HOW TO IMPROVE THE SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

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COMO APRIMORAR A HABILIDADE ORAL BASEANDO-SE NA ABORDAGEM COMUNICATIVA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at analyzing appropriate ways to promote language learning in the classroom based on the Communicative Approach, taking as main study references Jeremy Harmer (1998), Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers (1986). This theme was chosen due to the importance given to oral communication during the process of learning a language. For the accomplishment of this study, some proposals to improve the speaking skills and interaction - to assess the students` effectiveness - will be illustrated in order to show how the proposals get done into classroom practice. The student and the teacher`s roles will be presented in order to achieve the communicative goals efficiently and to promote a valuable interaction between these characters. The article reveals that *a)* the Communicative Approach contributes to the students` motivation while developing the target language; *b)* the Approach helps students to produce language for specific situational contexts easily; *c)* the students are able to understand an extended authentic discourse without thinking about isolated words; *d)* the activities also have an influence on the student`s written production. It is believed that the theme analyzed at this study

will help the teachers in their teaching practice, especially concerning the development of students` fluency.

Keywords: communication; improvement; interaction; development; skills.

RESUMO

Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar formas adequadas para promover a aprendizagem de línguas na sala de aula, com base na Abordagem Comunicativa, tomando como principais referências de estudo Jeremy Harmer (1998), Jack C. Richards e Theodore S. Rodgers (1986). Este tema foi escolhido devido à importância dada à comunicação oral durante o processo de aprendizagem de uma língua. Para a realização deste estudo, algumas propostas para a melhoria das habilidades de fala e de interação – para avaliar a eficácia dos alunos - serão ilustradas para mostrar como as propostas são feitas em prática na sala de aula. Os papéis do aluno e do professor serão apresentados a fim de atingir os objetivos de comunicação eficiente e promover uma interação importante entre esses personagens. A análise revela que: a) a Abordagem Comunicativa contribui com a motivação dos alunos durante o desenvolvimento da língua-alvo; b) a abordagem ajuda os alunos a produzirem facilmente a linguagem para determinados contextos situacionais; c) os alunos são capazes de compreender um discurso autêntico prolongado sem pensar em palavras isoladas; e d) as atividades também têm influência sobre a produção escrita dos alunos. Acredita-se que o tema analisado neste estudo vai ajudar os professores em sua prática docente, especialmente em relação ao desenvolvimento da fluência dos alunos.

Palavras-chave: comunicação; melhoria; interação; desenvolvimento; habilidades.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking a second language is a crucial detail for the mankind process of development in different areas, such as, economical, social, political and cultural. Nowadays it is essential to be aware of this detail, otherwise we could be excluded from the social environment, that is globalized. In fact, the English language teaching is becoming part of the natural process of learning and the number of people interested in learning a L2 is constantly increasing due to a high demand required.

The goal of language is communication and the aim at speaking in a language context is to promote communicative efficiency; so to learn efficiently a second language it is necessary to practice the four important skills: writing, speaking, listening and reading, but the emphasis on this study will be sustained particularly in analyses focused on the practice of "speaking". As speaking is interrelated with the other skills, its development results in the development of the others.

Teachers want their students to actually be able to use the language as correct as possible and with a purpose. Students often value speaking more than the other skills of reading, writing and listening so motivation is not always as big of an issue, but what often happens is students feel more anxious related to their oral production.

Making students speak is neither an easy nor a fast process. Teachers must be aware of some special techniques that will help to achieve this objective. These techniques are based on different approaches. For this research, specially, the Communicative Approach is going to be the object of study since that the main purpose in discussion is on promoting language into the classroom and supporting ideas that will be mentioned in order to share the scientific contribution brought with other teachers helping them to achieve positive results in the oral production with their students.

During this study process, a few issues of utmost relevance will be discussed: What are the benefits of the Communicative Approach? What contributions can the materials develop? What are the teacher`s roles? And what are the Communicative tasks that can be developed with students to achieve better results in the oral production?

The method used for the production of the research will be the deductive bibliographic method; based on logical reasoning presented by the communicative proposals.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING ORIGINS

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was originated dating from the late 1960s and it is known to be the product of Situational Language Teaching, which represented the major British approach to teaching English as a foreign language. This method was thought by using meaningful situational-based activities. After a while, linguists began to put in evidence some theoretical assumptions against the method (RICHARDS; RODGERS, 1986).

