ON THE USE OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH AT SCHOOL LEVEL IN HUALPÉN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY*

USO DEL ENFOQUE COMUNICATIVO A NIVEL ESCOLAR EN HUALPÉN. UN ESTUDIO CUALITATIVO

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Abstract

The Chilean Ministry of Education frameworks the teaching of English, by and large, in the Communicative Approach (CA). However, the current results show a poor performance between students when using the English language. A communicative curriculum does not assure the use of the language communicatively. This issue has been studied in different countries with similar results. It would be essential to know what it is happening in our national context for future decision-making. This study attempts to determine the degree of congruence between the methodologies used within English classrooms and the tenets proposed by the CA, in three municipal schools in Hualpén. To this end, data was collected from three English language teachers and five students randomly selected from each the three teachers' classes. A semi-structured interview was used with the former participants and a focus interview with the latter. Also, a content analysis procedure was used to carefully examine the teachers' lesson plans. The results suggest despite the use of different proposals of the CA, communicative competence is not being enhanced among students who do not have the possibility to use the English language as a communicative tool.

Keywords: Communicative approach, methodologies, proficiency, language.

Resumen

El Ministerio de Educación de Chile enmarca, en gran parte, la enseñanza del idioma inglés en el Enfoque Comunicativo (EC). Los resultados actuales muestran un desempeño deficiente entre los estudiante al usar la lengua inglesa. Un currículo comunicativo no asegura un uso comunicativo de la lengua. Este asunto ha sido estudiado en diferentes países con resultados similares. Sería esencial conocer qué está sucediendo en nuestro contexto nacional para una futura toma de decisiones. El presente estudio busca determinar el grado de congruencia entre las metodologías usadas en las salas de clases de inglés y los principios propuestos por el EC en tres colegios municipalizados de Hualpén. Con este propósito, se recolectaron datos de tres profesores de inglés y cinco de sus estudiantes, seleccionados aleatoriamente. Se utilizó una entrevista semi-estructurada con los primeros participantes y grupos focales con los segundos. Además, se realizó un análisis de contenido para examinar detalladamente las planificaciones de los profesores que formaron parte del estudio. Los resultados sugieren que a pesar del uso de diferentes propuestas del EC, la competencia comunicativa no está siendo promovida entre los aprendices que no tienen la posibilidad de usar la lengua inglesa como una herramienta de comunicación.

Palabras clave: Enfoque comunicativo, metodologías, proficiencia, lengua.

Introduction

As a consequence of globalization, the need for communication among the peoples of the world has become an essential issue not only in the domains of economy, science and the academia, but also in different daily life situations. Hence, in order to successfully deal with the communicative barriers, governments have been working together to solve the linguistic obstacles faced by citizens of the world. Thus, the need for using a specific language for communicating has become one of the most important political, economic, and educational concerns. As a result, English has emerged as one of the most widely spoken languages used by non-native speakers, thus becoming a *lingua franca*. As stated by Kirkpatrick (2010: 74): "English is primarily used as a lingua franca for communication between people of different linguistic and cultural background".

Many nations have adopted the English language as part of their educational curricula in order to allow their inhabitants to use this

language as a means of international communication. In our context, the English subject is incorporated into the Chilean Curriculum as mandatory from fifth grade at primary levels. However, schools have the possibility to begin teaching English subject at lower levels. The Chilean government has mainly adopted the tenets of the CA of language teaching so that Chilean people can use the English language efficiently (Bases Curriculares, 2012). Thus, it is stated "the current proposal of *Bases Curriculares* takes essentially the guidelines stemming from the CA for teaching English complemented with contributions from other approaches that emphasize communication" (Bases Curriculares, 2012: 1).

In addition to this, the Chilean government has made varied efforts in order to enhance the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language, i.e. implementation of different programs as *Chile Opens Doors*, training programs for enhancing English teachers' language competence and methodologies, scholarships for teachers to live and study in a speaking English country, etc. Notwithstanding the enormous efforts in order to make students capable of using English language as a communicational tool, the results have been rather poor. Chilean learners mainly from public schools are not able to speak English in a communicative way, which affects their possibilities of inclusion in this current globalized world, augmenting the existing social gaps.

