

## THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH VS. THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH WITH REFERENCE TO EST

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### ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the characteristics of the communicative approach with some detailed definitions. It also shows how the communicative approach combines with the structural approach to give a more complete communicative view of language with examples. Some exercises to develop communicative skills have been suggested. At last an attempt has been made to suggest a methodology based on the communicative approach so as to teach English for science and technology (EST) effectively.*

### RESUME

*Cet article décrit les caractéristiques de l'approche communicative avec des définitions détaillées de cette approche. Il montre également comment la combinaison de l'approche communicative avec l'approche structurale résulte en une vision communicative plus complète. Des exercices pour développer une compétence communicative ont été suggérés ainsi qu'une méthodologie basée sur cette approche afin d'enseigner l'anglais scientifique et technologique efficacement.*

### Introduction

An attempt has been made in this article to discuss the characteristics of the communicative approach with some detailed definitions. Although the labels functional – notional approach, functional approach or communicative approach are used interchangeably the phrase communicative approach is a very broad term encompassing any and all the ways of teaching that emphasize the actual communication of meaningful information.

In addition the learner is the main concern in this approach<sup>1</sup> where there is not an imposed curriculum<sup>1</sup> which has no concern with learners' needs and their motivation.

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1. The term approach refers to those assumptions, beliefs and theories about what characterizes language and language learning. They are derived from linguistics,

The necessity to insert the structural aspect of language with its functional aspect has been imposed by itself because the combination of the two gives a more complete communicative view of language. These facts have been illustrated and clarified with examples.

Moreover different types of exercises to develop communicative skills have been suggested. At last an attempt has been made to suggest a methodology which is based on the functional - notional approach so as to teach EST effectively so that the students may gain positive results in the acquisition of the needed skills, since they are expected to be competent in communication at least in the field they are in

## CHARACTERISTICS

As Finochiaro and Brumfit (1987) stress it, the communicative approach (functional-notional approach), focuses on the purposes for which language is used. When we use a language we do not think of grammatical categories, as described by linguists. We speak to greet, apologize, persuade, and so on (functions). We also speak to express certain meanings : time or spatial relationship (notions). In other words, as Finochiaro and Brumfit (1987) argue, any act of speech is functionally organized that is, it is an attempt to do something for a particular situation in relation to a particular topic. When these elements change, the language changes, because the speakers adapt and adjust their language or messages according to the conditions in which they use it.

In addition, the functional-national approach focuses on the purposes of a speech act ; in other words, it concentrates on what people want to do, or what they want to accomplish through speech. The functions of language which human beings wish to express and through which they let others know their aim in speaking are to introduce people

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psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics. The language teacher selects the information from these areas that can provide him with clear ideas about the nature of language and language learning. For example the functional approach gives importance to and specifies the semantic potentialities rather than grammatical potentialities of language teaching, and thus organizes the content of language accordings to the functions rather than categories of form. Richards C.Jack and Ted Rogers, 1985, 'Method : Approach design and procedure' in Richards Jack.C, 1985 'The context of language teaching', Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> A curriculum specifies the knowledge , skills and insights to be acquired by the learners through a series of in-class or out of class tasks and activities performed to foster learning. In addition it specifies the degree of performance the students have to demonstrate through different oral or written measures. It differs from a syllabus in that the latter represents a listing of content to be learnt but does not suggest methods, activities, and measures for evaluation. (C. Brumfit and M. Finochiaro 1987.)

to each other, to direct someone or not, to do something, to talk about a film or a book or to recite a poem or give a sway to their creative impulses.

The function, the situation and topic give rise to specific notions. Finochiaro and Brumfit (1987) give the definition of 'notion' in these terms :

The words following the functional expression would generally be considered notions. Thus notions are meaning elements which may be expressed through nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives, or adverbs . (P. 14)

They state that the nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and other words complete the function or the communicative purpose<sup>1</sup> and clarify it. In other words, the notions are the semantic terms and language items that are most appropriate to complete the functions being expressed (Mary Finochiaro, 1979)<sup>2</sup>. They see the difference between functions and notions in that functions depend on the purposes of the speaker, whereas the specific notions depend on three main factors :

- i) the functions ;
- ii) the elements in the situation ;
- iii) the topic which is being discussed.

