What is Beyond the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching ?[1]

ALEJANDRO G. MARTÍNEZ, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS [2]

Throughout the history of language teaching it has often been assumed that "one method" is the only one at any one time. However, more and more recently the term informed eclecticism has been advocated to refer to the choice of method in the language classroom. Richards and Rodgers (1986) have defined eclecticism as the selection of various design features from different methods which relate to the objectives of a course or programme. As DeKeyser (1998) states: "what most teachers end up doing in the classroom is not exactly a stereotypical implementation of any one method." This applies to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) perhaps more than to any other approach, since from the very beginning there have been a series of Communicative Approaches rather than just one. This article focuses on a brief explanation of the ways of teaching that have appeared in the last few years, mostly as a result of a search for methods or approaches that go beyond CLT.

In the past, a method would come as a reply to a previously existing one. For example the Situational Method was a response to Grammar Translation and CLT came as a response to Audiolingualism. However, the methods or ways of teaching that have appeared in the last few years do not necessarily contradict CLT, rather they take what is valuable and expand or change what has been found to be of little use. Also, some ways of teaching can be considered to be within CLT.

If one asks a group of teachers what method they use, it is very likely that most of them will say CLT. However, it has been some time since teachers and researchers have begun to look for other options to CLT, so one can say that its popularity has already started to wane. There are several reasons for this, one of which is that when it began to be used in the classroom, many teachers sent grammar into oblivion because teaching it was considered to be "uncommunicative". Like in any extreme, this has caused more problems than solutions to the acquisition of a second language. Another reason is that at the core of CLT we can usually find a sequence of structures, notions or functions wrapped up in communicative activities.

---

[1] This is a refereed article.

[2] The author can be reached at agmg@mail.internet.com.mx.

Students are supposed to learn these linguistic items in order and somehow synthesise them in their minds. There is still no empirical evidence to support this theory and ways of teaching such as Task-Based Learning and Content-Based Instruction look at language in a more organic way.

I would first like to look at Task-Based Teaching. It is an umbrella-term that subsumes the procedural and the process syllabus. It began in India with the Bangalore Project (Markee 1997). The main criticism it makes of CLT is that it often consists of a synthetic syllabus with a communicative disguise. In other words, it breaks down language into its grammatical and lexical constituents and these are taught separately and step by step causing the "Humpty Dumpty effect": it is easier to separate all the components than to put them back together again. On the contrary, Task-Based Teaching consists of what is considered a real analytic syllabus, in other words it looks at language as a whole. The syllabus consists of a series of tasks learners are to carry out. These tasks pose a problem to learners, and in order to find the solution they need to communicate in the target language. The objective is for learners to reach the end of a given task, not necessarily to practice a specific linguistic point. A typical task would be one where students are split in groups of three. They are given a plan of an apartment and a list of furniture each one owns. The lists are all different and each contains six or seven different pieces of furniture. For instance, one list might include the following items: a bed, a couch, a stereo, a bookshelf, two chairs and a lamp. Students are told that they are moving together into the apartment and they are to fit in all their furniture. The floor-plan has only two rooms so first they need to decide who will take which room, then they need to discuss where to put every single piece of furniture. The outcome of the task is evaluated, in other words the teacher gets feedback on whether students were able to agree on where to put the furniture or not.

Another recently developed way of teaching is the Lexical Approach (Lewis 1993, 1997). The main tenet is that words, not grammar, give meaning to language. It does not mean that teachers should not teach grammar, but that they should look at it from the lexical point of view. Two important characteristics are the teaching of collocations and multi-word items. For instance textbooks deal with, *do* and *make* as if they were grammar points when in fact they should be treated as collocations. *Do* collocates with certain nouns such as: homework, favour and exercise, whereas *make* collocates with other nouns: friends, bed and mistake. Another important claim of the Lexical Approach is that language is full of semi-fixed expressions and certain structures should be treated as such. Lewis (1997) gives the ex-

ample of the so-called second conditional. Most grammar books separate this structure into two components: if I were and I would + infinitive. Lewis states that from the lexical point of view the stem should be: *If I were you I would*, since this is a fixed expression. This approach has its critics. For instance Cook (1998) states that it goes back to "the tradition of using linguistics theory to dictate to language teaching practice."

A method that has been developed especially in the U.S. is Content-Based Instruction (CBI). This method comes from immersion education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and cross-curricular approaches (Brinton 1997). It stemmed from the need foreign students have to learn content and language at the same time in undergraduate and graduate courses in American universities. Of course, this can only be applied with false beginners or, I would even venture, intermediate or advanced students. It uses authentic materials, that is to say, the ones students are using in their university studies. Brinton suggests a three-step process for language lessons within CBI: *into, through* and *beyond*. In the first stage, called *Intro*, students' prior knowledge of a topic is probed. In the second stage students are exposed to new knowledge and in the third stage they demonstrate their comprehension of the material by creatively applying their new knowledge.