It is our claim that one of the possible cause that could account for the above scenario would be some sort of mismatch between the correspondence between English language teachers' teaching classroom practices and the principles promoted by the CA, included in the Chilean curriculum for English language teaching.

Hence, the present investigation aims to identify and describe the teaching methodologies employed by in-service English language teachers and determine their degree of congruence with the tenets proposed by the CA. To this end, in order to collect data English teachers and students of three different state-run schools are interviewed and also a thorough examination of these English teachers' lesson plans is conducted. These data are triangulated in order to assure the quality and validity of the results. Thus, we could gain a bet-

ter understanding of what it is being done inside English language classrooms and determine whether the methodologies used promote the English language as a communicative tool, not only within an educational setting, but also in the outside world, in a real context.

1. Theoretical Framework

The Communicative Approach constitutes the last teaching approach in the so-called method era. It originated as a response to Situational Language Teaching (SLT), which regarded structures of the language as the basis in language teaching (cf. Richards & Rodgers, 1986). This approach was based on the theory of Behaviorism considering language learning as habit-formation through imitation and repetition. As Richards (2006: 6) claims, "it was assumed that language learning meant building up a large repertoire of sentences and grammatical patterns and learning to produce these accurately and quickly in the appropriate situation".

In this context, and due to diverse changes in Europe, linguists started to realize that there was a necessity for emphasizing communication in language teaching. Richards (2001) stated that "they saw the need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures". Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2000: 121) claimed that "some observed that students could produce sentences accurately in a lesson, but could not use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside of the classroom".

Thus, the CA started to emerge based upon the theories first proposed by Hymes in the 1970s. Hymes (1972) conceived *communicative competence* as an inherent grammatical competence and the ability to use a language in a variety of communicative situations, where both knowledge and ability for appropriateness in the use of language stand out. Thus, it could be stated that a good learner of a foreign language is not the one who only acquires linguistic elements of the target language but also who develops the necessary skills to use the language appropriately in any social context.

Later, Canale and Swain (1980) further developed CA including

notions stemming from Halliday's perspective of the role of *functions* in communication (cf. Halliday, 1975). Contrary to Hymes' tenets, Canale and Swain (1980: 5) argued that "there are rules of language use that would be useless without rules of grammar". They suggested that a person could have a good level of sociolinguistic competence but without a minimum level of grammatical competence, communication cannot take place.

Canale and Swain (1980) referred to Hymes' linguistic competence as *grammatical competence*. In addition to this, they added *strategic competence* to the linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence proposed by Hymes. Strategic competence deals with the ability to be able to compensate for troubles or deficiencies in communication to negotiate meaning, to cope with vagueness and to compensate for shortages in any of the other competencies. Thus, the learner of a foreign language is endowed or not with the tools to overcome barriers when communicating. Canale (1983) introduced *discourse competence* as an ability that enables language users to produce and interpret language 'beyond the sentence level', so that the learner could produce consistent texts.

More than a decade later, Celce-Murcia *et al.* (1995) proposed as part of the communicative competence the *actional competence*. This corresponded to "the ability to comprehend and produce all significant speech acts and speech act sets" (p. 42). With the purpose of improving the model, Celce-Murcia (1995) incorporated the *formulaic competence* which refers to the acquisition or learning of some fixed elements of language such as chunks, routines, collocations, idioms, lexical frames, etc. which would help users of a language to be more fluent when communicating and to be successful in situations in which individuals have not developed a deep competence. Celce-Murcia specified that the diverse components of communicative competence were mutually related, so it was important to describe these connections to understand thoroughly the construct of communicative competence.

In the aforementioned constituents of the communicative competence established by Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), and Celce-Murcia (1995; 2000), two fundamental factors are clearly distinguishable: 1) the conception of language as a means of

communication among people and 2) the importance of sociocultural context when communicating. Thus, these theories constitute the theoretical underpinnings of the Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching.

