How Communicative is the Communicative Approach? – The German Teacher's Experience

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Abstract

This study mainly focused on exploring the efficacy of applying the communicative approach to teaching German at the Goethe Institute in Bangladesh. A qualitative approach was used to collect data by using journal writing by the teacher as well as informal feedback from students. The students comprised 11 schoolteachers from a number of Bangladeshi English-medium schools. Since emphasis was given on testing reading and writing rather than on evaluation of all four skills, applying CLT was tailored to teaching reading and writing rather than speaking and listening with the effect that students at the end of the course had elementary knowledge of reading and writing but poor knowledge of speaking and listening. The question that follows is how communicative is the communicative approach if testing clashes with pedagogy? This article explores the limitations of applying CLT to the German language class and the dilemma that comes with it as to which approach is the best approach to teach a foreign language.

Key words: CLT in German, Best Approach, Teaching Dilemma, Evaluation

Introduction

After 7 years of studying in English out of which the entire last year was devoted to becoming an ELT teacher, I find my career has started not as an ELT but as a GLT (German Language Teacher). I spent some years of my childhood in Germany. So, it is perhaps all but natural that I should think of teaching English as well as German. After all, the approach is the same- *kommunicativ* is what each of the eight lessons in the book I teach, have as the dominant approach. But I wonder if the teachers handling this book really know the meaning of this word as these teachers themselves were taught German in the "non- communicative" mode. The group I was supposed to teach consisted of a number of school teachers who were adults and who possessed already an excellent command of Bangla and English. The classes went on for 12 weeks at the end of which they were supposed to sit for a four-part communicative test. This in reality, was never implemented. Instead, the students took a multiple-choice-question test testing mainly students' knowledge of grammar. This article explores the limitations of CLT in the German language class and the dilemma that comes with it as to which approach is the best approach to teach a foreign language. The implications for this in the context of developing countries like Nepal and Bangladesh is that teachers will become more conscious educators and improve their pedagogy while learning to

teach a foreign language like English.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used in writing this article is based on one of the three models of teacher education discussed in Wallace (1991).Wallace (ibid) explains the teacher education model of reflective teaching in details. According to Akhter (2006),'Reflection is a process where the teacher evaluates his or her ideas and practices, makes specific plans, implements them and again reflects on the results' (p.182). Loughran (1996) considers reflection as 'the purposeful, deliberate act of inquiry into one's thoughts and actions through which a perceived problem is examined […]' (p.21).The idea of reflective thinking is not new and it can be traced back to the work of educational thinkers such as Dewey (1933). Khan (2008) mentions Schoen's (1983) work on the "reflected practitioner" has been a major guide in developing teachers and

making them perform better'(p.170). Goodson (2001) echoes Schoen and says 'reflection is at the heart of what it means to be professional; and teacher education, supervision and development should be constructed in ways that make such explicit reflection more feasible and more thorough' (p.185). Khan(2008) mentions that Continuous Professional Development (CPD), Professional Development(PD) and Teacher Development(TD) are all synonymous terms (p.170).In order to carry out one or/and all three, reflective teaching is essential. According to Akhter (2006) 'Reflective teaching is a systematic approach to second language teacher education that integrates received knowledge and experiential knowledge" (p.182).

Nichollos (2001) believes that the expertise and competency teachers display in their teaching, can be termed "teaching professionalism". To promote teaching professionalism, it is essential to combine received knowledge with experiential knowledge. Received knowledge refers to the "facts, data, theories" which the teacher derives from books, lectures and other external sources (Wallace, 1992, p.52).Experiential knowledge is derived from practice and observation of practice. Being adequately prepared with received knowledge, I set out to gain experiential knowledge from what McMillan and Joyce (2011) call 'learner-learner interaction' (p.71) and of course, also from student-teacher interaction. My aim was to enhance my teaching professionalism.