The specific notions give rise to exponents in the speech act. The exponents, as defined by finochiaro, and Brumfit (1987) are utterances or statements which arise from the function, the situation, and the topic. They are the language forms which realize a message. For example the different forms that a verb or modal auxillary takes according to the use of different tenses : simple present, present continuous, present perfect simple, present perfect continuous etc...and the interrogative, negative and affirmative forms related to these tense with the different question words ; the plural marker s the definite and indefinite articles and their use according to whether the noun is countable or uncountable etc... These forms are also used by the speaker according to social roles which will influence the formality or informality of the conversation. In speaking, the exponents are selected depending, not only on these elements, but also on the speaker's personality and his level of linguistic competence.

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<sup>1</sup>The phrase » communicative purpose » is used as a synonym of the phrase 'communicative function' by Mary Fiochiaro and Christopher Brumfit (1987).

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Mary Fiochiaro and Christopher Brumfit (1987) , The Functional-Notional Approach : from Theory to Practice, Oxford University Press.

**A BRIEF EXAMPLE OF A UNIT SEQUENCE**

Unit	Function	People	Situation setting	Topic	Notions and exponents
1	Reacting to an emergency	Patient Relative Doctor nurse	Doctor's office or emergency room of a hospital	Ill ness or accident	Where's a hospital What's wrong Tell me where you fell the pain

Accordingly, the characteristics of a functional-notional approach is the fact that the form, the tone and appropriateness of any oral or written message are determined by social roles and the psychological attitudes of the participants towards each other in a conversation, for example, the conversation between employer-employee, teacher-pupil, doctor-patient and so on, the place and time of communication act (speech act) and the topic being discussed.

Any speech act (communicative act) is determined by three factors :

- i) the function that language serves in real world and every day use ;
- ii) the varieties of language that are possible within each of the functions ;
- iii) the shared sociocultural allusion or presupposition. All these are necessary to make an oral or written message understandable, acceptable and appropriate.

The communicative functions are classified into five categories : personal, interpersonal, directive, referential and imaginative (Finochiarro and Brumfit, 1987).

- i) The personal function refers to the speaker's or writer's ability to express his thoughts and the emotions which every human being experiences like love, joy, anger, distress, sorrow, frustration etc. It also refers to the speaker's or writer's ability to clarify his aim in speaking or in writing.
- ii) The interpersonal function serves to establish and maintain sociable and working relationship, for example, appologizing for errors or expression of sympathy, joy at another's success etc.
- iii) The directive function serves to use language to persuade, to make requests, and so on.

- iv) The referential function of language is concerned with speaking or writing about the time (the present, past, and language itself. This function is also labelled the «metalinguistic function ».
- v) The imaginative Function refers to using language creatively, for example, to compose rhymes, poetry, essays, stories, or plays, etc.

## COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT)

CLT takes into consideration both the functional and the structural aspects of the language combining them into a more complete communicative view. It is not sufficient to consider the manner in which language is used as a means of communication ; the structural aspect needs to be focussed on as well. For exemple, « Why don't you close the door ? ». This sentence may function in some circumstances as :

- i) a question from a functional view point ; the speaker may wish to know why his companion never closes a certain door .
- ii) command : a teacher addresses it to a pupil who has left the classroom door open.
- iii) Plea .
- iv) Suggestion or
- v) Complaint.

However, from a structural point of view, « why don't you close the door ? » has the negative-interrogative form which can serve as a pattern to build a number of sentences of this kind to master this structure.

Thus, foreign language learners need to have opportunities to develop the three skills involved in understanding the meaning the speaker intends to convey :

- i) the ability to understand structures and vocabulary ;
- ii) the knowledge of the communicative function of the linguistic forms, and
- iii) the ability to link the linguistic forms to non-linguistic knowledge. This can be done only by making them exposed to situations in which the focus is on making them use their knowledge to communicate meaning as efficiently and economically as possible. Nevertheless, this may involve neglecting grammatical accuracy in favour of the communicative effectiveness. But , this aspect could be remedied by the teacher with his remarks and corrections.

