

THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO STUDENTS IN AUTOMATICS

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Abstract: The Communicative Approach is a modern teaching approach based on the concept of learning a language through having to communicate real meaning. In the Communicative Approach, real communication is both the objective in learning and the means through which it takes place. This approach was initiated during the 1970's and quickly became prominent, as it proposed an alternative to the previous systems-oriented approaches. In other words, instead of focusing on the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary, the Communicative Approach aims at developing students' competence to communicate in the target language with an enhanced focus on real-life situations. To put it in a nutshell, the Communicative Approach considers *using* the language to be just as important as actually *learning* the language.

Keywords: communication; approach; linguistic competence; knowledge.

1. Introduction

English Language Teaching Methodology is concerned with the question of how to efficiently learn and teach English to students. It addresses everybody who aims at the teaching profession in foreign language education at school or in the field of continuous education. The skills to teach or train and to impart information and knowledge to others is vital for a wide range of jobs outside the traditional field of teaching. For students in Automatics, a good command of English is essential, as most of programming software is in English and this domain of activity is expanding at a pace that has never been encountered before. As a consequence, and in line with other similar studies (Dejica-Cartis A. & D. Dejica-Cartis, 2013) fluent accurate communication in English is of paramount importance.

There are five main objectives of English Language Teaching for students in Automatics: to develop students' cognitive structures, to enhance students' capabilities to recognize values embedded in language behaviour, to interpret authentic texts of specialized technical genres, to stir their interest in using English as alternate channel of communication and to enable the learner to communicate effectively and appropriately in real life situations. None of them can be achieved but with the help of communication, which is the ultimate goal of learning a second language. In recent years, the purely Structural Approach to English Language Teaching has been intensively criticised, as it tends to produce students who, despite having the ability to produce structurally accurate language, are generally deficient in their ability to use the language and understand its use in real communication. The Structural Approach is the least enjoyable method of teaching, as it consists of memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules through repetition.

A different approach developed in an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of the structural method is the Communicative Approach to language teaching, based on a combination of linguistic structures, situational settings and communicative acts. There is yet another method, the Conversational Approach, which can be considered the opposite of the Structural Approach, in which it is assumed that exposure to lots of conversation with a native English speaker will produce a high level of linguistic competence in the students. However, whereas the Structural Approach promotes accuracy and tends to inhibit communicative competence, the Conversational Approach encourages communication. Out of the three approaches, we consider that the Communicative Approach, given the nature of specialization for students in Automatics, is the most appropriate method of teaching for reasons that will be presented further in this paper.

2. About the Communicative Approach. Origins and Definition

The origins of the Communicative Approach can be traced in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The Communicative Approach was proposed as an alternative to the previous systems-oriented approaches. Hymes, Chomsky and Wilkins were some of the linguists who contributed to the rise of this modern approach. These linguists claimed that students were unable to learn the realistic language. Students lacked the necessary abilities to communicate outside the classroom in real life situations, using the appropriate social language. So far, they were relying on the structures of language instead of relying on functions and notions of language. This made them unable to communicate in the culture of the language studied, which was a major disadvantage for students in general.

The Communicative Approach, which is an alternative method of teaching second and foreign languages, emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. The Communicative Competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge (Richards:2006, p.88):

- how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions;
- how to vary the use of language according to the setting and the participants;
- how to produce and understand different types of texts;
- how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge.

The Communicative Approach comprises a set of core principles about language learning and teaching, assumptions which can be applied in different ways, and which address different aspects of the processes of teaching and learning. While some of them focus centrally on the input to the learning process, the content-based teaching stresses that the content or subject matter of teaching drives the whole language learning process. Some teaching proposals focus more directly on instructional processes. Task-based instruction, for example, advocates the use of specially designed instructional tasks as the basis of learning. Others, such as competency-based instruction and text-based teaching, focus on the outcomes of learning and use outcomes or products as the starting point in planning to teach.