For Bartlett (1990), reflective teaching is a process. He talks about certain components of the reflective teaching process. They are mapping, informing, contesting, appraising and acting. These five elements form a continuous cycle in the reflective teaching process. Mapping involves reflecting on 'what do I do as a teacher?'. The emphasis in this phase is on our individual observation which can be recorded by keeping a diary or journal. Informing involves reflecting on 'what is the meaning of my teaching? / what did I intend?' .In the informing phase, the teacher distinguishes between teaching routines and conscious teaching actions and unmasks the principles behind them (p. 211).Contesting involves reflecting on 'how did I come to be this way? / how was it possible for my present view of teaching (with reasons) to have emerged?'.

Contesting may best be achieved by sharing with our colleges (including teachers, students, parents (ibid).Appraisal involves asking the question 'how might I teach differently?'. According to Bartlett (1990) 'A handy way of appraising is to ask the question "What would be the consequences to learning if I changed…?"'(p.213).Acting involves thinking about 'what and how shall I now teach?'. Bartlett (ibid) states 'reflection without action is verbalism: action without reflection is activism-doing things for their own sake'. There needs to be a continuous dialectical relationship among the preceding phases and the idea of acting out our new ideas about teaching.

Strategies for reflection:

According to Akhter (2006, p.183), the following are the strategies for reflection:

Keeping track of the teaching-learning process in a journal by the teacher

Bartlett (1990), has made the following suggestions on what to write.

Our writing will be about our routine and conscious actions in the classroom; conversations with pupils; critical incidents in a lesson; our personal lives as teachers; our beliefs about teaching; events outside the classroom that we think influence our teaching; our views about teaching and learning.(pp.209-10)

Journal writing can be carried out individually or collaboratively where two or more colleagues share their journals and regularly discuss them (Akhter, 2006, p. 184).

For my class, I chose to carry out individual journal writing. Journal writing in teaching is a means of ensuring continuous professional development. It has to be mentioned here that according to an article published on eHow, the learning journal is something which even students can maintain in order to ensure more effective learning. In order to practice journal writing, teachers record their experiences of the classroom in a journal. The recording could be carried on at the end of each class of the course the teacher has chosen to reflect on. Alternately, journal writing could also be carried on, on a weekly basis. According to Smith (2006), starting to write a learning journal requires a framework consisting of four basic elements. They are:

- **Description** of the situation, encounter, experience and feelings.

- **Additional material** - information that come to our notice or into our minds after the event.

- **Reflection** - going back to the experiences, attending to feelings and evaluating experience (Boud *et. al.* 1985, p. 26-31).

- **Things to do** - the process of reflection may well lead to the need to look again at a situation or to explore some further area. It may highlight the need to take some concrete actions. In this 'section' of the entry we can make notes to pick-up later.

Smith (2006) also mentions a few benefits of writing the journal .Firstly, it helps us to remember something lateron. Secondly, irrespective of the content, the act of writing itself engages our brain. Thirdly, journal writing helps us to look at ourselves, our feelings and actions in a different way.

Fourthly, journal writing helps us to clear our minds. As Mary Louise Holly (1989, p. 9) puts it, 'The journal offers a way to sort out the multitude of demands and interactions and to highlight the most important ones'. Last, and certainly not least, making journal writing part of our routine means that we do actually take time out to reflect on what might be happening in our practice and in our lives generally (Rainer, 2004). The real benefits of learning and other journals flow from their sustained use over a period of time. This was the reason I started to maintain a journal for the course I taught. I thought that recording the insights I gained from teaching my very first class would improve my pedagogy in the future and most importantly, help me to grow as a teacher the benefits of which would ultimately be gained by my students.

Feedback from students

This can take the form of surveys and questionnaires. These are most useful when we want to collect information on ' affective dimensions of teaching and learning, such as beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preferences' (Richards and Lockhart, 1996, p. 10).Feedback can also be obtained by talking to students individually or as a group. For my purpose, I chose to obtain feedback from students while taking classes. Time and again, I asked them if my instructions were clear, if I should go at a slower pace and that they should ask me to repeat information if students did not understand. This is in line with McMillan and Joyce (2011)'s proposition that '…lower-proficiency learners working alongside highly proficient classmates in MACs [mixed ability classes] may feel insecure about their abilities in the TL [target language]' (p.71).Therefore, my attention in gaining feedback was specially focused on these lower-proficiency learners.

