

Article Review

A Critical Look at the Communicative Approach (1) and (2) (Michael Swan)

Reviewed by San Shwe Baw*

A lengthy discussion by Michael Swan on the strengths and weaknesses of the Communicative Approach is really insightful. Bringing some confusions resulting from the mistaken conception of the Communicative Approach to light, the author not only provides us with theoretical justification for his belief in language teaching, but also suggests better ways of exploiting any approach – old or new. The core of his argument will be divided into three parts in this report for the sake of clarity; namely, (I) Communicative Approach as asserted by its proponents, (II) Critical examination of the Communicative Approach and (III) Effective teaching through an integrated approach.

I. Communicative Approach as Asserted by Its Proponents

The Communicative Approach is well aware of the two levels of meaning in language: propositional meaning and functional meaning, the former being the structural and lexical meaning and the latter situational meaning. The concept of “appropriacy”, which involves appropriate choice of lan-

guage according to the situation and relationship of the speakers, is regarded as the real goal of teaching. Communicative ability largely depends on the teaching of communicative skills, which cannot be transferred from the mother tongue. Language is better understood through developing the skills of adjustment and negotiation between the speakers. Classroom discourse is made to correspond as closely as possible to real-life use of language. By incorporating notions, functions and strategies into its syllabuses, the Communicative Approach teaches meaning systematically.

II. Critical examination of the Communicative Approach

The Communicative Approach is full of assertions about language use and language learning, which are not factually tenable. The belief that understanding contextual meaning requires special training results from misunderstanding between thought and language. The fact that a child may interpret the sentence “Your coat’s on the floor” as one asking him to pick it up indicates that

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he gives some thought to its lexical meaning in line with the situation s/he is in. There is no other knowledge involved. The argument about “usage” and “use”, therefore, has little relevance to foreign language teaching.

There is no denying the fact that language items used to express a certain situation need to be appropriate and suitable for the purpose. But the Communicative Approach over generalizes the concept of appropriacy and presents it as if it applied to the whole language and all of language teaching, without properly considering that this concept is more to do with the teaching of lexis.

The Communicative Approach does not recognize positive effects of the mother tongue on the foreign language learning. So it is assumed that normal communication skills such as prediction, guessing and negotiating meaning are required to be taught anew to the foreign language learners. In fact, what the learners need to know are lexical items, plus something about the subject matter, and the speaker or writer.

With its syllabuses emphasizing notions, functions and strategies, the Communication Approach does not consider the question of “form” even when necessary, turning a blind eye at the students’ need to be structurally competent.

III. Effective Teaching Through an Integrated Approach

Several different meaning categories and several different formal categories need to be taken into consideration in order to decide what to teach a particular group of learners. Once lists of meaning have been gathered, structures, words and expressions

required to convey these meanings can be worked out. A sensible teaching programme is one in which eight or so syllabuses (functional, notional, situational, topic, phonological, lexical, structural, skills) are systematically integrated. It is, therefore, essential to consider both semantic and formal accounts of the language when deciding what to teach – the former helping to teach stereotyped language and the latter creative language.

As far as methodology is concerned, the Communicative Approach attempts to make all the activities as much life-like as possible by using authentic materials, which can be considered as a methodological improvement. But other types of discourse like repetition, structural drills etc. should also be encouraged to a certain extent though they seem to have no immediate “communicative” value. A basic concept in contemporary methodology is that of “information gap”. The information conveyed through the exercises, however, should have relevance and interest for the students. Using both scripted and authentic material at different points in a language course is also desirable as each has positive contributions towards learning.

As mother tongue plays a pivotal role in the process of learning a foreign language, the English-only approach cannot be regarded as foolproof. By systematically integrating semantic and formal syllabuses (i.e. Structural, notional/functional, phonological, etc), a good teaching model should consist of four stages; namely, (1) finding out what learners need to know, (2) finding out what they know already, (3) subtracting the second from the first and (4) teaching the remainder.

EXAMINING INTO THE CRITICISM OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH by Michael Swan

Michael Swan stated that the Communicative Approach is rich in assertions about language use and language learning, likening its characteristic to leaves falling in autumn. But, unlike many people who are wont to let these assertions pass unchallenged with an automatic habitual nod, he had the courage to speak his mind in his articles “A critical look at the communicative approach (1) and (2)”. His critical evaluation of the communicative approach against the much less popular structural approach is so frank and thought-provoking that one cannot help thinking about his discussion pro and con after reading his articles. Indeed, the two articles have covered many important issues relating to English language teaching, providing readers from the teaching profession with food for thought.