Nowadays, the CA is the fundamental approach used in language teaching around the world. It has been claimed to be the solution for developing communicative competences and to help students achieve the final goal of teaching and learning a second language, *communication*. Different governments have based their language-teaching curriculum under the tenets of this approach in order to fulfill the global demands of communication in the current globalized world.

Notwithstanding, the advocacy of the Communicative Approach has been subjected to –at times– bitter criticisms on the grounds of its multifarious interpretations and ensuing applications. One important critique to this approach is the gap between classroom practice and real life situations; what happens inside an English classroom would never replicate what really happens in real social contexts.

According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), there are certain doubts about the true promotion of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in relation to meaningful negotiation, interpretation and expression in the language within communicative classrooms. Besides, it is suggested that CLT is not a pure method. On the contrary, it has developed many of its tenets from other approaches such as audio-lingual and situational methods among others.

Another critique of this approach is the one that proposes that CLT is not an easily adaptable method to each diverse context in which it is adopted. This may lead to the idea that teachers are not very much acquainted with the tenets of the Communicative Approach and, also, they have not been trained in how to apply this approach into classrooms. Thus, it may be concluded that embracing a specific approach requires not only a policy adjustment but also providing the teachers of English with the necessary tools to modify and suit their lessons to the tenets of the selected approach (cf. Swan, 1985; Peterwagner, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Jeon, 2009; Quinghong, 2009; Xu, 2010).

Despite the disadvantages that could emerge from a CA advocacy,

it has ended up as a widely accepted teaching approach across the world, so much so, that it has been widely advocated by private and public institutions, both at local and international levels.

Nowadays, the CA is the fundamental approach used in language teaching around the world. Specifically in Chile, it has been adopted as the fundamental approach that guides the English teaching process.

In the context of the rationale just presented, it turns interesting to identify and describe the teaching methodologies employed by in-service English language teachers and determine their degree of congruence with the tenets proposed by the CA.

2. Methodological Framework

This exploratory and descriptive investigation (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2006) was conducted using a qualitative approach in its attempts to a) identify and describe the teaching methodologies employed by three in-service English language teachers in three different municipal schools in Hualpén, Chile, and b) to determine their degree of congruence with the tenets proposed by the Communicative Approach.

The research samples corresponded to three teachers and 15 students[1] (five pupils of each teacher) part of three municipal schools. The fundamental reasons to select municipal institutions is because they follow the ministerial guidelines as the fundamental pillars of their teaching learning processes. Teachers' lesson plans were also included as a source of data collection.

The instruments used to gather the information needed are a structured interview for the students and semi-structured interview for the teachers due to the fact that "this instrument is the most often used method in qualitative inquire" and "this method works so well as a versatile research instrument" (Dörnyei, 2007: 134, 136).

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[1] In order to safeguard ethical issues when investigating with children, learners' parents authorized their children participation through a written consent (cf. Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007).

As access to the English teachers' lesson plans of the schools selected was requested in order to examine if they were developed following the communicative tenets, methodological triangulation was used in order to confirm the interpretations of the researchers and assure quality of the results.

3. Data analysis and discussion

3.1. Lesson plans analysis

As a starting point, a thorough revision of the lesson plans of the selected teachers was conducted in order to examine if tenets stemming from the CA were included. Unfortunately, one of the lesson plans was not available, so we had access to only two of them.

After a careful review, it can be suggested that teachers' lesson plans incorporate a great variety of activities based on the tenets that underpin the CA. Some examples of this correspond to the incorporation of oral routines, pair work, and role-playing in each planning which may foster the use of the language in a communicative way. This reflects Savignon's view of the CA as a theoretical framework regarding *processes and goals* in classroom learning aimed at developing communicative competence so that students could be able to perform successfully in the target language (Savignon, 1997).

Nevertheless, even though some tenets of the CA are incorporated within these English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, many of them are not clearly seen in the lesson plans analyzed, which could signify a moderate display of this approach, thus endangering the development of communicative competence.