3. The Communicative Approach. Pros and Cons

The Communicative Approach has a series of advantages: it is very popular, it offers almost-complete immersion into the language and can be combined with multimedia or computer-based techniques. However, there are also some major disadvantages: one is the study of grammar, more exactly the need for a good command of grammar structures. Some people consider that by using the Communicative Approach, the grammar will be acquired automatically, which means that there is no need to study it separately. However, this assumption is completely wrong, as the study of grammar in the Communicative Method of teaching should occupy at least 25% of the study. Because this type of knowledge is given unsystematically and is often presented in the form of a short comment, the result is that students do not understand the logic of language, therefore they are unable to use it in full.

Another serious drawback of this approach is the teachers' tendency to ignore students' errors. Learning a foreign language is a gradual process, during which mistakes are to be expected in all stages of learning. Mistakes do not vanish just because they have been identified, contrary to what some language learners believe. Language acquisition is not accomplished unless the student is relaxed and keen on learning. Sometimes students are afraid of making mistakes and this concern makes them less receptive and responsive. In order to overcome students' fear, it is essential to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in language classrooms, to encourage cooperation through peer work or small group work and apply techniques for language acquisition that suit and involve individual learners.

Another aspect of overcoming fear of mistakes is the way mistakes can be remedied. Most English as a Foreign Language professors assume an active role in error correction, while learners prefer being passive and rely on professors to point out their mistakes. In the long run, this approach is neither efficient nor efficacious, particularly in treating the so-called *fossilized* errors. The contemporary emphasis on learner-centeredness and autonomy suggests that, in specific circumstances, learner's self-correction of errors might be more beneficial for language learning than professor's correction.

So, what is the difference between errors and mistakes? One of the most distinguished American linguists, Noam Chomsky, set apart *errors* from *mistakes* as two distinctive notions. He pointed out that native speakers produce mistakes when they speak, although a native speaker should naturally have a perfect command of his language, more precisely a perfect knowledge of grammatical rules, lexis and sound system. Mistakes can be seen as a common problem, which can appear in different circumstances, such as when we are nervous, tired, speak too fast or think too quickly. After all, *to err is human*, they say. The causes of making mistakes can be identified in psychological restrictions, memory lapses, distractions, changes of direction half-way through the sentence, hesitation, slips of the tongue or confusion. On the other hand, errors can be defined a systematically produced problem, which is usually the result of partially ingrained patterns of language that we are not aware of. Mistakes are caused by lack of attention or concentration, whereas errors are caused by lack of knowledge about the target language.

To correct an error implies providing a correct model for the learner to emulate. Correcting errors should be made with extreme caution: too much correction produces a class of students whose fluency suffers. They become too much concerned with grammatically correct responses and they produce lengthy pauses before answering even the least difficult questions, focusing too much on word order, verb tense or other grammar issues. If the professor decides to correct too little, then words rush out of the mouths of students and the sentences that are thus produced are full of grammar and vocabulary incompatibilities. Too much or too little correction can hinder communication, so finding the correct balance of the correction degree is the key to efficient communication for students.

When errors occur as a result of mother-tongue interference, they may be remedied by pointing out the correct forms repeatedly. If errors occur as a result of overgeneralization, errors are not to be regarded as signs of failure, but as evidence that the student is working his way towards the correct rules. In our opinion, the most effective form of correction in foreign language skills acquisition is self-correction. When students realize and correct their own mistakes, they are more effectively internalizing the language. The next most desirable and effective form is peer correction. When students are able to recognize and correct their mistakes collectively, they actually help each other to develop English language skills with less interference of their respective *Affective Filters* (Krashen, Terrell: 1983, p.106). Finally, there is the error correction made by the professor, which is an effective means, but this is the type of correction that should be last and the least frequently used form of error correction. In situations where the professor of English as a Foreign Language is not a native or near-native speaker or has grammar or pronunciation problems or heavy accent, recorded audio or video materials can be used in order to acquire fully functioning language performance.