To make learners communicate effectively, practice excercises or « activity »<sup>1</sup> , have been developed by specialists in the field. Littlewood (1981) divides practice exercises into two types : pre-communicative activities and communicative activities. In pre-communicative activities,

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<sup>1</sup> Term given by William Littlewood (1981).

the emphasis is on the structural aspect, which can provide a point of departure for other activities which are communicatively oriented. The learner must perform structural operations as in the following example where they must produce the correct form of the simple past :

A : Mary has gone to her brother's.

B : She went there yesterday.

A : Mary has made a cake.

B : She made it yesterday.

In addition, the example above can be adapted using the same structure but in a language which is communicatively authentic.

A : By the way, has Mary gone to her brother's ?

B : Yes, she went there yesterday.

A : Has she made the cake yet ?

B : Yes, she made it yesterday.

In this example, one can recognize the communicative function and the structure of the linguistic forms because (A) for instance is not only an interrogative but also a question, and the response is not only a past declarative, but also a reply. This can be justified by the following quotation :

communicative function is closely bound up with situational context. A further step between structure and function is therefore to contextualize the language and ask learners to practise responses which would be (a) realistic ways of performing useful communicative acts in (b) situations they might expect to encounter at some times<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, it is necessary to free the activity from being dependant on the teacher or the tape, so that learners begin to interact as equal partners in an exchange rather than simply reacting to stimuli.

Learners may also be given picture cues which make them speak with each other. For example, two learners see a picture of a park :

Learner 1 : Shall we go to the cinema ?

Learner 2 : No, I'd rather go to the park.

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<sup>1</sup> Littlewood William, 1981, *Communicative Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, P. 10.

The next step may consist of a combination of two exchanges to form a longer conversational sequence, hence learners relate linguistic forms (structures) to social contexts.

In short, the pre-communicative activities aim at training learners to acquire forms, and relate them to communicative function and use them in an acceptable way. Thus, the focus here is more on linguistic forms to be learnt than on meaning to be acquired.

The second type of practice exercises or activities is the communicative activities. In communicative activities, the learner uses the linguistic forms he has learnt to communicate meanings for specific purposes : discovering location by using a plan of a house, for instance. Among the purposes that can be achieved by communicative activities is strong motivation towards learning since most learner's conception of language is as a means of communication rather than as a structural system. These activities also can create a context which support learning. The communicative activities can be achieved by creating a situation where the learner or group possesses information which another learner (or group) must discover. In addition to this, the act of identifying pictures could also be used as a base to achieve the above mentioned activity. For example :

- Learner A has a number of pictures which are all similar in content but contain a number of features which are different from each other.
- Learner B has a duplicate copy of only one of these pictures, which he has selected from a complete duplicate set.
- Learner A must discover which of the pictures learner B is holding by asking questions about it.
- The vocabulary is determined by the subject matter of the pictures.
- To distinguish the pictures, learners would need to ask questions with " what colour...? " " how many...? " and where ...? etc.

As a result, in this type of activities, success is measured in terms of whether learners gain facts possessed by the others or not.

There are other communicative activities where the classroom can be used as a social context, since learners must be prepared for varied social contexts in which they will need to perform outside the classroom. Among these activities there are two that seem to be effective : conversation (or discussion sessions) and role playing. Conversation gives a rich stimulus for communicative interaction; for example, the varied experiences, interests and opinions of the learners can be complemented by written or visual materials which add more aspects

of the outside world to the classroom and provide a context for a wide range of communicative functions and domains of meanings. In role playing, students play roles whose situations and actors are described to them by the teacher or in books designed specially for this activity.

Another category of communicative activity is listening. Littlewood (1981) considers listening as a communicative activity. Learners must spend more time in listening to the foreign language than in producing it. It is not only that they must understand what is said to them during face to face interaction but they are also silent receivers of messages directed at them by the radio, television announcements or a great number of other sources. In all these situations, the learner must extract the meaning as best as he can. The activities that help the learners develop their listening skills are performing tasks like identification and selection. Here, the learner has a set of pictures ; he must listen to a description or dialogue and select the pictures which the spoken text refers to. They may also be asked to identify a wanted person described in a radio message.