> By the end of the sixties it was clear that the situational approach …had run its course. There was no future in continuing to pursue the chimera of predicting language on the basis of situational events. What was required was a closer study of the language itself and a return to the traditional concept that utterances carried meaning in themselves and expressed the meanings and intentions of the speakers and writers who created them (HOWATT, 1984, p. 280 apud RICHARDS; RODGERS, 1986, p. 64).

For the American linguist Noam Chomsky (1986, p. 64), the current standard structural theories of language were incapable of accounting for the fundamental characteristic of language – the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. British applied linguists emphasized another fundamental dimension of language teaching at that time – the functional and communicative potential of language. "They saw the need to focus

in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures" (RICHARDS; RODGERS, 1986, p. 64).

> Afterwards, a huge change happened in the European educational context. The need to articulate and develop alternative methods of language teaching was considered a high priority. With this in mind, a British linguist D.A Wilkins (1972) proposed a functional or communicative definition of language that could serve as a basis for developing communicative syllabuses for language teaching. Wilkins attempted to demonstrate the systems of meanings that lay behind the communicative uses of language. He described two types of meanings: notional categories (concepts such as time, sequence, quantity, location, frequency) and categories of communicative function (requests, denials, offers, complaints) (WIKINS, 1972 apud RICHARDS; RODGERS, 1986, p. 64).

According to Richards and Rodgers (1986, p. 64) some British scholars[1] also contributed with the theory development that generated rapid acceptance to what came to be referred as the Communicative Approach, or simply Communicative Language Teaching.

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

The Communicative Approach is a way of teaching which is based on the principle that learning a language successfully involves communication rather than just memorizing a series of rules. Teachers try to focus on meaningful communication, rather than focusing on accuracy and correcting mistakes all time.

> Piepho (1981) discusses the following levels of objectives in a communicative approach:
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> 1. an integrative and content level (language as a mean of expression);
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> 2. a linguistic and instrumental level (language as semiotic system and an objective of learning);
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> 3. Widdowson, Candlin, Christopher Brumfit, Keith Johnson were some

examples of British scholars who advocates the Communicative Language Teaching;

4. an effective level of interpersonal relationships and conduct (language as a means of expression values and judgments about oneself and others);

5. a level of individual learning needs (remedial learning based on error analysis);

6. a general educational level of extra-linguistic goals (language learning within the second curriculum) (PIEPHO, 1981, p. 8 apud RICHARDS; RODGERS, 1986 p. 73).

Canale and Swain (1980) provided a more recent description of Communicative Competence divided in four dimensions. The *Grammatical competence* refers to the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity. The *Sociolinguistic competence* refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction. The *Discourse competence* focuses on the individual message elements and how the meaning is represented to the entire discourse or text. And the *Strategic competence* which refers to the coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication.

THE TEACHER ROLES

The teacher roles are fundamental during the process of teaching--learning acquisition. The teacher`s tasks are not only in explaining the content and transmitting the knowledge but also motivating students to develop language either determined to situational context or guides the students and shows them the possibilities of utilization of various language mechanisms. Providing feedback, for example, is a

way to promote motivation. It usually happens because students feel extremely comfortable when they are praised by the teacher as a result of a positive task. (It usually happens when the student gets a good grade on testing, presents a good pronunciation, answers questions effectively, etc).

> The principal way that teachers can influence learners` motivation is by making the classroom a supportive environment in which students are stimulated, engaged in activities that are appropriate to their age, interests, and cultural backgrounds, and most importantly, where students can experience success (LIGHTBROWN; SPADA, 2006, p. 185).

According to the web site <http://www.education.ualberta.ca> (2009), when assisting students in the development of their oral skills, there are some tips and techniques that teachers can use to minimize students' anxiety and to make the development as efficient and practical as possible. This way, students will learn more and have increased motivation to continue this skill development.

Creating authentic practice activities that as similar to real-life as possible can be a good way to promote language in classroom as creating different contexts in which students can practice in order to broaden their vocabulary and experiential horizons. Generally it`s easier to talk about themselves than about someone else; the teacher should provide scaffolding and support for each context (this means making sure students are aware of the appropriate vocabulary and what social or cultural norms are appropriate); do not focus solely on errors; correct as much as each student can handle, more advanced students can often handle more correction, but avoid excessive correction if it will promote anxiety; give students options to use when responding to questions and teach them those options; allow them to use minimal responses if it reduces anxiety but make sure all students are aware of the possibilities.