Additionally, the lesson plans show the incorporation of other methods of language teaching as Total Physical Response, Audio-Lingual Method, and Grammar Translation Method which may reflect, in one way, the possibility of an eclectic view of teaching when selecting methodologies. Alternatively, it could mean a poor knowledge, on part of the teachers, of the proposals of the CA as a theoretical construction. As reported by Swan (1985: 11): "theoretical confu-

sion can lead to practical inefficiency" because teachers may not have the necessary elements or knowledge to apply the CA.

In this sense, Kumaravadivelu (2006) states that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) does not represent a pure method; on the contrary, it has allegedly developed many of its proposals from other approaches such as the ones just mentioned. Nevertheless, to elucidate this is further the scope of the current research.

On the other hand, according to the lesson plans students should acquire some chunks of language that may allow them to a) develop their *formulaic competence* which would permit them to be more fluent and accurate when using the target language (Celce-Murcia, 1995), and b) use the language in situations outside the instructional classroom. Indeed, Richards (2001: 41) states that "the learner is expected to apply the language learnt in a classroom to situations outside the classroom".

However, as the students learn brief samples of language or set questions, they do not have the possibility to choose what to say or how to say it. They just learn pieces of language but they seem not to be able to use them in a communicative context later (as stated by most of the students interviewed). It should be indicated that it is not evident if the small pieces of language used by the students provide them with the necessary learning for using language appropriately as the CA suggests.

3.2. Teachers' interviews analysis

All of the teachers that participated in this investigation declared they used a great variety of activities and techniques leading to the development of communicative competence, considered as the most essential ability to be developed. According to the teachers' accounts, the fundamental core aspect of teaching English as a foreign language in the national context leans towards making students be able to use such a language.

As evidenced in each interview, educators claim they promote the use of the English language as a communicative tool. This can be

concluded when, for instance, they suggest "students learn to express their preferences"; "the most important thing is to develop oral production"; "students learn chunks of language" and "use oral routines, songs, videos and fact files to promote communication".

In this respect and regarding teachers' responses, it could be stated that educators seem to encourage students "to maintain communication", Richards (2006: 3), which corresponds to one of the aspects of language knowledge incorporated in communicative competence.

Thus, after analyzing teachers' lesson plans and interviews, it could be concluded the CA is the fundamental pillar that guide the teaching English process.

3.3. Students' interviews analysis

In light of results collected among students, most of the findings described in the previous sections are brought into question because there is not a clear alignment in terms of what the lesson plans showed, what the teachers reported in their interviews, and what the students informed in their focus group interview. It seems that there is not much congruence among the three sources of information when triangulated.

Undoubtedly, in the teachers' lesson plans and on their discourses when interviewed, many elements that evidence the use of communicative methodologies within the English classrooms can be found, for instance, teachers promoting the usage of oral routines among the students, developing the four skills through the activities displayed, encouraging the use of English language, teachers' use of the English language, and so on. However, interestingly, some of the information reported by the students presents a degree of contradiction between teachers' lesson plans, their discourses and learners' declarations; this makes it hard to analyze the data collected.

An example of the above situation is the incongruence between teacher 2 and the information provided by her students when asked

about the language of instruction used by the teacher. Many students agreed that the teacher uses the target language, but reported that she later translates, which is not congruent to what she stated when she suggested that she uses the English language "a hundred percent of the time".

Another contradiction is shown in the three sources of information (lesson plans, teachers' and students' interviews) when using the target language as "a vehicle for communication" (Larsen-Freeman 2000: 132). There is something which does not seem to quite fit the setting: if teachers use the target language and students are asked to use the target language orally, why is it that students report they do not often work in pairs or in groups? So, how and when do they use the language with a communicative purpose?

Therefore, it can be stated oral interactions do not appear to be highly promoted. Students are not allowed to exchange or negotiate meanings working individually. Students' declarations suggest teachers do not appear to be successful when setting up communicative activities. Instead of applying activities that promote and support the CA, namely, using game, role-playing, transfer-information activities, gap-information activities and working in pairs or groups, educators tend to ask the students to work individually completing exercises in their course books, copybooks or worksheets, thus not leaving much room for the students to use the language communicatively. One more time, it may be asked: how do students use the English language communicatively without interaction?