Classroom observation

The research context

Participants

The group I was supposed to teach consisted of a number of adult school teachers .

Their native language was Bangla but they possessed an excellent command of English. These school teachers had come to learn German at the Goethe Institute in Dhaka, Bangladesh where this study was conducted. As part of a German government funded project called the PASCH whose aim was to foster cultural understanding between Germany and Bangladesh by signing memorandums of agreements between the German government and a number of Bangladeshi English-medium schools, the teachers of those respective schools were sent to the Goethe Institute to learn German so that the teachers in turn, could teach German to their own students at school. It is an ongoing project and the Institute now sends its language teachers to English-medium schools to teach German to their teachers. The number of schools embracing the PASCH project is on the rise.

Class duration

The classes went on for 12 weeks. The cost of participation and teaching materials was free. The lessons were intensive weekend classes whose duration was from 9 a. m. to 2 p.m., with a break of 15 minutes each after every one and a half hour. The lessons consisted of goals such as going to the market and buying things,

exchanging information, making guesses, filling out forms and so on. Activities all followed the implications of CLT proposed in Mcdonough and Shaw (1993, p.21). I consider myself to be lucky because my very first batch was a group of highly educated adults whose strength in English gave them an advantage with learning German, I think. One of them had learned French for a year so that for him, German was a fourth language (his analytical skills in German were excellent and needless to say, he was an excellent student as well). This is not definitely the case with every batch that comes to learn German.

Classroom interaction and teaching methodology

For my very first class, I wrote the alphabet on board and taught students the pronunciation. My goals were, to teach reading and pronunciation. Lateron, my colleagues told me that this would not work if it were taught in the very first class. But for my students, it worked. From about the third class, despite having a lot of pronunciation mistakes, the majority was able to read fairly correctly. But gradually, the mistakes reduced in number. At the end, there were no more reading mistakes at all. The attendance was another thing. For my very first class, there were 11 students. By the end of the month, attendance had fallen to 6. These six were more or less my students for the rest of the trimester until I lost another 1 and eventually 5 students took the model test. At first, I interpreted all the instructions in book in Bangla. Students even did not know the page numbers. I exercised tight teacher control even over speaking classes because I explained everything myself to the students instead of letting the students discuss among themselves their problems. Also, there was little group or pair work.

Method of data collection and analysis

The method of data collection used was journal writing which I started to use from the beginning of my very first class. At the end of each class, I would record student's problems, my own problems regarding pedagogy followed by suggestions as to how to overcome those problems. Therefore, it was a qualitative method of data analysis I used. Classroom observation can be carried out in two ways. Either, one novice teacher can observe the class of an experienced teacher or, peer observation where teachers can observe each others' classes and discuss the collected information.

In my class, towards the middle of the semester, a teacher trainer came in order to observe the first one and a half hours of a class. Before she did so, she gave me a questionaire to fill out. She asked me to identify certain problems, provide my own solutions to them and then left a blank space in which after observing my class, she herself would make suggestions to my problems as well as make comments on improvement. The teacher trainer followed principles for carrying out action research (AR). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), AR is a teacher initiated classroom research. It aims at increasing the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning, and bringing about change in the classroom practice. It is carried out in the teacher's classroom, usually by the teacher herself with the purpose to finding solutions to particular problems. Needless to say, AR is intricately linked to reflective

teaching practices.

Accordingly, I chose to carry out a combination of all three strategies of reflection mentioned above in order to practice reflective teaching in class.