This allows for differentiation, as students can use the level of response that they feel comfortable with;

Another point that also contributes for this purpose is to develop routines involving certain scripts (ie greetings, compliments, asking certain questions) so students become comfortable and familiar with those scripts; use gestures to help get meaning across and encourage students to do the same; emphasize that what is important is the meaning; and of course, make it fun.

Besides the aspects concerning the communicative approach there are also some fundamental teacher roles that make an L2 class more interesting. According to Harmer, (1998, p. 1-2) a research was made with European teachers and methodologists. The purpose was to give answers that represent a good teacher. Among them, it was related that: a good teacher should make the lessons interesting in order not to have their student asleep; they might have lots of knowledge not only of his subject; they might be an entertainer and has a positive sense, not a negative one; they should help their students rather than shout; try and draw out the quiet ones and control the more talkative ones; they should know their students` names and also love their job.

> The teacher has two main roles: the first role is to facilitate the communication process between all the participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning teaching group. The latter role is closely related to the objectives of the first role and arises from it. These roles imply a set of secondary roles for the teacher; first, as an organizer of resources and as a resource himself, second as a guide within the classroom procedures and activities … A third role for the teacher is that of researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities (BREEN; CANDLIN, 1980, p. 99 apud RICHARDS; RODGERS, 1986, p. 77).

HOW TO TEACH SPEAKING

For Harmer (1998), teaching speaking based on the Communicative Approach involves speaking activities that tend to follow the same basic pattern: *Engage-Study-Activate (ESA)*. This way, the teacher makes students feel interested in the topic presented, the students study any language issues that the teacher has identified as being problems and then the students are given tasks to do concerning that topic.

Engage: One of the most important elements in these ESA grade. Mostly used when the class seems to be bored. In this section the teacher tries to grab the students` attention and involve them around the theme proposed. During this teaching sequence the teacher`s main purpose is to arouse students` interest, thus involving their emotions. The activities and materials to engage students are frequently composed by: games, music, discussions, stimulating pictures, dramatic stories, amusing anecdotes, etc.

Study: In this section the students are asked to focus on language (or information) and how it is constructed (HARMER, J, 1998 p. 25). Students tend to investigate and understand the elements composed by the grammatical features. There are different ways to practice the study: the teacher can explain the grammar or the students can study by themselves inductively, students can make group works and open for discussion, etc. Some typical areas that involve the study can be: the practice of sounds (phonetics), the study of the grammar tenses, functions, pronouns, etc.

Activate: This section provides students an opportunity to put in practice everything that was previously learned. Generally, the teachers or the course books provide a range of designed activities to get students using language freely and 'communicatively' and output the language. The activities usually include: role-plays (where students

act-out, as realistically as possible), drama activities (where students perform a scene based on a situational context), discussions, drawings, dialogues, etc.

In the following three examples, some ideas about how to practice the oral production with students will be exposed. All activities satisfy the three reasons for speaking tasks which were mentioned above.

The first and the second examples were taken from the book *How to Teach English*, by Harmer (1998, p. 89-90).

Example 1 - Surveys (elementary)

According to Jeremy Harmer (1998) one way of provoking conversation and opinion exchange is to get students to conduct questionnaires and surveys. If the students plan these questionnaires themselves, the activity becomes even more useful.

In this example for elementary students, the present perfect tense has recently been introduced. The teacher wants students to activate all their language knowledge and would be only too happy if this provoked natural use of the present perfect.

PROCEDURE

The topic is sleep – ways of sleeping, sleeping exercises etc. First of all, the teacher talks about sleeping. Perhaps he tells a story about not being able to sleep, about a nightmare, or about someone he has seen sleepwalking. He gets students to give him as much 'sleep' vocabulary as they can (e.g. 'dream', 'nightmare', 'walk in your sleep', 'heavy sleeper', 'light sleeper'). The students now work in pairs to plan questions for their sleep questionnaire and the teacher goes round helping where necessary.

A simple student questionnaire might end up looking like this:

SLEEP QUESTIONNAIRE

* How many hours do you normally sleep?_____

* Are you a light sleeper / heavy sleeper?_____

* Have you ever

	YES	NO
talked in your sleep?		
walked in your sleep?		
had a nightmare?		
fallen out of bed?		

