as a tool for communicating rather than as an object to be analyzed and studied. Only when learners are engaged in decoding and encoding messages in the context of actual acts of communication are the conditions created for acquisition to take place.<sup>(2)</sup>

Thus, the role of the teacher consists of planning activities that allow learners to practice and develop real-life communication skills, i.e., the ability to exchange thoughts, messages or information in a situation that is true to life or could actually happen outside the classroom; skills for dealing with unpredictable conversations. In this case, language is put into a situation where people have a reason to exchange ideas and meaning. As meaningful activities and tasks support and encourage learning, learners acquire and retain language best when the topics meet their interest and when they are active participants in their learning. The teacher chooses topics that allow learners to develop skills in learning and communicating about themselves and their community, and about the country and the world. Learning improves when the learner is an active participant in the educational process. The teacher's task is to choose a variety of activities that allow the learner to become most involved. Using varied activities helps the learner maintain interest and may help to reinforce concepts without being repetitious.

Most important to the learner's progress in developing communicative competence is a variety of activities in which he can use the second language in unrehearsed, novel situations requiring, on his part, inventiveness and resourcefulness. These are the activities that most closely approximate the real world of the second-language learner. They let him see just how well he could get along if certain situations came up. They let him measure his progress against criteria which he knows to be more real than weekly grammar quizzes or dialogue practice. The most implication that can be drawn from this is that grammar rules and explanations can be presented by avoiding the grammarian's jargon or, at least keeping it to the minimum and by avoiding elaborate and complicated analysis. The problem is that learners learn language as one thing and metalanguage as another.<sup>(3)</sup>

The point here is to make real-language activities and linguistic accuracy the most important objective in language learning. Despite the many good intentions of both students and teacher, however, the transition from the classroom to the realities of the world is often a rough one. Classroom use of language is constrained by factors that are irrelevant to real life. To talk just for the sake of talking may be common in the classroom, where attention is given to how things are said. It is not so common in real life, where words take on a functional purpose. In the classroom, errors in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation count for much and are used to evaluate students' progress-or more precisely, the lack of it.

Recently, however, methodologists have privileged meaning over accuracy. They state that what counts is the message and not the way it is said. First, we must agree that control over the grammatical correctness of the language is not to be sacrificed. There can be no justification for assisting our students to develop functional proficiency while allowing them to make serious errors in grammar and pronunciation. Accuracy in form and fluency in use are not mutually exclusive ends. Therefore, we maintain that the study of grammar is not a waste of time and that learners should be introduced to the structures at the same time that they learn to use the language.

Accuracy in grammar use grows naturally as the students are engaged in the solving of problems or the completion of tasks that involve individuals in social contexts. Communicative competence thus includes not only the mastery of grammar and lexicon, but also the rules of speaking.<sup>(4)</sup> By shifting the focus of attention away from matters of structure and bringing it to rest on the kinds of issues that commonly involve people interacting with each other, the teacher is able to respond to the various needs for grammar as these needs grow from the

learners' own awareness of them. Learners who are asked to complete a realistic task requiring interaction with other learners are apt to generate function-oriented questions about grammar and are able to interpret directly the answers given by the teacher. It is essential that the task given to the students is not intended merely to model the proper use of English, as is usually the case in traditional curricula where the learner's attention was focused on the smallest formal features of the language without his necessarily understanding the overall meaning of the utterance. The student never arrived at genuine communication. Its nature must be other than language oriented, or else the attention of the learner comes to rest on how things are said rather than why they are said and what effects they have on others.<sup>(5)</sup>

True, teachers are concerned with how students express themselves ! but throughout their professional preparation, they were always concerned with accuracy and propriety. The new methodologies tend to stress more on fluency than on accuracy because, according to these methodologies, an undue preoccupation with accuracy may dam up fluency for ever, while the sense of mastery that comes from fluency leads to a wish to cultivate accuracy. Traditionally teachers have been trained to teach students and make them repeat correct sentences; and they hope to instill the same respect for the language in their students. How can they permit them to say whatever they want and let it go uncorrected? Fortunately, grammar also can be taught communicatively; for it is not a separate 'subject', nor is it even a separate division of English work...

