DOES PRE-TEACHING ACTUALLY CONTRIBUTE TO BETTER LISTENING AND READING SKILLS?

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Although the communicative approach to foreign language teaching has been "preached" in our schools for some time now, in practice it can be seen that it still has not grown strong roots. Most teachers whose classes have been observed show lack of grounding in the overall philosophy underlying this teaching methodology. This philosophy is backed by a set of principles that rule whatever procedure, activities or techniques are used on its behalf. Ignoring these principles or misinterpreting them will not contribute to a communicative class.

Teachers claim that they are using a communicative methodology (1) because they get their students to communicate orally among themselves, or (2) because they are "teaching functions", or (3) just because they are using Spectrum (a communicative course in English). But then their classroom practice does not comply with the principles, since they have either misinterpreted them or ignored them altogether. This results in misleading procedures and techniques that in turn result in uncommunicative teaching. Some of the most common problem areas in this respect are unsuccessful pair/group work; skill development activities not oriented to tasks; processes of real-life communication, like information gap for example, use in communication; pre-teaching all unknown lexical items prior to a reading or listening lesson; etc.

In this paper we will stop and look at the last problem area listed above, since a great many teachers strongly argue in favor of it as a necessary step to better understanding in listening and reading lessons. First, we will present some of these arguments and then we will contrast them with what some outstanding proponents of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) consider reasonable about this important aspect. Finally, we will give some personal reflections based on our own classroom experience.

Pre-teaching is the extraction of grammatical or lexical items from a text and the teaching of their meaning before presenting the whole text to the learners either for listening or reading purposes.

Seen like this, without any further consideration, it leads us to think that it facilitates comprehension, as the learners will only have to swallow what has been previously chewed for them. This is precisely one of the arguments teachers maintain. They assert that if the unknown language items are worked out before, then the learners will be in a better position to recognize them, understand them and in turn understand the whole thing readily. This is in its own right an unquestionable truth, but as will be seen later on this paper it does not develop discourse skills.

Most teachers base their reasoning on the so-called principles of accessibility which states that the material (written or oral) presented to the learners must be accessible to them in terms of language content. According to this principle, the teacher must move from the easy to the difficult, from the known to the unknown. Some authors (Antich, 1986, e.g.) who defend this point of view even propose a four-phase sequence in the use of passages for reading comprehension purposes. The sequence goes like this:

1. Classroom-made passages that only reproduce what has been practiced orally;
2. Classroom-made passages that contain a minimum of unknown vocabulary;
3. Adapted passages with an increased number of unknown elements; and
4. Passages taken directly from authentic sources in the foreign language. Even at this phase accessibility has to be taken into account through a step-by-step selection of various functional styles in order of difficulty.

As for listening comprehension lessons, Antich (1986) insists that preparatory exercises be carried out prior to presenting the learners with the listening text. These preparatory exercises are aimed at eliminating the linguistic ad psychological difficulties that supposedly keep the learners from concentrating on the contents (meaning) of the text. It is believed that all the phonetic content of a listening text has to be known by the learners and that their ears have to be trained focusing attention on the elements of the sound system before listening.

This belief has been held for many years and is, in fact, still present in the practice of a great number of teachers, particularly in the adult education language schools. Teachers at this level also argue that because they are teaching adult learners and because they have to guarantee that their pupils do not droop out after panicking from failing to understand every little word or even every sound in a listening material, they have to facilitate the students´ listening as much as they can. This, of course, is based on the wrong belief that every single word or sound has to be "heard" in order to be able to understand the whole thing.

However, the truth is that in order to understand the whole text one does not necessarily have to understand and process every single element. CLT practice presents quite the opposite picture.

One of the principles of CLT is "the whole is more than the sum of the parts" (Morrow, 1983). The idea behind this principle is that communication results from the ability to deal with strings of sentences and ideas at the level of discourse both in the oral and written language. In the oral language (speaking and listening) these strings must be processed in "real time". In conversation one cannot study the individual elements of what one's interlocutor says before one gives an appropriate answer or approval; the process of listening and reacting must be immediate. In the written language (writing and reading) although the time pressure is, on the whole, not so rigorous, producing and understanding individual elements of the message is not enough. What one needs is the ability to work out the whole message in its context.

