How culturally appropriate is the communicative approach?

Greg Ellis

The article questions the universal relevance of the communicative approach to language teaching in view of the cultural conflicts arising from the introduction of a predominantly Western language teaching approach to Far Eastern cultures. The central argument is that, for the communicative approach to be made suitable for Asian conditions, it needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted. It is suggested that 'mediating' can serve as a useful tool in this process. In this way the nature of what eventually takes place in the classroom involves the teacher's ability to both filter the method to make it appropriate to the local cultural norms, and to re-define the teacher–student relationship in keeping with the cultural norms embedded in the method itself.

Introduction   Among the roles ascribed to expatriate English language teachers are: teacher and model of the language; representative and interpreter of his or her culture; learning facilitator; friend and counsellor. All of these roles have cultural dimensions, and are to some extent defined by the expectations of the teacher and the language learners. For most such teachers, their fundamental orientation to language teaching is 'communicative'; but many learners may have expectations which are rather different. Is the communicative approach culture specific, or is it based on universal generalizations about educational practices that transcend individual cultures?

Culturally embedded teaching practices   The literature indicates that different constructions of meaning or 'meaning systems' exist across cultures which inhibit the transferability of particular pedagogical practices between them. As Orton (1990) discovered, for her methodology course to be accepted in China it required not only a change in behaviour on the part of her Chinese participants, but also a change in their value orientation:

> On reflection it seemed that for the Chinese to adopt the approach proposed, they would not only have to do more of, better and perhaps a little differently, what they had always done, but they would also have to make radical changes to some of their basic beliefs, values and consequent ways of acting (1990: 2).

Rather than trying to assimilate the Chinese English language teachers to her own Western values, Orton's solution was to reframe the task in keeping with Chinese values. The result was a different form of the

original practice, 'based on a new relationship between teacher and student' (ibid.). Significantly, her findings touch upon a fundamental aspect of learning concerning the need to make new knowledge sensitive to existing beliefs and values. As Damen (1987: 302) explains, 'learning involves the incorporating of new information into old sets of beliefs and knowledge for the purpose of maintaining a consistent world view'.

The importance of making new knowledge attuned to the learner's world view is especially obvious, where the disjuncture between the old set of beliefs and the new experience is too great. According to Jarvis (1986), this will produce passive resistance or non-learning on the part of the student. This view is also supported by Little and Sanders (1990) who, in a quantitative study examining the perceptions of a group of foreign language students toward various teaching methods, found that unfamiliar activities having a communicative or process orientation were not highly valued by students from traditional backgrounds. They concluded that too large a gap between the current level of performance and the intended learning experience results in a breakdown of language production, and frustration for the language learner.

The communicative approach in Asia

In a study of the appropriateness of the communicative approach in Vietnam conducted by this author (Ellis 1994), it was found that the methodology courses, which were offered by a group of Australian ELT aid volunteers, closely resembled the language teaching model proposed by Canale and Swain (1980). The model is underpinned by the notion that communicative competence is both linguistic knowledge and the skill in using this knowledge. It also addresses the ways in which a learner can bridge the gap between underlying competence and actual performance, and for Canale and Swain, this ability to apply knowledge in actual situations is crucial. Thus, the instrumental aim of a communicative approach is to produce students who can communicate both orally and in writing with native speakers in a way appropriate to their mutual needs. The desired outcomes may range from functional tasks, such as greetings, to complex academic skills. Although pronunciation, grammar, and spelling play an important part in language teaching, these forms in themselves are regarded as meaningless if removed from their social contexts.

Process vs. content

There are a number of aspects of Canale and Swain's model which makes it unsuitable for Asian learners and teachers. One aspect hinges on the relative importance the communicative approach places on process as opposed to content. For Brumfit (1985), there is a concern that ELT methodologists seem to equate process with content, a notion which found some resonance in the views expressed by the informants in the study by this author. In the words of one informant, 'Language teaching principles are all about processes. (. . .) That's a whole new learning experience [for Vietnamese EFL teachers], that process is important' (Ellis 1994: 54). Another aspect is the emphasis on meaning rather than form. However, such an orientation ignores the observance

Greg Ellis

of rituals in the 'collectivist societies' of Asia (Hofstede 1986) and the reverential attitude towards the mastery of individual linguistic forms, for example the aesthetic value attached to the Chinese ideographs (Marr 1981).