The first of his two articles examines some of the more theoretical ideas underlying the communicative approach, whereas the second one deals with more pedagogical aspects of the approach. It was tactful of the author to have begun his argument with the concept of having two levels of meaning in language – a concept adopted by the Communicative Approach. It may not have been by accident that he put forward that issue as the first point to be criticized. He must have been fully convinced from the beginning that this concept was the easiest for him to make people see its fallibility clearly. In fact, the idea of a “double level of meaning” is built around some truth, and it is this element of truth that seemed to con-

found the originators of the Communicative Approach. Basing their argument on the fact that a language item takes various meanings in various contexts, the proponents of the Communicative Approach criticized those of the Structural Approach for teaching only the propositional meaning. It was when they claimed that any utterance in a given situation could be specified by rules, which they believed teachable, they found themselves open to criticism. Even big shots like Wilkins or Widdowson could not make it clear what forms the teaching of such rules might take. On the other hand, Swan was quick enough to expose that soft target, which, indeed, was staring us in the face all the time. He claimed that those who were in favour of teaching the second kind of meaning (i.e., the communicative value that utterances actually have in real-life exchanges) were people who misunderstood the distinction between thought and language because they were not aware of the significance of the mother tongue in learning a foreign language. Swan, in my opinion, was right in viewing that a foreign language teaching syllabus should not include the teaching of the second type of meaning. To support his argument, let us look at the word “yes”. Short and simple as it might look, it can mean, in one case, showing agreement, willingness etc, raising a question in the other (i.e. out of curiosity to someone approaching one unexpectedly) or a response to someone calling one’s name. The word “yes” can still take on various meanings in various contexts. It is doubtful whether there would ever be an end if all the meanings of a language item in various situations were to be taught. As Swan had pointed out, our experience and common sense have already equipped

us with a facility to deal with these matters. We also have had enough exposure to similar processes of interpreting language while struggling to pick up our mother tongue and even after acquiring it.

Swan did not deny the importance of “appropriacy” in language learning, but considered the assertion that it is the real goal of language teaching an overgeneralization. He also remarked that the discussion of appropriacy often obscures a perfectly valid point about the need for increased attention to the teaching of lexis. In my opinion, the Communication Approach has done a little bit of exaggeration in this regard, and Swan may also have probably made light of one of the most significant concepts of the Communicative Approach. Few would argue with Swan’s statement that the choice of appropriate lexical items is more to do with the teaching of lexis. However, to decide which form the teaching of lexis should take needs thinking. Traditional approaches have their ways of teaching of lexis, the simplest of which is giving definitions or, in some cases, translating the given words into the mother tongue. Still, knowing the meaning of a word is a far cry from knowing when this word can be most appropriately used. In order to know whether a certain language item is appropriate to be used in a certain situation, one needs to have frequent experience of seeing or hearing it in the context it belongs. In other words, a learner needs to learn to use the most appropriate language item out of many other synonyms by studying how it is used in an interactional discourse. As Swan remarked, these are all lexical matters; however, having recourse to the communicative language teaching methodology in this regard may prove more fruit-

ful than by taking any other means.

Regarding the teaching of skills and strategies, Swan criticized the teaching of such comprehension skills as predicting, guessing and negotiating meaning as unnecessary, citing that these skills can be transferred from the mother tongue. I do not regard myself either as conservative or radical in matters concerning theories of language, but I think Swan has given the mother tongue too much merit than is necessary. There is no denying the fact that these skills can be transferred from the mother tongue. But, at the same time, they are the skills that we are using consciously or unconsciously in the process of exchanging information among ourselves in real life. If we are trying to learn to use a language, it is natural that we need to practise many of the skills involved in the production or reception of it. To give an example to support the idea that skills need to be practised, we can look at a squad of new recruits going about their everyday drill during their military training. For these young soldiers, the drilling will not be complete without having to obey their captain’s commands such as “Eye right”, “Eye left”, “Eye front”, “About turn”, “Stand easy”, “Attention”, etc. In fact, they are all adults. Every one of them has no difficulty in carrying out their captain’s commands. But it is to be remembered that they are practising a discipline which is going to be strategically essential for the operations they have to carry out later. The same is true with communicative skills. Though Swan said that what the learners need is lexical items – not these skills – as a learner can fall back on the mother tongue for the latter, it may not be wrong to practise these skills while the learners are at the lower levels of profi-

ciency. Another reason why we need to teach these skills is that there may be learners who, either out of confusion or anxiety, simply do not know how to apply the skills they have acquired through their mother tongue in a classroom context. Definitely, we need to consider for the learners who sometimes do not see the wood for the trees.