*"It is the study of the behavior of words, word-groups and changes in the meanings of words which are a reflection of changes in the appearance and sounds of words. The study of the language as we hear it and see it, of its analysis into its several parts and our ability to put it together again and to follow patterns already learnt-this is grammar, and this is language."*<sup>6</sup>

Most of us who have been in the foreign language classroom within the last twenty years or so, whether as a student, teacher or both, have learned to place great importance on linguistic accuracy. Beginning on a wide scale in the late 1950s, proponents of the audio-lingual method stressed near-native speed and pronunciation in first-year students through the use of dialogue memorization and repetition of patterned responses. The number of phrases introduced was purposely limited with, again, the emphasis on accuracy. Above all, teachers were cautioned against moving too quickly lest the material not be "mastered". Under no circumstances were students to be allowed to express themselves in an area in

which they had not had previous drilling. Truly spontaneous or creative language use was not a debatable issue.<sup>(7)</sup>

The intent was that students would reach a degree of familiarity with the materials presented which would then allow them to recombine patterns and vocabulary in a pseudo-communicative context (a sort of role-playing modeled after the situation in a sample dialogue). In fact, however, most teachers never reached the recombination activities at the end of the unit. Conscious of having to complete a specified number of units by the end of the term, and concerned with student mastery of the basic material, there just did not seem to be time enough. Those teachers who did try to make time for students to use the patterns they had practiced in more authentic, true-to-life situations were in for a surprise. When put on their own, the majority of students simply could not readily use patterns and vocabulary spontaneously and fluently in a novel situation. There was much stumbling and hesitation, sometimes long and very complete silence. It is no wonder that a good many teachers found dialogue recitation to be a more convenient and face-saving way to test speaking ability.

The expectations created in the minds of both students and teachers by the audio-lingual method in its many variations have been essentially unrealistic. They have led to a good deal of disillusionment and discouragement. It's the same whether you have studied a language for one year or more. Teachers may also have noted that it is not always the "best" students who go on to perform well in an unstructured situation. They themselves may feel they know a lot about the language they teach and are very competent to present syntax, pronunciation, and vocabulary; but their self-assurance may vanish when confronted in a social situation with a real live native speaker. This is because language has form, meaning but also social use.

*"communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essentially social nature."*<sup>(8)</sup>

In their own experiences with teaching and testing for communicative competence, teachers have found that students who were given the opportunity for innovative self-expression from the very beginning of their study of the language far outperformed students who had not the benefit of such experience in situations requiring spontaneous interaction with a native speaker. This in spite of the fact that both groups performed equally well on standardized tests of proficiency in the language. The implications of these results are important. First, they suggest that the evaluation of the students cannot be based on the standardized tests. Second,

it is apparent that innovative self-expression in which a student is encouraged to use creatively the language he is learning, regardless of errors, in no way decreases his linguistic accuracy.

Of equal interest to foreign-language teachers along with student achievement is student attitude. All of us work best and stay longest in activities that give us a sense of accomplishment. The reactions of my beginning students to the opportunity for spontaneous use of the language they are learning have been ones of enthusiasm and gratitude. Students frequently mention the confidence gained. The sessions especially gave them confidence in themselves that they really could talk to someone in the language, and were able to get a better idea of how to express themselves with limited vocabulary, these sessions taught them to say what they wanted to say instead of book conversations.

There are a variety of classroom activities that not only encourage but require spontaneous language use. Role-playing, discussion topics, and games all represent strategies for providing the emotional involvement necessary for authentic interaction in the classroom. Not all activities are suited to all students at all times. Some students, natural actors, will particularly enjoy the role-playing. Encourage them to create their own scenarios, not merely memorize dialogues. Others will prefer small group discussion where there is no pressure on a particular person to speak at any one time. Try to respect individual differences as much as you can. Let each student find a sense of achievement in whatever kinds of language activities he enjoys most. As they begin the role-playing, games, and other activities, many of your students are ill at ease performing without preparation, in their language, let alone in a second language.

The teacher can help enormously by not criticizing her students' efforts and relating to them in as friendly, authentic a manner as possible. This is not the time to correct grammar or to ask for complete sentences. The teacher tries to forget just for a moment, she is a language teacher and to listen instead as an interested participant. If she doesn't understand a statement addressed to her, she had better let the student know. Ask him to repeat or to explain if he can. Or she can restate what she thought she understood for his confirmation. The teacher should be helpful, honest, but never harmful. Above all, the teacher should remember that for it to be real, communication must be a personalized spontaneous event. It cannot be programmed. Only the teacher can make it happen.<sup>(9)</sup>

Obviously communication is what matters first and foremost. When communication is possible, why strive for perfection? Or as a student once



confided to me: “I get along, with some difficulty to be sure, but why should I invest a tremendous effort in an attempt to sound like an American when I’m really Algerian.”