In sum, in these different types of communicative activities, the learners struggle to communicate, which is an efficient way to grasp the different aspects of communication dealt with in the classroom as described above.

## **THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH AND EST**

The communicative approach and EST could be linked up in the classroom in order to make the course more effective and purposeful. To make an EST class more communicative and more vivid, the EST teacher should make students talk about topics in their field of studies. For example, if the students are specialized in computer science the teacher can divide the class into small groups and guide each group into discussion of computer uses in industry, agriculture, medicine, economy etc. Charts, graphs and drawing can also be used to stimulate student's oral participation. Through these activities, the learners will develop an ability in oral communication in their field of studies because besides developing their reading skills, they must know how to communicate with a native speaker in their field of studies. In addition, they are also supposed to understand a lecture given by a visiting teacher. Students are deficient in listening although they can speak good English, because they pay more attention to speaking than to listening. But, if their teachers help them, their ear will progressively get used to spoken English, and they will learn more about politics, culture, habits, and customs, science and technology etc., of the target language. So, using different procedures, techniques from different methods will be of great effectiveness.



One can observe that the difficulties that the science students meet, do not come from a lack of the knowledge of the system of English but from an unfamiliarity with English use. Therefore, their needs can only be satisfied through the use of a course which provides, not only practice in the composition of sentences, but also which enables them to understand and use sentences used to perform different communicative acts, in other words, a move from a concern with grammatical forms to an equal concern with the use of rhetorical functions<sup>1</sup> like descriptions, classifications, definitions, making comparisons, predictions etc. so that language as communication is no longer a separate subject, but an aspect of other subjects, Medicine, Chemistry, Computer Science etc.

Indeed, learning science is not simply a question of learning facts, but of learning the manner in which language is used to express certain processes of reasoning and the manner in which it is used to define, classify, generalize, to make hypothesis, draw conclusions and so on.

To design an English course for students of science in the first year of higher education, two assumptions must be made. The first one is that in spite of the shortcomings of secondary school English teaching, the students have acquired how to manipulate the language system. The second assumption is that they have knowledge in basic science. These two kinds of knowledge have existed in separation. The role of the language teacher is to link them. To do this, passages on common topics in basic science must be presented to the students in a way that allows them to become aware of the ways in which the language system is used to express scientific facts and concepts. The passages must be written rather than derived directly from textbooks because syntactic complexity and idiosyncratic features of style can withdraw the students' attention from features of use which the teacher wishes to concentrate on. The intention here is to make linguistic forms unobtrusive and to make communicative functions as obvious as possible. Another reason for writing passages is that features of language which have particular communicative value<sup>1</sup> can be put in foreground. Such passages are representative of what is conceived to be certain basic communicative processes which are variously realized in texts dealing with scientific writing, and are designed to focus on such processes more clearly for example, "English for computer science"<sup>2</sup> and "English for computing"<sup>3</sup> written for people who are studying computer science at the university

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<sup>1</sup> C. Beedham (1986) uses the phrase 'rhetorical function' to mean 'communicative function' and defines it as a particular purpose or function which a piece of language must serve in a given instance of use

<sup>2</sup> Allen J.P.B. and H G Widdowson (1985), use the term value to mean function.

<sup>3</sup> Produced by Norma D. Mullen and P. Charles Brown (1984).

<sup>4</sup> Produced by Keith Boeckner and P. Charles Brown (1993).

and people in companies where the computer personnel need to improve their understanding of English.

## CONCLUSION

One can conclude that the communicative view cannot be detached from the structural view – Both views complete each other as has been described. Besides, EST can be taught in the frame of the communicative approach; that is in addition to texts and exercises dealing with reading comprehension the teacher can make students talk about topics related to their scientific and technical fields, and use language laboratories to improve their aural and oral comprehension. In other words the use of an eclectic method for EST students is of great benefit to them, because besides the necessity of learning speaking and understanding what they read, they also have to understand what they hear and to communicate in their field since they can be given lectures by native speakers, in their fields of studies.

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