Problems faced

Time management

Among other things, I asked the teacher trainer on the questionnaire as to how to make more effective use of time. While observing my classes, this was one major issue which bothered me and which I had written down in my reflective journal. The trainer told me to be more comfortable with pair and group work. After this, I changed my strategy. I told my students to buy dictionaries and from the very next class onwards, I made my students sit with the dictionary and go for group work for most of the time. They discussed their problems with each other, corrected each other and if someone had not understood something, I asked someone else who had, to explain. In my last month of the trimester, the students even did not bother to ask me what they had not understood because they knew I was not going to tell. I would tell them to ask a partner or more frequently, look it up in the dictionary .So, students automatically would turn to each other for help in the last month because looking up each and every word in the dictionary was too strenuous. They also did one more thing. In pair work, one partner would look up a stretch of sentences in the dictionary for any activity (say, for fill in the blanks) whereas the other partner would look up the other sentences. . It has to be told here that four-and-a-half hours sound to be a lot of time, but for raw beginners of any language, at most 3 pages

can be covered for any lesson if they are to be covered properly. I could not properly cover the book due to time constraints so that I covered the double (6 pages) of the book per lesson.

Too many activities per chapter

Time constraint was another problem.. First of all, there were too many activities per chapter to be covered in a lesson. Maybe ,there were not too many activities themselves but teaching was made complicated by the fact that after every two or three activities in the coursebook, there were accompanying activities in the workbook at the back of the book. These were excercises which students were supposed to solve after they understood the rules and completed the activities in the coursebook. Also, the workbook activities were a type of further practice for students on what they already learned. Students could do the workbook excercises at home but I never took the risk except for a very few times. I knew these working adults would never find the time and also because there was a separate practice book out of which I always gave homework which the more serious students always practiced and which I always collected for checking at regular intervals. This was easy for me to do because I had a very small class.

Now, the problem was that the coursebook activities were often so much demanding that little time would be left for the workbook activities. I tried to strike a balance and started to omit activities in the course book itself. For each topic in the lessons, there were too many activities. My problem was not unique. Other teachers (Siddique, 2004; Sinha, 2005-6) teaching

in the communicative mode in the country have also complained about this. By time constraints, I mean, if I had to cover each and every activity, I would have needed double the time instead of that which was allotted to me. That would be six months. I found lateron that my colleagues did not do the workbook activities. Instead, they focused on teaching the course book activities.

Practicing speaking and listening

I also found that practicing speaking and listening took up at least one-and-a-half hour if they were to be done properly. Listening could not be practiced for 2 to 3 classes because either the CDs or the recorder was out of order. This is also a problem- most often at the school and college level- which practitioners like Sinha (2005-6) and Siddique (2004) have mentioned. When eventually it was practiced, I found it was too time consuming. Each activity had to be played for at least three times. However, as the lessons progressed, students took less time to analyse the listening activities not because they were understanding more of what was being said but because they were making more use of contextual clues. For instance, in matching which picture belonged to which listening text, students made use of the sound of cars to match an outdoor picture to the correct listening text. Keeping in mind, which metacognitive strategies students employed to understand a text, I asked the students about the strategies they employed. This is how I found out.

If speaking activities were not of two lines only, they continued to take up as much time as before. Still, I did practice some

of them. First, I made my students write dialogues in pairs and then I made them practice them. I thought, making students speak without writing it first would be too difficult for them.

So, it came to the fact that I spent most of the time on teaching reading and vocabulary , concentrating on teaching writing only for a few times. The latter was made more difficult because in Lesson 4, students were asked to write a short story with some sentence constructions which were given. This was far too difficult for them and I gave it to them as homework only to find out later they could not do it. My colleagues told me they did the same.

Negative washback on teaching

By this time, I had come to know that my students would be sitting for a multiple-choice-question test so I started to concentrate more on grammar and less on writing and speaking. So, there was what Hughes (2003, p.53-57) calls a negative washback on teaching. This was at the beginning of the third month. Now, why would there be a multiple-choice-question test only? My boss did not tell me but I could guess. It was because students would fail the listening and speaking tests. The fact that testing these would lead to a positive feedback effect is not new and a number of leading practitioners in the country (Sinha, 2005-2006; Siddique, 2004) have raised their voice about it.