Picture 1 – Sleep Questionnaire.
Source: HARMER, 1998, p. 90.

The students go round the class questioning other students and noting down what they say. While they are doing this, the teacher listens and prompts where necessary and he then gets them to tell the class of any interesting experiences they have uncovered before moving on to remedial language work that may be necessary.

Encouraging students to stand up and walk around talking to other classmates (not only the ones they are sitting next to) has many advantages. It varies the structure of classroom periods, allows people a bit of physical movement, and provides a welcome variety of interaction.

Students can design and use surveys and questionnaires about any topic – smoking, TV watching, feelings and emotions, transport, musical preferences etc. They are often a good lead-in to writing work.

Example 2 - Discussion (intermediate / upper intermediate)

Most teachers hope they will be able to organize discussions sessions in their classroom, particularly if the exchange of opinions provokes spontaneous fluent language use. Many find, however, that discussion sections are less successful than they had hoped.

The first thing to remember is that people need time to assemble their thoughts before any discussion. The ability to give spontaneous and articulate opinions is challenging in our own language, let alone the language we are struggling to learn. The following sequence, therefore, stresses the need for discussion preparation and shows the teacher building the discussion up in stages.

PROCEDURE

The teacher starts by asking individual students to name the last film they saw. Did they enjoy it? Was it funny? Serious? Violent? The replies he gets at this point will be fairly monosyllabic, but at least the topic has been introduced and the students are enjoying thinking about movies.

The teacher now says that the class is going to concentrate on the issue of violence in films. Is there too much? Does it matter? Should anything be done about it? He puts the students into groups. In one group, the students have to think (and make notes about) the level of violence in films and what effects it might have. In another group, students have to think of (and make notes about) ways of stopping the portrayal of violence in films. In another group, students have to think up (and make notes about) reasons why the level of violence in films is quite justifiable and unworrying.

When students have had a chance to think of ideas (with the teacher going round to individual groups offering help when necessary), he asks for an opinion about violence from one of the groups. When a student has given it, he encourages other students to ask questions about that opinion. He then asks a different student to say what can be done about it, and that student, in turn, is questioned. Finally he asks a student from the 'violence isn`t worrying' group to disagree with the idea that violence in movies is a bad thing.

The teacher keeps prompting in this way until the conversation takes off, with different opinions being freely exchanged. Later, when the activity has run out of steam, he can work on any language arising out of the activity.

This kind of discussion can be formalized into a proper debate – speakers on different sides giving speeches, comments from 'the floor' and a vote at the end. It can also be provoked by giving pairs statements they have to assess on a 0 (= completely disagree) to 5 (= completely agree) scale for example.

Example 3 - Deduction (elementary / intermediate)

One type of speaking activities involves a 'Deduction' exercise, where students have to infer a story that can be told according to the pictures shown.

PROCEDURE

The grammar focus is on the simple past. To introduce the theme, the teacher should tell the students a story that happened to him / her by showing pictures that represented that description at the same time.

This popular Deduction activity is called "Continue the Story". In this activity the teacher collects different pictures (a girl, a telephone, a letter, an airplane, etc – pictures that have no connection with each other) and prints it – each picture in a different piece of paper – another option is to use the power point – each picture in a different slide. The teacher presents the first picture (e.g; a teenage girl) and starts the story: "*Once upon a time, there was a girl called Marie, she was 16 years old…",* then the teacher changes to the next picture, and the following student has to continue the story based on the picture showed.

This activity might provoke a funny and enthusiastic environment at the end of the story. It may happen because sometimes the complete

story created by the students is completely nonsense or sometimes it has a good end.