It is no use saying it doesn’t matter how they are performing in the language as long as they get their message across. Most of the learners we are dealing with want to sound like educated individuals; they don’t want just to get messages across with gestures and crude words without proper morphemes and so on. This notion has thrown a great deal of light on how we can better operate in the classroom. In this case it is advisable to teach grammar communicatively in order to succeed fluently and structurally. In communicative grammar activities, we can be sure that the elements of grammar are introduced, heard and experienced. After all, there is a final goal that grammatical structures are used in functional ways. The feeling is that there is something very difficult and distasteful about grammar and that our pupils are bound to dislike it. By adopting the communicative approach to the teaching of grammar, teachers can do away with the old-fashioned dread of the grammar lesson. Thus, grammar is no more considered as a monotonous and boring task of the language classroom. Language teachers can no doubt find insights in these techniques or methodologies. But how can we teach grammar communicatively? We should seek what kinds of features within the activity itself arouse learners’ interest and attention and make them want to take part in it?

First, the content of the activity is obviously a major factor in arousing- or deadening!-learner interest. The importance of the topic as a focus varies: if the activity is a discussion or essay on a controversial subject, then obviously the topic must be one that holds the learners’ attention; but if the activity is a game-like one where the emphasis is on problem-solving or creating amusing juxtapositions-then the subject matter becomes relatively unimportant, and the task itself is what provides the interest.

There is no single ‘recipe’ for the selection of subjects that will arouse learner interest, but it may help to ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Is my topic something my students can relate to because they know something about it and it arouses definite positive or negative reactions?
2. Or alternatively, something they would like to find out more about, and can do so through participating in the task?
3. Is it something which stimulates their imagination or curiosity?

4. Or something they are already familiar or personally involved with and would like to discuss or tell others about it?

5. Is it something I am interested in and can communicate my enthusiasm about to the class?

If the chosen topic gives a positive answer to one or more of these questions, it will probably be found interesting. But even experienced teachers find themselves constantly surprised by the unpredictable reactions of their students to topics they had thought would interest or bore them. This is why variety in the choice of topics is needed to guarantee a maximum participation from the part of the students.

Similarly, visual aids are very important in language learning. Pictures provide necessary variety and foster a high degree of interest. They serve as a ready means of establishing a clear, immediate concept of what a word or a structure may mean. They go beyond the limited classroom environment and make possible discussion of a wide variety of situations and circumstances. It is very much easier to concentrate on thinking about something if you can see it, or at least see some depicted or symbolic representation of it. Learners who are asked to discuss or listen to something without any visual focus often find their attention wandering. This is because sight is an extremely powerful sense: if you do not provide your students with something to look at, they will seek and find it elsewhere, in objects that have nothing to do with the learning task and that may distract them. An exercise that uses both aural and visual cues is likely, therefore, to be more interesting than one that is only speech-based.

On the other hand, open-endedness constitutes a powerful tool for creativity and variety. A task that is open-ended allows for lots of different learner responses during its performance, and is therefore conducive to the production of varied and original ideas. Even if the basic structural framework of the response is prescribed in advance, learners' motivation to participate rises significantly if they are allowed to choose the actual 'content' words to use: the contributions, written or spoken, become less predictable and more interesting. For example, suppose you want to practice adverbs of frequency: one technique is to supply a sentence such as 'he has coffee for breakfast', and then ask students to insert the adverb 'always'. The result is boring because it is predictable and totally of uninteresting content. But if students are asked to suggest all sorts of things they always (or usually, or sometimes, etc.) do when, say, they are feeling depressed, or when they have a free day, the exercise immediately becomes more interesting for all participants (what



do you do when....?). True, it also means they have to find their own vocabulary: but usually they can manage with what they know; and you can always supply the occasional new word as needed.