ESL vs. EFL   The distinction between ESL and EFL highlights a mismatch for Asian learners between the instrumental aims of the communicative approach and their own situation. It is important to remember that ESL takes place within an English-speaking environment. As a result, the ESL student will have a far greater need to communicate. At the lower levels, the student has the opportunity to immediately test out or practice new language skills in authentic situations. At the higher levels, a great deal of language acquisition will occur outside the classroom, and the ESL teacher will act more as a facilitator, providing structure, explanations, and a forum for discussions. EFL, on the other hand, is always a cultural island, and the EFL teacher is cast in the somewhat onerous role of sole provider of experience in the target language. Without the reinforcement of an English-speaking environment, motivation becomes more a product of the teacher's initiative on the one hand, and the student's will to succeed—or fear of failure—on the other.

Whereas ESL is integrative, in that it is designed to help individuals function in the community, EFL is a part of the school curriculum, and therefore subject to contextual factors such as support from the principal and the local community, government policy, etc. It is also dependent on the teacher's language proficiency, teaching resources, the availability of suitable materials, and may or may not test communicative competence, depending on national curriculum goals. By contrast, ESL teaching is primarily designed to develop communicative competence, with little or no curricular demands and pressure of examinations. Reconsidered in this light, the EFL teacher could be doing the student a disservice by focusing on oral skills when, for example, the examination is testing for translation skills.

Negotiating cross-cultural interactions   In reviewing the literature on problems encountered by individuals acting in a cross-cultural capacity, the field of social psychology, and the work of Stephen Bochner (1982) in particular, offers some promise. Drawing upon research studies carried out in cross-cultural contact situations, such as Peace Corps workers abroad, foreign students in the USA, and intergroup contacts in Australia, Bochner suggests four types of psychological responses to the second culture that depend upon the relationships of cultural groups as insiders and outsiders in the society in question, or as he puts it,

> the extent to which the participants emerge from the contact having rejected or exaggerated their first culture, rejected or exaggerated their 'second' culture, vacillated between the two, or synthesized them (1982: 28).

Culture and the communicative approach   215

Kamm (1990) cites the example of the culture shock experienced by Vietnamese migrants after a period of six to twelve months in the USA. When faced with the realization of the total disparity between what they had known before and their current lives, their reactions ranged 'from over-enthusiastic embrace of everything American to a dissatisfaction with everything' (p. 17). Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1983) refer to these two categories as 'over-assimilation' and 'self-segregation'.

Gumperez (1982) maintains that many difficulties in cross-cultural interactions arise from a wide variety of misunderstood cues, conventions, and organizing features of discourse. Some of these difficulties are due to contexting, which can make intercultural communication quite a complex and even bewildering act even between two fluent speakers. As Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (ibid.) point out, knowledge of a culture, and sometimes even mastery of specific behaviours, does not necessarily lead to well-functioning communication. Brislin (1993) adds that when people observe behaviours which differ from what they expect in their everyday life, they tend to make judgements and draw conclusions in order to make sense of their observations. These judgements about the causes of behaviour, known as attributions, can lead to misunderstandings even at the most basic level; nodding the head, for example, can mean 'yes' or 'no' depending on the culture.

Forms of discourse, complicated by sociocultural expectations and assumptions that are often unconscious, make working in a foreign setting quite a complex task even where no language barriers exist. Our culture is a major factor in perceptual discrepancies. Culture helps supply us with our world-view and therefore plays a dominant role in intercultural communication. Every cross-cultural interaction rests on assumptions each party makes about their own and the other party's culture. The problem with such assumptions is that they are often inaccurate and misleading. The idea that Western culture has discovered a language teaching methodology with universal application, and that communicative competence shares the same priority in every society, may be just such an assumption.

