# Communicative Language Teaching

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## Kenneth Groger

Communicative language teaching starts from a model of language use and derives the framework of an instructional system addressing learner roles and behaviors, as well as classroom activities and techniques. Within this framework of communicative language teaching, I generally incorporate both the use of functional communication activities and social interaction activities.(Richards and Rogers, 1998) The functional communication activities may include such tasks as learners comparing sets of pictures, noting similarities and differences and working out a likely series of events in a set of pictures. Students may be asked to discover missing features in a map or picture, and to solve problems from shared clues. Social interaction activities that I use in my classes may include conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role-plays, simulations, skit improvisations, and debates. I consider my role in the class to be that of facilitating students' learning by managing classroom activities and setting up communicative situations. I see my students in the role of communicators actively engaged in negotiating meaning.

The range of exercise types and activities compatible with a communicative approach is unlimited, provided that such exercises enable learners to attain to the communicative objectives of the curriculum, engage learners in communication, and require the use of such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction. Classroom activities are often designed to focus on completed tasks that are mediated through language, or involve negotiation of information and information sharing.

Most of the classroom activities start from a communications gap that needs to be filled. Speakers have a choice of what to say and how to say it. They receive feedback from the listener that will verify that the purpose of the communication has been achieved. Authentic materials are used, and students usually work in pairs and small groups. As a teacher, I often initiate interactions between students, and sometimes I participate myself. With lower-level classes, I can contribute some clarity to the communicative process by modeling some of the interaction, and then encouraging them to proceed. The students often interact in a wide variety of configurations. A great deal of emphasis is placed in developing motivation to learn through meaningful and purposeful things that have to do with the target language.

Communications gap exercises encourage individuality, as well as cooperation with peers, both of which contribute to a sense of emotional security with the target language. The beauty of this approach is the fact that there is plenty of room for learners to express their individuality, as well as to benefit from all the feelings of comfort and belonging that emerge from being part of a group. This is what I strive for in the communicative learning environment.

At this time I'd like to report on an activity that can produce significant results through integration of many of the skills and qualities that encompass the communicative approach. I think that every good communicative activity begins with the process of familiarizing and motivating. It also involves scaffolding, which I will talk about later. I usually try to co-ordinate this activity with the approach of the winter holidays. It's always good to add the authenticity of doing an activity in the proper season so it co-ordinates well with the topic. I like to get students motivated for this activity by writing on the board a warm-up question, such as, "What are you planning to do over the winter holidays?" This will hopefully get them into the mood of talking about the winter holidays. Perhaps they can even share the answers that they got from their partner with another pair of students. It's always good to have one pair of students interact with

another pair, and this will in turn produce useful language skills. As students tend to conclude their warm-up questions, I might decide to write up on the blackboard some of their answers as they report back what their partner and other group members or other pairs might have said. You can brainstorm other activities as a class, which can be put up on the blackboard. I might make a "word-web." By placing vocabulary items on the blackboard, students are aided in activating their passive vocabulary. They begin to think about the subject, and this serves as a very good warm-up for what's to come.

Once we assemble blocks of vocabulary items that students can use, I may pose the question: "What would you suddenly do if you found out that you had a visitor coming from the United States for a seven-day stay, and you also found out that you and your fellow group members would have the pleasure and the responsibility to host that particular individual that's coming from the United States. At this point, I would distribute the handouts for hosting a Japanese winter holiday. This particular handout, shown in Figure 8, contains an itinerary form with the dates from December 28th through January 5th; and this itinerary also includes the time of day (morning, afternoon, and evening).

The reader is referred to the handout in Figure 8 which appears on the following page.

At the start, I generally ask the students to discuss in their groups, and attempt to arrive at a consensus on how to fill out the itinerary. They may need to consult their personal schedule books, and find out who's available when. This is a good way to actually personalize this particular activity. Aside from personalizing the activity, they also have the chance to use real-world types of objects, such as a calendar or a schedule book. Once they have been able to free up the time, they focus on "How can we best accommodate our visitor?" They need to determine where that particular visitor will stay and how will the hosts transport them? In what types of activities should we as a group engage with them? Should we take

# Hosting a Japanese Winter Holiday

NAME

I VISITED GROUP

| | MORNING | AFTERNOON | EVENING |
|---|---|---|---|
| Thursday Dec 28th Arrive in Japan | | | |
| Friday Dec 29th | | | |
| Saturday Dec 30th | | | |
| Sunday Dec 31th | | | |
| Monday Jan 1st | | | |
| Tuesday Jan 2nd | | | |
| Wednesday Jan 3rd | | | |
| Thursday Jan 4th | | | |
| Friday Jan 5th Leave Japan | | | |

\* I would like to choose group _____ 's Japanese winter holiday plan because

Figure 8. Worksheet on Hosting a Japanese Winter Holiday

them sightseeing? Should we take them to spiritual happenings, traditional Japanese-types of activities, or everyday-lifestyle things? Should we get them involved in the New Year's cleaning process, and food preparation? All these types of decisions need to be made within the group structure.

