



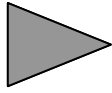
**A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING
BUSINESS ENGLISH**

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Abstract

The present article focuses on what has been called the “communicative approach” to teaching. The main idea is to focus on language acquisition rather than language learning, on fluency rather than accuracy. Since the traditional method of correcting students’ every single mistake seems to have a negative impact on their self-confidence, the article suggests an alternative approach – that of encouraging students to speak freely, in spite of minor errors. Among some of the factors to be taken into account, the most important are teacher roles, learner roles and the students’ actual knowledge of the language.

Keywords: language acquisition, language learning, fluency, accuracy, communication

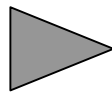


Introductory remarks

The present article intends to make some suggestions concerning the teaching-learning process for the students in the Faculty of International Business and Economics and the Faculty of Business Administration, and especially for the students in the first year of study, that is, before the syllabus stipulates teaching commercial correspondence proper.

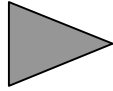
For the first year students, the syllabuses include the revision of grammar rules, combined with the study of business-oriented texts, without however tackling the complex domain of commercial correspondence. This first year seems to have the very complex - and difficult - role of “preparing” students for their future specialization, a specialization which, taking into account the present labour market requirements (now that Romania is an EU member state), includes very good knowledge of foreign languages, English being a priority.

The present article attempts to make some suggestions regarding this process of preparing students for proficiency in the target language (English in this case).



Main concepts

To begin with, the dichotomy *acquisition / learning* must be highlighted. *Acquisition* refers to an unconscious process that involves the naturalistic development of language proficiency through *understanding language* and through *using language for meaningful communication*. *Learning*, by contrast, refers to a process in which *conscious rules about a language are developed*. It results in explicit knowledge about the forms of a language and the ability to verbalize this knowledge. Formal teaching (still widespread in Romania) is necessary for learning to occur, and correction of errors (even of minor ones) helps with the development of learned rules. According to the traditional theories of teaching, it is learning alone that leads to good knowledge of a foreign language.



Students of English as FL1 or belonging to the English module

What is the problem, then? The problem seems to be related mostly to the Romanian reality. The Romanian revolution in 1989 brought about a complete change of mentality. Ever since then, the clash between the old ways and the new approach, adopted overnight, has led to a chaotic understanding of the education process. There is nothing wrong with “updating” an old mentality, unless renewal itself is misunderstood. For some students, this new approach implies a total refusal of traditional teaching structures. The students in the Faculty of International Business and Economics and in the Faculty of Business Administration, especially those majoring in English, or belonging to the English section / module, have been through an entrance examination test requiring good knowledge of grammar rules. Consequently, they are often under the impression that they know “everything” related to grammar. The fact that their media-induced acquisition of the vocabulary and language structures has enhanced their overall proficiency helps in boosting their self-confidence. However, their impression that they already know “everything” is not always justified. Often, they have forgotten what they knew (also under the influence of the education system, involving many exams, so the student automatically forgets what he / she knew the very next day after the exam, in order to “produce” a brand new memory for the next exam). In other cases, they did not know so much in the first place, since they did not consider this knowledge to be in any way useful or relevant to their future careers. Anyway, some of them strongly believe that they know more than they in fact do, and consequently refuse any form of grammar revision.

Of course, the teacher can impose his / her point of view in spite of this fact. But he / she thus runs the risk of losing the friendly atmosphere in the classroom. A better way to “dupe” the students into reviving their grammar competence, and at the same time improving their communicative skills, would be what has been called *the communicative approach*.

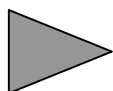
In this approach, the target language will be acquired by the student, rather than learned. The language acquirer is seen as a processor of comprehensible input. He / she is challenged by input that is slightly beyond his / her current level of competence. Therefore, he / she is able to assign meaning to this input through an active use of context and extralinguistic information. The facilitator must create a classroom atmosphere that is interesting and friendly.

He / she will do this by not demanding speech from the students unless they are willing to participate (unless, of course, in cases of overt lack of cooperation from them), not correcting minor student errors (but correcting blatant ones) and

providing subject matters of high interest to the students. The teacher is seen as responsible for collecting materials and designing their use. Indeed, the seminar is text-oriented, and the materials must connect with the realities in our country and with the active needs and interests of the students.

The formal / grammatical organization of language as a prerequisite to teaching is an important issue. However, it will be completed by the stress laid on the students improving their communicative competence in the target language. The students will be compelled to reactivate their grammar knowledge by being forced to use it in a challenging context. Thus, the learning process will produce mastery of the language at a native level. The target linguistic system will not be revised through the overt re-teaching of the patterns of the system, but will best be remembered through the process of struggling to communicate.