4. Teaching and learning how to learn

The ability to study and learn fast and efficiently is essential for every student. In general, English Language Teaching tackles two aspects: teaching and learning how to learn, therefore English Language Teaching conveys the basic skills for all students of English. It helps students to become aware of the learning strategies, to acquire study techniques such as skimming for instance, or representation skills. English Language Teaching can be fun though, because creativity and real-life applications represent the basis and the focus of this discipline. Moreover, traditional resources can be combined with new multimedia and computer-based techniques in order to create an interactive learning environment. The traditional teaching methods may lead the way to various types of chats and meetings on the Internet, and presentations such as brochures and web pages might be a part of a new methodology to reach teaching and learning objectives.

English Language Teaching has triggered changes in pedagogical methods and continues to do so. However, the most important aspect is that the focus has shifted from teacher-controlled classes to student-centered classes. This aspect has imposed new rules and attitudes, especially for the teacher. The latest approaches in English Language Teaching define a class as a balanced two-way teacher-students relationship, in which the parts negotiate in terms of dynamics and implication.

The most important task for a teacher is to create an environment in which learning can happen efficiently. The Communicative Approach seems to be the most appropriate method toward this objective. It is of utmost importance that the learner listens and speaks with the teacher, as the teacher is the person who can decide whether the required level of accuracy is achieved. Students always look up at the person who teaches them, whom they consider to be a person with the necessary skills to observe, understand and correct the mistakes. One of the problems in teaching English to students to Automatics lies not only in the process of input, of providing information, but also in the process of output, or the type of message the students eventually produce. Taking into account that students absorb the correct picture of the language by listening to the teacher, we may easily fall into the mistake of dominating the lesson to the exclusion of any other participants. Thus, teachers should constantly acknowledge that by interacting with the teacher, a student is actually learning to interact with a competent user of English. Again, if the only conversation practice the students get is one-to-one with the teacher, then they will get a very reduced period of time to speak at all. An important observation to be made is that talking at the student does not necessarily mean that learning happens; in fact, the time when the teacher speaks is the time when students become partially disengaged from the process of learning. Instead of constantly talking to students, students' speaking time and their oral interaction should be increased.

Controler and *participant* are two concepts representing limits of teaching behaviour within the Communicative Approach. A controller teacher stands in front of the class and acts as a person who governs every aspect from teaching to students' possible reactions. In contrast, a participant teacher gets involved not only in the communicative activities, but also physically in the class, maintaining a low profile in order to allow students to perform at the highest levels possible. When learning English for specific areas of interest such as Automatics, students are receiving particular type of language, as this sort of language is somehow put into students, although this assumption is not completely satisfactory. The teacher also needs to provide opportunities for students to activate knowledge and actually produce language. A controller teacher should be aware of when and for how long he needs to allow students to talk, because language production implies practising whilst receiving feedback. Therefore, it is clear that there is a great need for communicative output from the students and also of feedback. If a controller teacher does not switch to participant teacher at the proper moment, students can no longer practise language, so their speaking skills will be negatively affected. When dealing with language input, we should observe that finely tuned input is often the focus of the presentation of new language where repetition, teacher correction, discussions and discovery techniques are frequently used to promote cognitive strategies (Vilceanu:2005, p. 57).

The Communicative Method resorts to different techniques of teaching, according to the type of students' specialisation. On one hand, there is the component of restricted practice, and on the other hand is that of free practice. When referring to restrictive tasks, we take into consideration exercises that focus on certain language topics, for example *Networking, Software, Multimedia, Robotics or Automations*. At the same time, oral practice may have as main target the words used from the previously mentioned semantic fields, so that students can produce error-free statements sustained by logical

arguments. For communicative purposes, this combination of skill enhancing activities is more appropriate than those old-school drills that simply ask students to solve exercises with fixed patterns and through which students' imagination and creativity are not challenged (Barbuceanu:2020, p. 38). Fluency and accuracy are speaking abilities which can be greatly improved by the Communicative Approach, as this method focuses on students and their linguistic needs, meeting clear-cut objectives set by the teacher after a thorough analysis of students' needs and requirements.