Before the students actually get started, I may do a bit of scaffolding and write some language frames on the board that will facilitate students' use of the target language. By having some reference points on the board, they are less likely to resort back to their native language. I also remind group leaders at this time that they make sure all group members stay on task. Even though every student has received a handout, only the group leader will actually enter information onto this handout. I will allow each group approximately 25 to 30 minutes to complete their itinerary. During this time the students will be interacting, through making and dismissing suggestions, recommending alternatives, giving reasons, comparing ideas, exchanging experiences, and producing a substantial amount of language that is necessary for the negotiation process. The result is an activity of a highly communicative and consensus-building nature. All of these negotiations will have concluded with an itinerary of which each group member can be proud.

The next phase of this lesson involves sharing information. All group members, with the exception of the group leaders, go off on a fact-finding mission. I instruct them to imagine that they are American university students who will soon be coming to Japan to spend their winter holidays. They will have the unique opportunity to preview one of the winter holiday programs by visiting one of the other groups. Seven other students from their original group will also set off on a visit to another group in order to gather information regarding an upcoming Japanese winter holiday program. What we have in this segment then, is eight students from each group physically dispersing in order to go off to visit separate groups. They will, in effect, be re-congregating with seven new students from various other groups. At the new group location, all students will listen to a 10-minute

presentation by that particular group's leader. The students will need to take notes and ask questions in order to have clarity in regard to every detail of that group's winter holiday schedule.

The group leader who is presenting is aware of the need to speak in clear English so that visiting "American" students from the other groups will be able to report back to their original groups with a high degree of clarity and enthusiasm regarding the presented winter holiday. During this stage all participants are engaged in the highly responsible task of obtaining quantitative and qualitative information in order to pass it on when they return to their original groups. Here we have the clearly defined communicative task of recording and retaining the essential and purposeful information that other group members will rely on for future decision-making. These traveling group members representing their group of American students on a fact-finding mission return home to inform the other group members about the Japanese holiday preview that they witnessed. Each student takes no longer than 5 minutes to report the contents of the schedule they experienced. Once again, other group members are encouraged to ask questions regarding any elements of the itinerary.

Once the reports have been delivered, it's up to each student to choose the Japanese winter holiday program in which they want to participate. Of course they will not be allowed to vote for their own group's program. In the small groups, they may offer reasons as to why they chose that particular program. Following the vote, each group leader will cast their members' votes by writing the respective number of votes on the board under each of the other group names. They will also decide the most popular of the winter holidays.

There are several components of this particular activity that implement the beneficial aspects of the communicative teaching approach. Students at all times are striving to perform clearly defined tasks. They are involved in negotiating purposeful meaning and information sharing. In this

particular activity, Japanese learners are assuming the role of American students, which will preclude to a great extent any use of the native language during the winter holiday presentation. I find it extremely useful and effective to assign roles that preclude the use of Japanese. Teachers should be aware of this tool in their arsenals. The tool is the knowledge that Japanese students will often go to great lengths to maintain the integrity of their role. This is one of the many reasons that role-play becomes an effective aspect of communicative language teaching.

Another wonderful aspect of this activity in relation to teaching Japanese students is the dynamic of presenting information to others in small groups. At no time during the activity do our Japanese learners have to present in front of the entire class. Speaking in front of the class as a whole can be a petrifying experience for Japanese learners. There is absolutely no need for them to be concerned with that. Speaking in front of groups of eight should be quite manageable for them. This is especially true when their speaking is done in a clearly defined activity that is in collaboration with others and contributes to a successful completion of a group task.

The successful outcome I observed for this activity can be easily replicated in other activities, if we teachers ensure that the same important dynamics are carried out with the utmost consideration given to the type of learner with whom we are dealing. We must give careful contemplation to the important question of "how can we provide our Japanese learners with a fairly controlled task that is clearly defined and one that generates learner interest?" We should also ask ourselves if it is possible to reduce learner anxiety by making adaptations in design or presentation of the activity, or through searching for new and improved mechanics that will induce smooth and communicative interaction with a small and familiar audience. Are there ways we can further personalize the task for the Japanese learners? These are all questions that we should ask ourselves when introducing a communicative framework into our lessons.

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