In this context, it could be assumed despite the beliefs teachers express about the fundamental importance to promote communication among students as the final goal of teaching English as a foreign language, seemingly the instructional contexts are not being used as a communicative classroom. This inconsistency suggests what teachers plan and declare is not what it is happening according to the students within English classrooms. As Nunan (1987, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006: 62) observes "the so-called communicative classrooms […] were anything but communicative".

4. Conclusions and further directions

This research study has explored and revealed, at a small scale, what is happening inside a few of the so-called communicative classrooms for English language teaching in our national context with the purpose of trying to elucidate if what the Ministry of Education establishes in *Bases Curriculares* 2012 and 2013 is really occurring in EFL classrooms.

In this context, the current research has exposed the fact that sometimes EFL teachers use some tenets established by the CA, approach adopted as the main framework for language teaching in Chile. However, they nourish these proposals with methods that are not suggested in the national curriculum, such as Total Physical Response, Audio-Lingual Method, and Grammar Translation Method. Hence, two critical issues spring to sight: Firstly, the need to elucidate whether teachers do this because they know this is necessary in order to fulfill the demands of their own contexts; secondly, the need to establish whether the inclusion of other approaches represents a lack of knowledge when selecting activities and techniques that support and promote communication.

Whatever the answer might be, it could be stated that when analyzing this specific situation, despite the fact teachers overtly declare the importance of communication when teaching English as a foreign language, there is a lack of an appropriate focus on communication, which may result in a poor development of communicative competence.

In addition to what was stated above, it can be argued that there are some inconsistencies between teachers' discourse as to what they do in classes, and what seems to take place in reality. There seems to be a high level of inconsistence in what they plan and declare and what they actually do in their lessons. This can be observed when contrasting the information they provided (lesson plans and interviews) with the data reported by their students (group interview).

An evidence of this may be the teachers 'claims when suggesting, "we use pair work"; on the contrary, students' declarations affirm that "we never/rarely work in pairs". Thus, it is necessary to inquire into

how it is possible to develop communicative competence among students without providing them the opportunities to carry out interactions in the target language, which stands as one of the principal tenets of the CA for language teaching. Further research should include observation as a technique to enlarge the amount of information and to make possible to contrast data in a more detailed manner.

Indeed, it is important to bear in mind that without interaction there is no communication. In this study, the activities employed by the teachers, instead of fostering the exchange of meaning, seem to be acting as hurdles for acquiring communicative competence. Therefore, a controversy emerges when reflecting on the possibility of developing communication among students without allowing them the opportunity to use the language for real interactions. This situation might foster the development of the other skills such as writing, reading and listening, yet it does not necessarily contribute to the improvement of oral abilities.

There may be many reasons capable of accounting for the aforementioned situation, such as number of students per class, lack of knowledge of the tenets of the approach, teachers' lack of know-how to use it, among others. It must be stated that teachers agree that the number of students within the instructional settings represents a disadvantage to assess communicative activities; they also claim that there is a lack of time when creating communicative materials and activities. All these issues when conducting a CA for language teaching agree with worldwide investigations (cf. Swan, 1985; Peterwagner, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Quinghong, 2009; Xu, 2010).

Undoubtedly, in spite of the findings uncovered in this study, a fair number of other issues may be brought to discussion as far as the limitations are concerned, e.g. a larger sample, a larger number of teachers' lesson plans, the possibility to observe actual lessons over a period of time, to clarify teachers' theoretical background when selecting the approaches, and so forth. Besides, experimental studies may be conducted in order to clarify the incidence of number of students per class when developing communicative activities because this has allegedly represented a drawback for Chilean teachers when implementing communicative methodologies, as stated by the teachers interviewed

in this study. This further research would signify a contribution to bear in mind when making educational policies for language teaching.

The feasibility to conduct future research into this area would represent an important benefit to review the teaching learning process of English as foreign language in Chile, and also to restructure methodology courses in second language teacher education institutions with the objective of providing prospective teachers with a wide variety of tools to master successfully what is required in the actual globalized setting. Thus, improving learners' outcomes may approximate international standards that impose the necessity for people to be able to communicate.

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