5. Principles of the Communicative Approach

There are ten main principles of the Communicative Approach, as follows:

1. Language learning is learning to *communicate* using the target language.
2. The language used to communicate must be appropriate to the situation, the roles of the speakers, the setting and the register. The learner needs to differentiate between a formal and an informal style.
3. Communicative activities are essential. Activities should be presented in a situation or context and have a communicative purpose.
4. Learners must have constant interaction with and exposure to the target language.
5. Development of the four main language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) is integrated from the beginning, since communication integrates the different skills.
6. The topics are selected and graded regarding age, needs, level, and students' interest.
7. Motivation is central. Teachers should raise students' interest from the beginning of the lesson.
8. The role of the teacher is that of a guide, a facilitator or an instructor.
9. Trial and error are considered part of the learning process.
10. Evaluation concerns not only the learners' accuracy, but also their fluency.

6. Other methods with impact on the Communicative Approach

The way towards the Communicative Approach has been a controversial one and marked the shifting of focus from language as a systematic code to language as a means of real communication. To this purpose, various methods have had a direct impact on the establishment of the Communicative Approach as a modern and efficient way of teaching English to students, as follows:

1. *The Prussian Method*, which included detailed analysis of grammar rules and translating sentences and texts in and out of the target language;
2. *The Direct Method*, which encouraged the use of foreign language in class, by using the target language as the only channel of communication;
3. *The Situational Method*, which consisted of organizing situations using objects and pictures in order to introduce new grammar structures and vocabulary;

4. *The Audio-lingual Method*, which applied the basic principles of structural linguistics and was a combination of linguistic theory and fundamentals of behaviourism, such as stimuli, response and reinforcement;
5. *The Natural Method*, which put emphasis on the exposure to the target language rather than formal practice;
6. *The Humanistic Method*, which emerged as a response to the Natural Method, focused on the enhancement of students' self-actualization and the acknowledgement of their personalities.

The concept of Communicative Competence started to develop as early as the construct of linguistic competence and is defined as innate knowledge of language (Chomsky:1986, p. 24). Linguistic competence is just an essential component needed for communication, but not the only requirement. The Communicative Competence encompasses knowledge and how to use language in the real world, without which the grammar rules would become just theoretical knowledge. The Communicative Competence is not and should not be considered an ability. In order to be able to communicate, students need psycho-physiological mechanisms, such as communicative skills. Communication is, by definition, the process of interpersonal interaction and requires the knowledge of social conventions, i.e., the knowledge of rules regarding proper ways to communicate with people. In accordance with the social conventions, participants in a conversation perform various communicative functions (socializing, informing, persuading, eliciting information, manipulating behaviour and opinions or performing rituals), or communicative roles (leader, informer, witness, participant, catalyst or entertainer). In order to perform these functions, a speaker needs more than just theoretical knowledge of linguistic structures (Paunescu,Chiritescu:2017, p. 234-235).

7. The Communicative Competence and Knowledge. Core competences

The Communicative Competence is conceived in terms of knowledge. The Communicative Competence includes the following core competences:

1. the grammar competence (knowledge of grammar rules, lexis and phonetics);
2. the textual competence (knowledge of how to express messages);
3. the functional competence (knowledge of how to express a message in a variety of circumstances);
4. the socio-linguistic competence (knowledge of social etiquette, national mindset and values)

The Communicative Competence is probably one of the most desirable objectives in language teaching, as it allows students to express ideas and opinions in the target language. Communication requires interpersonal responsiveness rather than the production of honest, accurate and stylistically pleasing language, characteristics which belong to language rather than behaviour. Communication is produced when language is used and the manipulation of language symbols is performed successfully. Efficient communication also requires that students share the social meaning of the linguistic forms and have the same social rules for language use. Dell Hymes claimed that the Communicative Competence must include not only the linguistic forms of the target

language, but also comprehension of when, how and to whom is appropriate to use these forms (Hymes:1972, p. 63).