Another efficient strategy to adopt with learners is personalization. It means the use of interaction based on the students' personal experiences, opinions, ideas and feelings. Too many textbooks seem to see the learners merely as potential containers of knowledge, and neglect to relate to them as individual people. This expresses itself in exercises which ask them only to do things such as to express objective facts, or to manipulate texts about unknown characters, or to discuss issues that do not touch their (the students') own lives. From an educational and moral point of view, I find these kinds of books uncongenial; it seems to me a basic tenet of good teaching that the teacher-student relationship should be built on the entire personalities of both teacher and student, like any other human relationship, not just on their language teaching or language learning faculties. But also from the point of view of interest, to fail to relate to the students' individual backgrounds, thoughts and feelings is to deprive ourselves of an excellent source of interesting activities.<sup>(10)</sup>

As an example of a non-personalized exercise, learners can be asked to practice present perfect forms by discussing how long something shown in a picture has gone on, or has been going on. This can be a useful exercise providing plenty of use of the structure. But a much higher level of interest is likely to result if we ask students to talk about things they themselves 'have done' or 'have been doing'. Their contributions are interesting not only because they are unpredictable and likely to be very varied and original, but also because there is an element of personal investment: the students are 'giving' of themselves to each other. This not only raises the level of attention to what is said, it also tends to contribute to an atmosphere of warmth and friendliness within the class.

Finally, pleasurable tension is also of interest as it enhances learners' motivation. The introduction of pleasurable tension does not necessarily mean the activity may be called a 'game'. There is a fundamental difference between a true 'game', played for fun and recreation, and a 'game-like' language practice procedure which is a serious goal-oriented activity, performed primarily for the sake of its contribution to learning. The distinction is, it is true, largely one of pedagogical approach and an educationally valid and significant one.<sup>(11)</sup>

A grammar practice activity, then, should be presented to the class in an enjoyable way and may be made interesting to do by the introduction of an element

of tension associated with game-playing. Such tension is enjoyable because it is rooted in the drive to achieve some stimulating and clearly- defined objective. <sup>(12)</sup>

For example, if the class is shown a picture and invited to make up sentences about it using the present progressive, the objective is rather ill-defined, and there is no particular challenge involved. If, however, we rephrase the objective: ‘Make up 20 sentences about the picture using the present progressive’, there is an immediate rise in tension (can we get to 20 or can’t we?), and interest increases. We can increase it still further by introducing a time limit (‘Make up 20 sentences about the picture using the present progressive within two minutes’) and/or an element of competition (‘which group can make the most sentences about the picture using the present progressive in two minutes?’). This sequence of exercises enhances students’ motivation to participate and increases the amount of language produced with each step. <sup>(13)</sup>

Communicatively oriented classroom activity is what most foreign-language teachers are trying to achieve, because these activities contribute to the goal of enabling the learners to communicate freely in the foreign language. The purpose of this article has been to show the powerful role of communicative activities to promote learning and motivate learners. Besides teachers can turn boring tasks to very exciting ones where learners’ interest and motivation are raised. By using such activities, teachers create an acquisition-rich classroom with contexts of language use where learners have a reason to attend the language classroom. In this way, learners can integrate separate structures into a creative system for expressing their personal meanings. <sup>(14)</sup>

Communicative activities should be adopted by most language teachers for their usefulness in making the classroom a focal point for creative language teaching and learning. The aim is to let the student become personally involved with communicative tasks. Communicative activities are those in which the student himself supplies the sounds, the words and structures needed to express his thought. Thus, the emphasis is on putting thoughts into words rather than decoding the thought from the words. Viewing language learning as a natural creative process rather than as habit formation suggests that the teacher should provide guided practice in thinking in the language rather than mere repetitive drill. Such mental involvement tends to make language learning more enjoyable for the student-which must itself be a positive factor contributing to improved attitudes and better results. <sup>9</sup>

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In conclusion, activity in the language lesson is very important. In any remarks on the teaching of English as a foreign language, high place must be given to the recommendation that the lesson must be active. The first requisite for an active lesson is an active, lively teacher. The lesson is also too passive when the students sit tied to their desks and tied to their textbooks with only occasional mouth-openings, and these for only a few of them, to answer a question or read a few sentences. This is a dead lesson in a living language. There must be a textbook and it must be studied, but the lesson can still be often lifted from the passive book-level to a more active level of living use. It is the argument here to stress the importance of the teacher ; for she is strongly urged to create a lively atmosphere in the learning situation.

Finally, but most important of all, it is appropriate to remind ourselves that teaching involves much more than a knowledge of methods. However well-versed a teacher may be in psychology or linguistic theories and techniques, this knowledge alone will not assure success. An even more basic ingredient of all teaching is the teacher's attitude towards his/her students and his work.<sup>(15)</sup>

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