Goals and values   In the confusion between Eastern and Western world-views, it is quite natural to fall into the trap of assigning one's own hierarchy of goals and value orientations to our counterparts from the other culture. The often unexamined practice of making casual attributions about the behaviour of people from other cultures from our own perspective is part of a much larger picture, in which social interactions in one culture are distorted through the prism of values in another. For example, the pivotal Western notion of the 'teacher-as-facilitator' as being an ideal teacher/ student relationship makes its entry here. Its presence should alert us to the social principles underlying the communicative approach. Indeed, so long as the embedded notions of social relations remain unstated, the essential conflict arising in the transfer of a Western teaching approach into an Asian context can all too easily be ignored. The alternative is to concede that there is some other way of viewing the world which is

Greg Ellis

incompatible with the principles of the communicative approach. As Phillipson (1992: 15) points out, the process

> involves asking awkward and difficult questions about the English teaching profession internationally and about the possibly unquestioned ideological tenets of our work.

Interculture   Because English language teachers in foreign settings are operating through language to teach language, intercultural communication theory would lead us to expect many misunderstandings between Western teachers and their Asian counterparts, to the extent that lack of metacommunicative and metacultural awareness could even prevent the instructors from applying their linguistic or cultural knowledge while still behaving in a culturally acceptable manner. Brislin (1993: 41) suggests searching for opportunities to make isomorphic attributions, i.e. 'the ability to make the same attribution as the other person in the interaction'. Similarly, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1983) suggest communicating within the framework of a so-called 'interculture', which would combine compatible elements from both cultures. As with Bochner's (1982, 1986) category of 'mediating', by trying to fit contradicting norms together, the use of interculture would have a synthesizing effect.

The teacher as mediator   Arguably, then, the ideal type of relationship the Western teacher can hope to achieve is that of cultural mediator. In contrast to the other responses to second-culture influences mentioned above, mediation demonstrates awareness of other culture identities whilst still retaining one's own. It is the process of moving from an ethnocentric perception to a non-dualistic, 'metacultural' perception.

One aspect of mediation is the ability to find points of congruence between seemingly contradictory cultural norms. For example, pedagogical practices influenced by Chinese Confucianism tend to be teacher-centred. However, certain elements can be found in their philosophical tradition which support a Western student-centred approach. In Ellis (1994), one informant reported that the key to gaining acceptance for the concept of 'student-centred learning' was in quoting the Confucian proverb 'If you give a man a fish you can feed him for one day, but if you teach him how to fish you can feed him for a lifetime' (p. 57). A second element of mediation is the ability to empathize with the experiences of others. In this sense, the 'mediating' person who has benefited from extensive intercultural communication often possesses an accepting and affirmative attitude toward cultural differences, as well as the emotional and behavioural openness and capacity to participate in the other person's experience (ibid.).

Conclusion   It is inevitable that ESL/EFL teachers working in an Asian setting will have cultural biases about the soundness of their educational practices. However, 'mediating' is an important aspect of their work, without which their professional knowledge cannot be easily applied. When

teaching cross-culturally, it is not enough to operate purely in a theoretical mode, clinging to a single concept of good teaching—in this case the communicative approach. Once this is understood, then points of integration between Western and Eastern teaching practices can be jointly explored.

Received April 1995

References

Bochner, S. (ed.). 1982. *Cultures in Contact: Studies in Cross-Cultural Interaction.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Bochner, S. 1986. *Culture Shock: Psychological Reactions to Unfamiliar Environments.* London: Methuen.

Brislin, P. 1993. *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behaviour.* Orlando, Fla: Harcourt Brace.

Brumfit, C. J. 1985. *Language and Literature Teaching: From Practice to Principle.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Canale, M. and **M. Swain.** 1980. 'Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing'. *Applied Linguistics* 1/1: 1–47.

Damen, L. 1987. *Culture Learning: The Fifth Dimension in the Language Classroom.* Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

Ellis, G. D. 1994. 'The Appropriateness of the Communicative Approach in Vietnam: An Interview Study in Intercultural Communication'. Unpublished MA thesis. Faculty of Education, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

Gumperez, J. J. 1982. *Language and Social Identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hofstede, G. 1986. 'Cultural differences in teaching and learning'. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10: 301–20.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. and **R. Phillipson.** 1983. *Intercommunicative and Intercultural Competence.* ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 353778.

The author

Greg Ellis is a lecturer in ESL and Computer Studies at Western Metropolitan College of TAFE, Melbourne. His experience includes lecturing on EFL methodology at the University of Education in Ho Chi Minh City, and conducting an INSET programme for Vietnamese EFL teachers in the same city. His research experience includes extensive field work in Vietnam.