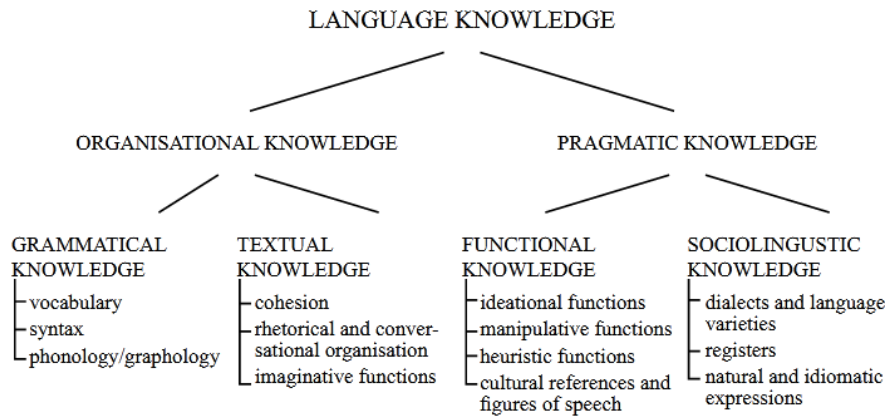


Figure 1. Areas of language knowledge. Source: Bachman &Palmer (1996, p. 68)

8. Communicative interaction activities

Linguistic Competence represents a part of the Communicative Competence; therefore, students need to acquire basic knowledge of linguistic structures. There are two types of communicative interaction activities that can be useful for developing the communicative competence for students in Automatics:

8.1. Social Formulas and Dialogues

In *Developing Communicative Competence: Interaction Activities in English as a Second Language*, Judy Kettering identified speech encounters such as greetings, partings, introductions, excuses, compliments or complaints (Kettering:1975, p. 18). Such examples are characterized by a progression from controlled language use, when students learn social formulas, to situations when they can actually use them. The phrases and dialogues are offered in order to develop students' communicative competence, provided that the teacher allocates enough time to explain the meaning and connotations of the type of situations in which students would use various expressions. These situations, ranging from structured to unstructured, take on aspects of play-acting or role play and are more effective with an audience.

8.2. Community-oriented Tasks

These are sets of exercises which compel students to interact with native speaker outside the classroom. For this type of task, background knowledge is essential, as it makes no sense to force students to try to communicate as long as linguistic knowledge is poor. Successful communication can be achieved only through a careful selection of

strategies and techniques, known as the four good maxims of good communication. Grice outlined four main *maxims of conversation*, which describe how people communicate when they want to make sure that they're properly understood by others. Grice's rationale for these maxims was as follows:

1. *Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. This purpose or direction may be fixed from the start (e.g., by an initial proposal of a question for discussion), or it may evolve during the exchange; it may be fairly definite, or it may be so indefinite as to leave very considerable latitude to the participants (as in a casual conversation). But at each stage, some possible conversational moves would be excluded as conversationally unsuitable. We might then formulate a rough general principle which participants will be expected (ceteris paribus) to observe, namely: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. One might label this the Cooperative Principle. On the assumption that some such general principle as this is acceptable, one may perhaps distinguish four categories under one or another of which will fall certain more specific maxims and submaxims, the following of which will, in general, yield results in accordance with the Cooperative Principle. Echoing Kant, I call these categories Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. (Grice:1989, p. 81)*



Figure 2. Grice's Maxims. Source: slidetodoc.com

Here is a brief description of Grice's Maxims:

Maxims of Quantity

- ✓ **Make your contribution as informative as is required.** Provide all the information which is necessary for the purpose of the current exchange; don't leave out anything important.
- ✓ **Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.** Leave out any unnecessary details that aren't important to the current exchange.

Maxims of Quality

- ✓ **Try to make your contribution one that is true.**
- ✓ **Do not say what you believe to be false.** Avoid stating information that you believe might be wrong, unless there is some compelling reason to do so. If you

do choose to include it, then provide a disclaimer that points your doubts regarding this information.

- ✓ **Do not say that for which you lack evidence.** Avoid including information that you can't back up with supporting evidence. If you do choose to include such information for some reason, provide a disclaimer that points out your doubts.

Maxim of Relation

- ✓ **Be relevant.** Make sure that all the information you provide is relevant to the current exchange; omit irrelevant information.