At the end the teacher can ask the students the following question: who has a story similar to that told one?
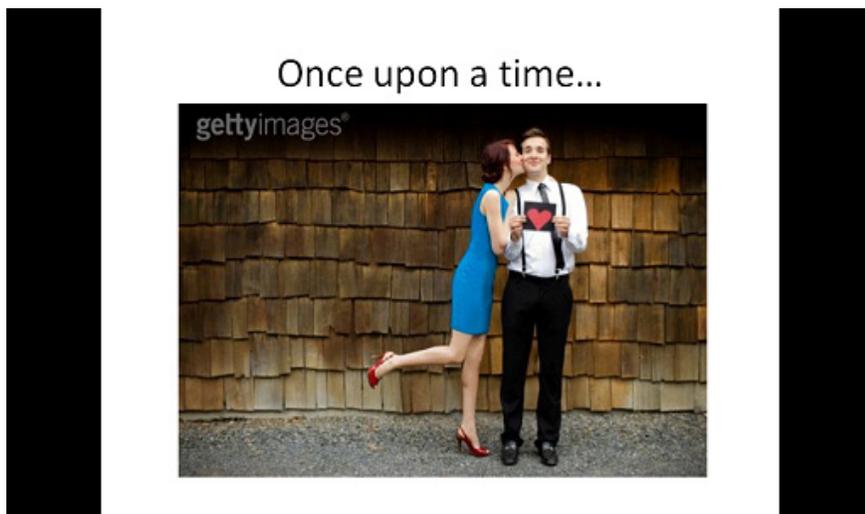
Picture 2 – Continue the Story. The first slide picture activity presented on Power Point.
Source: Getty Images, 2013.

All these three speaking activities presented above, can provide a great interference on the students` written production. The teacher can ask students - as a Post-Speaking activity - to write a composition based on the ideas shared previously in each exercise. For example: After discussing about the *Rate of Violence in Movies,* and collecting all the pros and cons between the students` arguments, the teacher can ask students to write an essay about the violence in movies explaining if they agree or not.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIALS

There is a wide variety of materials that can be used to support

communicative approach to language teaching. To exemplify, three kinds of materials, currently used in Communicative language teaching (CLT) will be considered: text based, task based, and realia.

TEXT BASED MATERIALS

Many textbooks are designed especially to support directly the Communicative Competence in language Teaching. Their syllabuses are divided into sections that follow a sequence of language practice.

> A typical lesson consists of a theme (e.g., relaying information), a task analysis for thematic development (e.g, understanding the message, asking questions to obtain clarification, asking for more information, taking notes, ordering and presenting information), a practice situation description (e.g, "A caller asks to see your manager. He does not have an appointment. Gather the necessary information from him and relay the message to your manager."), a stimulus presentation (in the preceding case, the beginning of an office conversation scripted and on tape), comprehension questions (e.g, "Why is the caller in the office?"), and paraphrase exercises (RICHARDS; RODGERS; THEODORE, 1986, p. 70).

TASK – BASED MATERIALS

A wide range of games, role-plays, simulations and task-based communication activities have been done in order to develop students` oral production. These typically are in the form of: exercise handbooks, cue cards, activity cards, pair-communication practice materials, and student-interaction practice booklets. Exercises involving conversational functions are the most common ones (restaurant, airport, store, school contexts etc). Some materials also provide drills and practice material in interactional formats.

REALIA

According to the Communicative Language Teaching (RICHARDS; RODGERS, 1986), a good way to promote motivation and encourage stu-

dents to speak is through realia exercises. The material provided to guide students to speak is the student`s own life experiences. Realia exercises are based on "authentic", "from-life" materials. It might include videos, graphic and visual sources, magazines, advertisements, newspapers, maps, symbols and objects. (e.g, the class theme for discussion is 'vacation', so students are asked to bring to classroom one kind of souvenir they bought during their vacation time and tell the story about it; another example is bringing a photo of their favorite singer or band and all the stuff they have kept about and talk about it). Students feel more confident and more capable to talk about something they like or even something they have already experienced. It is more suitable by giving students a task based exercise and something to support their ideas than only ask them to talk about something they might do not know what to speak.

CONCLUSION

Speaking a second language, especially English, is getting more and more common between learners and, as a matter of fact the oral practice is being increasingly valued in the English language courses.

In this study, it was concluded that the Communicative Approach plays an important role, contributing to the students' oral production. It was identified that the speaking skill is one area that matters most student`s time while learning a second language; speaking activities perform an Activate rather than a Study function; the historical contribution concerning the Communicative Approach in order to help teachers to understand how the process of teaching / learning was done and its importance to improve the teaching time. Furthermore, speaking activities provide opportunities for rehearsal give both teacher and students feedback and motivate students because of their Engaging qualities; decided that speaking activities contribute to the students` capacity of producing large conversational pattern and developing a variety of social contexts`

arguments easily. It also showed the importance of didactic and authentic material related to the motivation of the students during the practicing time; exercises based on the Communicative Competence to improve students` speaking and motivation to talk about a specific context, and finally, the influence that speaking activities can play on the students` written production.

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