Another way of teaching that has been gaining popularity of late is Cultural Psychology (CP). This is the application of psychological theories to language teaching. The main psychologists whose ideas have been taken are: Vygotsky, Piaget and Feuerstein. An important concept that is behind CP is, like in CLT, meaning. It plays a central role, not only the meaning of the language items taught in the classroom, but the meaning that learners bring into the tasks. From this point of view, there is a constant co-construction of meaning. Another key feature is the concept of mediation. In a nutshell, parents, and then teachers, are mediators since they select and present stimuli in such a way as to make it suitable to promote learning.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is perhaps the most widely known concept of cultural psychology (Williams and Burden 1997). It refers to the layer of knowledge that is just beyond that with which learners are capable of coping. Working with another learner (multiple-skills classes) or with a teacher, students should move on to the next layer. The concept of scaffolding, or the assistance students need in order to reach the next layer stems from Vygotsky's ZPD. This means that students can be given tasks that are beyond their current level of proficiency but that are within the realms of their zone of proximal development.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is a series of techniques, strategies and patterns based on underlying understandings of how the brain works (Revell and Norman 1997:28). CAT scan studies, Gardner's theory of the eight intelligences, and other psycholinguistic research have helped model NLP. Tasks that cater to the different intelligences and other individual varieties are proposed as the core of this way of teaching. For instance, activities that promote lateral thinking are commonly used. An example of this is an activity taken from Gairns and Redman (1995). Students are told to read the following text and solve the problem in pairs or groups of three:

> *There is a bowl of water on a table. You must not damage the bowl or move it. Think of as many ways as possible to get the water out of the bowl.*

It is accepted that still a lot of research is necessary before jumping into conclusions as to how the brain works, especially when it comes to processing language (Christison 1998). NLP has also been criticised by several authors, notably by Davidson (1997a, 1997b) who claims that the use of the word programming denotes "the idea that we teach people the same way we program computers. It is a very suitable and revealing term for what the NLP advocates are trying to do." Another point that NLP proponents do not focus on is the role that linguistics plays when learning a language, in other words how can learners achieve sociolinguistic competence when NLP is used.

Conclusion

The popularity of CLT has started to decline, so other methods and approaches are already being tried and used in language classrooms. These ways of teaching do not necessarily contradict CLT, but they often draw on it. Seemingly, Task-Based Teaching is the one that has attracted more attention and some teachers even think that this is the way teaching is headed for in the near future. This well might be, however, it is my belief that the era of one single method is gone and I hope it will not be back again. When teachers can rely on a wide variety of ideas and methods, teaching and learning become challenging and fulfilling experiences. I should like to end up by stating that one needs to look at both sides of the coin when embracing innovative methodologies and make informed eclecticism a rule of thumb in the language classroom.

References

Brinton, D. and Holten, C. 1997. "Into, through, and beyond. A framework to develop content-based material" *English Teaching Forum*. 35/4, 10-21.

Cook, Guy. 1998 "The uses of reality: a reply to Ronald Carter" *English Language Teaching Journal.* 52/1, 57:64.

Christison, M. A. 1998. "Applying Multiple Intelligences Theory in pre-service and inservice TEFL education programs". *English Teaching Forum*. 36,2. 2-11.

Davidson, B. 1997a. "The perils of people programming". *The Language Teacher*. 21(6). 36-37.

Davidson, B. 1997b. "Final thoughts on NLP". *The Language Teacher* http://language.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/jalt/pub/tlt/97/nov/davidson.html

Markee, N. 1997. *Managing Curricular Innovation* Cambridge University Press.

De Keyser, R. 1998. "Cognitive perspectives on learning and practicing L2 grammar" in C. Doughty and J. Williams, Eds. *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press. 42-63.

Doughty C. and J. Williams. 1998. "Pedagogical choices in focus on form" in C. Doughty and J. Williams, Eds. *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press. 197-260.

Fotos, S. 1994. "Integrating grammar instruction and communicative language use through grammar consciousness-raising tasks". *TESOL Quarterly*. 28(2). 323-351.

Gairns, R. and S. Redman. 1995. *True to Life Pre-Intermediate*. Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, M. 1993. *The Lexical Approach*. Language Teaching Publications.

Lewis, M. 1997. *Implementing the Lexical Approach.* Language Teaching Publications.

Revell, J. and S. Norman, S. 1997. "Powerful language." *English Teaching Professional*. 5 October. 28-30.

Richards, J. and T. Rodgers. 1986. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Williams, M. and R. Burden. 1997. *Psychology for Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press.