Maxims of Manner

- ✓ **Be perspicuous.**
- ✓ **Avoid obscurity of expression.** Avoid language which is difficult to understand, because it contains words that the listener doesn't know.
- ✓ **Avoid ambiguity.** Avoid ambiguous language which can be interpreted in multiple ways, and which therefore makes it difficult for your recipient to understand what exactly you are trying to say.
- ✓ **Be brief.** Provide information in a concise manner, that allows your recipient to focus on the key details.
- ✓ **Be orderly.** Provide information in an order that makes sense and makes it easy for your recipient to process it.

These maxims of conversation are intuitive and offer us an ideal picture of how communication should be like. For instance, it is clear that, if we want to have an efficient communication, we should make sure that what we say is relevant to the discussion. In fact, people often unwittingly ignore many of these maxims so that their communication efforts are hindered. Therefore, in order to make communication as effective and free of issues as possible, we should regard these maxims as a sort of guiding principles. We should also keep in mind that abiding by these maxims when conveying information to others is the best way to have effective communication.

9. Suggestion of activities to be conducted to students in Automatics

Here are some activities that can be used in a Communicative Approach lesson to students in Automatics:

❖ Role-plays

In role-plays, students are given an imaginary situation and are asked to perform a different role or act as themselves in a particular scenario. Role-plays enable learners to imagine themselves in realistic situations and "rehearse" before they need to use English in real life. They can also be fun and motivating for students. For example, the teacher can create the framework of a situation in which an engineer in Automatics is required to identify the problem of malfunctioning robots, while another student plays the role of an intelligent robot who fails to comply with Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics;

❖ Information-gap activities

Information-gap activities require students to talk to each other and find out missing information they need to perform a certain task. The information missing might include words, numbers and even drawings. The main point is to get students to talk and work collaboratively to share all information they need. For this type of activity, the teacher

can choose an incomplete scheme of a remotely controlled robot, then ask students to identify the name of the missing component so that the robot becomes functional;

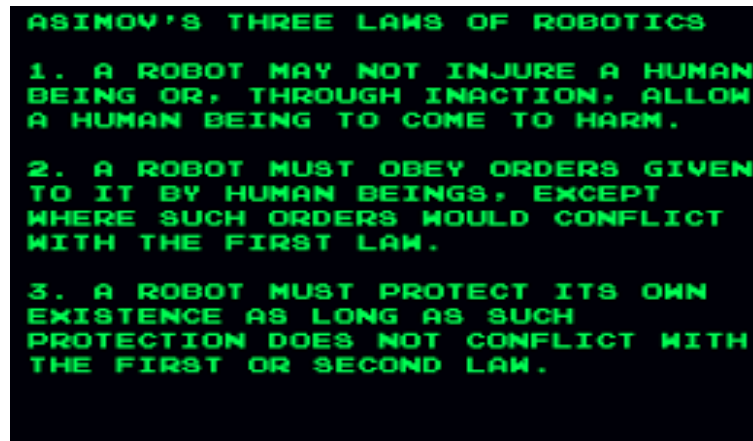


Figure 3. Asimov's *Three Laws of Robotics*. Source: Pinterest

❖ Jigsaw activities

Jigsaw activities involve learners reading, listening or performing different tasks at the same time and later sharing what they have done with their peers. For example, half of the students can be asked to watch a video about Aibo, the most advanced Japanese robot, performing physical tasks and the other half can be asked to watch a different video, showing Aibo comforting patients in a hospital. After students watch the videos and complete tasks for comprehension, they are asked to share what they found out with their peers related to Aibo's capabilities.

❖ Open-ended discussions and debates

Debates and discussions can be a useful tool for fluency practice. They enable students to share their own views on topics and use their communicative resource to convey ideas, make points and agree and disagree with others. Debates are usually engaging and provide a rich resource for teachers to assess their students' Communicative Competence. For example, the teacher can ask students to identify the pros and cons on Artificial Intelligence, then ask students to support their opinions on this topic.

10. All things considered...

The Communicative Approach considers *using* the language to be just as important as actually *learning* the language and it has the advantage of being based on a combination of linguistic structures, situational settings and communicative acts. Using the Communicative Method to teach English to students in Automatics may be the most efficient way, as it focuses on developing students' competence to communicate in the target language with an enhanced focus on real-life situations.

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