Use of L1

By this time, I had finished the numbers long ago. One problem which I was not aware of and which the teacher trainer mentioned in her feedback sheet to me,

was the use of Bangla. What happened in the class she observed was that I started the class with German and went on using it for about the first twenty minutes after which I had gone to using Bangla because students were to slow to understand my instructions in German and I thought I needed to progress with the lesson. After being made aware of the too frequent use of Bangla, I started to make more use of German in a way in which students would understand me .I spoke less, slower and curtailed my sentences. My students started to be able to follow very simple instructions (open the book on page …) in German , understood me if I spoke slowly in small German sentences (not at a stretch though) using gestures and to my extreme happiness, were even able to express elementary things in German ("how are you?", "what is its price?" etc.).

To avoid monotony, I even made the use of rap songs in class. They were given at the end of each lesson in the book and formed a kind of revision unit of things learned in the previous lesson. Due to time constraints, I chose to practice only one rap song. Firstly, a CD recording of the rap song was played several times. Then, students were divided into pairs and made to practice the song as it was sung on the CD. They were given about twenty minutes for practice. After this, each pair was asked to perform its rap song in front of the class. I told students they could add footsteps and hand as well as body movements to it. Eventually, each pair came up with its unique version and performance of the same song followed by huge rounds of applauses by the audience. In the end, we all sang the song together. But this was a huge time-consuming task,

taking up half of the total duration of the entire class time of that day.

Findings

Eventually, my students took the model test and all passed. The model test was given at the back of the book. It consisted of short reading texts. There were listening texts as well but I chose not to practice them because the placement test would not test them. Eventually, although students complained that the placement test was more difficult than the model test, all, except one, passed the actual placement test as well.

There is a twist to this article. After the placement tests were done, three or four days were spent by my colleagues, to take what were called 'preparatory courses'. These were courses which prepared students to take those actual communicative tests called *Start Deutsch* (SD) 1.SD1 was also the model test at the back of the book I taught. Taking the SD 1 test is a requirement for getting visa for Germany. Students pay extra fee for preparatory courses as well as a test fee for taking SD 1. This is further evidence of the failure of communicative tests. Otherwise, why would teachers and students spend extra time and money on practicing them when they have had entire three months of the so called communicative method behind them?

Conclusion

This article has explored the use of CLT in the German language classroom in a Bangladeshi context and has tried to identify a so-called "best approach" of language teaching. Why have I recorded my first time teaching experience in the classroom? It has to do with notions of

reflective teaching (RT) and continuous professional development (CPD) as propounded by Wallace (1991), Khan (2008) etc. Reflective teaching is important for a number of reasons. Among the most important reasons, one is that RT can help teachers to make professional judgments and to question the goals, values and outcomes of their action. Also, RT can generate a cycle of research and reflection. The action generated can bridge the gap between theory and practice. How to bridge the gap between theory and practice , has been the subject matter of this article. RT is needed to clarify our thinking and to change the nature of our own work, among others. RT in turn, is linked to CPD. CPD gives us a sense of direction and helps us to be on the right track, as Khan (2008) says. At the beginning of this article, I wanted to find a solution as to identifying the best approach to teach a foreign language. Truth is, there is none. Whatever works best, should be applied. For my part, I used a combination of the communicative as well as our traditional grammar translation method which is the most widely used method of the precommunicative era. Ellis (1996) identifies a number of problems of applying the communicative approach in Asian countries. But in addition, I would also like to add all the points mentioned time and again by Sinha, and Siddique as they are applicable to the German language class as well. Ending this article on a note of anecdote: a very famous joke that passes around in our teachers' room, will summarise the effectivity of the communicative approach . A says to B : *ich Bahnhof , du Bahnhof, wir Bahnhof,morgen 21 Uhr*. (I trainstation, you trainstation, we trainstation, tomorrow 9 p.m.).

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