Swan obviously backed up some of the pedagogical aspects of the traditional approaches while criticizing the Communicative Approach concerning its syllabus design and its preference for the authentic materials. In the Communication Approach, meaning is paramount, so items which belong together semantically are taught together. Swan noticed that this style of syllabus design can pose a lot of difficulties to the learners because we do not always use the same structures to describe things which are semantically similar. He **has**, indeed, made a remarkable contribution in trying to solve one of the most serious pedagogical problems regarding the choice of priority between form and meaning. He suggested that we need to take into consideration several different meaning categories and several different formal categories when deciding what to teach a particular group of learners. Then, as a compromise, he proposed that we can list the meanings we want our students to express and finally work out what structures, words and expressions are used to convey these meanings, thus ending the controversy over placing priority between form and meaning.

Swan continued discussing the inter-supportive nature of the two approaches, leading to a point where he suggested integrating semantic and formal syllabuses. He

reasoned that the Communicative Approach will need to refer to a traditional lexical syllabus based on word-frequency in order to cover all the common and important words. Traditional structural syllabuses, on the other hand, are not very good at catching sentence-length idioms and conventional expressions, the area where the Communicative Approach can boast of its strength. His maturity in terms of pedagogical experience and insight can be seen in his suggestion that a sensible teaching programme should include eight or so syllabuses (functional, notional, situational, topic, phonological, lexical, structural, skills) – a systematic combination of both syllabuses. One point I find myself unsure whether to agree or disagree with Swan is that semantic syllabuses are needed to help us teach the “stereotyped” language and structural/lexical syllabuses will enable us to teach the “creative” language. Though I can accept that semantic syllabuses are more to do with stereotyped language, I do not feel comfortable with his belief that structural syllabuses will enable us to teach “creative” language. A creative writer, to my knowledge, does not think about the structures s/he has studied in the process of producing a piece of writing.

No aspect of the Communicative Approach received as much favourable assessment from Swan as its methodology, which encourages language work involving genuine exchanges. But it was sensible of him to suggest that a little bit of artificiality should be allowable in some of our teaching activities for the sake of effective learning. He said there is nothing wrong if activities such as repetition, rote learning, translation and structural drilling are used moderately in our teaching. I am of the opinion that Swan, at

this point, is somewhat influenced by Audiolingual Method, which is characterized by dialogue and drills, repetition and memorization, pattern practice and similar activity types.

Swan also criticized some “information gap” activities that do not reflect the needs of the learners, and suggested asking the students to talk about themselves to ensure a productive language practice. It is, no doubt, a very nice idea, but there is no guarantee that the whole class will be interested in his/ her talk. It may not be very easy for a student to captivate the attention of the whole class just by talking about himself/herself in most cases.

His observations on the use of authentic and scripted materials are interesting and insightful. In his own way of thinking, he might be right in stating that the Communicative Approach fails to recognize the crucial role of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching. But the four-stage model that he finally proposed appeared too mathematical to me. Though we may find out what the learner needs to know with relative ease, it may be really difficult to find out exactly what s/he knows already, because what kinds of language learning sources the learner has been exposed to apart from the classroom learning may still remain in the dark.

There is no doubt that all the theoretical and practical aspects of language teaching Swan had discussed pro and con in his two articles were thoughtful, informative and intriguing. However, it is my impression that he was a little bit skeptical and pessimistic in his overall estimate of the whole affair in the conclusion part. At the very beginning of his conclusion, he reflected that we actu-

ally know hardly anything about how languages are learnt. I am not sure whether he was just trying to appear modest or humble with that statement. It is a good thing to be modest and to be humble anyway. But if we still have got almost nowhere after conducting decades of extensive research into second language learning and teaching, there is no point in thinking about or in trying to find out how languages are learnt. Enough time has been spent.

Since so little do new approaches base their theories on proven facts (his belief), had we better not rely only on our own speculation, common sense and experience which may, at least, help our students to learn something from us? His remark “Somehow our students do manage to learn languages” seems to be giving the answer “Yes”. His remark may be taken even as a kind of insinuation that language learning is possible no matter what or how the teacher teaches in the classroom. He observed that the lack of a solid empirical “anchor” of established knowledge about language learning makes us very vulnerable to shifts in intellectual fashion, which, in my opinion, is a perfectly sound statement. But is it not through chopping and changing that we learn things better? So long as there are thinking people, changes in any field cannot be taken as unnatural phenomena. Swan actually was not so much concerned about the changes taking place in the teaching arena as he was frustrated with the theoretical pendulum swinging from one extreme to the other. But he was seen to be taking a more neutral and softer stance as the article neared its end. He warned us not to give up useful older methods simply because they have been proved wrong, and not to expect too much

from the newly gained insight. Needless to say, Swan's two articles offer some really interesting, insightful observations into the nature of language teaching which will definitely provide teachers of English as a foreign language with the much-needed intellectual nourishment.

References

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- Swan, M. (1985). "A critical look at the Communicative Approach (2)". *ELT Journal* 39/2:76-87.