Consequently, a communicative methodology has to operate with real language in real situations. Another important principle of CLT is "to learn, do it" (Morrow, 1983). It goes without saying, then, that in order to develop the skill of listening to real language in real situations, the learners have to be presented with real language in real situations. "Piecemealing" the language before working out the whole will not contribute to developing this skill.

Cook (1989) presents two approaches to developing discourse skills: the top-down approach and the bottom-up approach. The former, also known as holistic approach, tackles discourse by starting with general ideas and filling in

details later. It considers all levels of language as a whole operating together. The latter, also known as atomistic approach, starts by details before establishing the general context. It breaks communication down into discrete levels and deals with them separately.

Cook sustains that “we should not forget that communication does involve handling everything together, usually at high speed, and this is what a successful language student must eventually be able to do. Splitting communication into levels may sometimes help, but these separate levels will always need to be reintegrated if communication is to take place. Sadly, this does not always happen.”

Moving top-down (from the global to the particular) through the levels of discourse is how competent language users handle discourse. Hence, it is evident that this is the best way to approach discourse in a language teaching methodology.

Byrne (1986) favors a global approach that requires the learners to try to work out the meaning for themselves, since this is a strategy they will need to acquire. He suggests that the learners should be given the opportunity to guess the meaning of new language. Of course, the teacher’s procedures have to aim at teaching, not testing. This means that the learners have to be give plenty of support, for example, several opportunities to hear/read the text; they have to be given visual support; they have to be allowed to look at the written text in due time (in the case of listening comprehension), while the teacher explains any difficulties which remain at the end, etc.

Rixon (1986) warns us that pre-teaching the language of a listening text should be avoided as far as possible so as not to take away the challenge and interest. According to this author, “there is, however, no harm in occasionally isolating features of language found in a listening passage to help students learn more about how the form of the language carries meaning (...). Because of a wish to discourage a piecemeal approach to listening on the part of the students themselves, I tend to confine activities of this sort to the post-listening phase of the lesson, when the students have already achieved an understanding of the overall

message of the passage and are now ready to look back and reflect on language points in it."

Rixon admits, however, that there are times when it pays to pre-teach particular language items especially when the text contains unknown terms or pieces of information which are essential to grasp the global meaning and which are unlikely to be worked out from the context.

Greenwood (1981) in dealing with reading comprehension makes a point about the presence of unknown elements in a text. Of course, his ideas also apply to listening comprehension. He points out that a text might present a few unknown words to the learners and that during the lesson preparation the teacher may decide on one of the following alternatives: 1) to discord the text and choose another one more appropriate to the learners´ linguistic level, 2) to get the learners to derive the meanings of these words from the text itself when they are reading it / listening to it, 3) to regard the words as unimportant for the reading/ listening purpose, and 4) to judge these words as key words whose meanings are central to the understanding of the text and then do some preliminary vocabulary teaching from a receptive point of view.

Our own teaching experience, particularly in the field of listening comprehension, has shown us that learners do not necessarily have to understand every single language item in a text in order to get its global meaning, and that from a teaching, not testing, perspective, learners can be led step by step into understanding more specific information. Learners, on the whole, like the challenge posed by authentic texts and there is always a feeling of satisfaction when at the end of the lesson they see that they have managed to handle the text in its wholeness.

Conclusions

The most important point made in this paper is that communication involves the use of language (both productively and receptively) at the level of discourse. If we teachers want our learners to become competent language users, we have to train them in handling language beyond the sentence level through both the

productive and the receptive skills. This leads us to regard pre-teaching not as a staple step in dealing with reading and listening texts but as an activity that can only be justified if the text contains unknown elements (lexical, syntactical, phonological) which are fundamental to get the global meaning and which are not likely to be understood from context.

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