Of course, the teachers must find a way in-between brutally enforcing their point of view upon the students and being dominated by them. Ideally, the student should actually acquire the language, if possible, without being aware of doing so. If they are recalcitrant to the friendly atmosphere pursued by their facilitator and they refuse to cooperate, naturally, a more severe stand shall be taken. However, the students in the Faculty of International Economic Relations, as well as those in the Faculty of Business Administration, are in most cases highly motivated, as good knowledge of English is a must nowadays in every rewarding job; therefore, they are not likely to oppose the goodwill of their teacher.

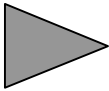


Students of English as FL2

There is, indeed, another category of students, namely the students of English as their second foreign language. Why do they choose English as their second foreign language, although many of them have never studied it before? For pragmatic reasons: they need English badly. So, even if in high-school they studied, say, German and Spanish and they passed an entrance examination in German, they now have German as the major language, but some of them prefer to choose English as their minor language, or even as the third language, the study of which is optional in the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. Therefore, students come to the seminar convinced that, since they never studied this language, they know nothing.

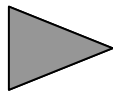
This category of students represents the exact opposite of their counterparts majoring in English, who think they know more than they actually do; these students with English as FL2 are often not aware of the things they know. We are exposed, in Romania, to a wide range of contacts with the English language, mostly through television. Watching TV, people come to be familiar with the

language. Also, more importantly, as many students work and are obliged to use English in their contacts with foreigners, (for instance, some have part-time jobs in call centres) many of them have a solid vocabulary and even a slight knowledge of grammar, which exists, though in a latent state, somewhere in their unconscious. When confronted with such cases, it is the role of the teacher to make the student aware of what he/she knows, to help him/her bring to the surface these things in order to use them successfully. In many cases, we are dealing with a psychological obstacle: aware of the fact that English grammar exists, that it is not easy and that they have never studied it, obsessed with the idea that they cannot possibly speak a language they have never officially studied, the students experience a psychological blockage. With much patience and tact, the facilitator has to help the students through this period, and combine his/her teaching of grammar rules with many communication exercises, to help the students become aware of, and successfully use, the things they know. Therefore, careful selection of texts of interest to the students is highly recommended, texts which must be read in the classroom and followed by interesting, challenging discussions on the topics they raise. Perfect knowledge of grammar, doubled by poor communication skills, is not desired. On the other hand, satisfactory grammar competence combined with good communication skills, and, last but not least, with the students convinced that they are able to use the foreign language efficiently is preferable. The mastery of structures is not enough, unless it is accompanied by communicative proficiency. Language learners need, first and foremost, to understand others and express their ideas. Instead of "learning to use" it may be better to "use English in order to learn it". This approach looks similar to the "on-the-job training" that many companies resort to nowadays. Attempts to communicate must be encouraged from the very beginning, as communicative competence (i.e. the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately) is the desired goal. Language is thus created by the individual often through trial and error; still, by the time students are faced with commercial correspondence, they will have both learned grammar rules, and acquired good communication skills.



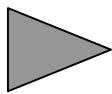
Learner roles

Breen and Candlin best describe learner roles: "the role of learner as negotiator (between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning) emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom, procedures and activities which the group undertakes. He should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an interdependent way". (Breen and Candlin, 1980:110)



Teacher roles

The teacher must facilitate the communication process among all participants in the classroom, as well as raise a positive response to the various activities and texts. He/she must also act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group. He/she is a researcher, a learner, an analyst, a counsellor, and a group activity manager at the same time. The materials he /she is expected to provide for the students must range from business-oriented textbook materials to authentic materials, like magazines, advertisements, and mostly newspaper articles. Also, the use of new, topical, business-oriented subjects from the international press has to be encouraged. Broadly speaking, teachers are supposed to help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language, rather than control the learners and prevent them from doing anything that conflicts with the theory.



Conclusions

What has been suggested above does not claim to be a method, but rather an approach. We are proposing a combination of theoretical consistency (represented by language and learning theory) with individual interpretation and variation. It may be viewed as a humanistic approach to teaching, bringing together the study of grammar rules and the stimulation of an interactive process of communication. Fluency and acceptable language become an important goal; accuracy is enriched with new meanings, being judged not in the abstract but in context. Intrinsic motivation will spring from what is being communicated by language.

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