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Opportunities for Learning through the Communicative Approach

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A danger of the communicative approach, as it is applied to the learning of spoken language, is that it underplays the contribution that the teacher can make to learning.

This paper looks at the ways various pair and group arrangements provide an opportunity for learning a language. By looking at research on the strip story in particular, we can examine the teacher's role in providing opportunity for participation in language activities.

Conditions for Language Acquisition

Several writers have described the conditions that they consider to be essential for the acquisition of another language (Krashen 1981; Terrell 1982). Briefly, acquisition occurs as a result of understanding messages which the learners are interested in, and which include some language which is just beyond their present level of proficiency. The essential features are that the learners

- (1) understand
- (2) are interested in understanding
- (3) meet some new material which is understandable through context
- (4) are not worried or threatened by the activity

As I will show, it is not difficult for teachers to arrange various types of activities where these conditions occur. However, from a practical point of view, there is one more essential condition if learning is to occur. That is, there must be sufficient *opportunity for participation* in language activities. I will use research on the strip story to illustrate this point.

The Strip Story

The strip story is an example of the combining arrangement (Nation 1977) applied to group work. In the combining arrangement

information is divided among learners so that each learner has a unique contribution to make. In the strip story, a previously unseen text is cut up so that each sentence or part of a sentence is on a separate piece of paper. The strips of paper are mixed together and are distributed to a group of learners so that each learner has one strip. The learners memorize their sentences and then return the strips to the teacher. This memorization is essential so that the activity is solely a spoken one. If learners keep the strips of paper, it is usually impossible to stop them showing their strips to each other and thus eliminating the need to contribute orally. By telling their sentences to each other and discussing them, the learners try to put the sentences in a sensible order. After collecting the strips of paper the teacher takes no further part in the activity, except to listen to the completed story.

Let us now apply the conditions for acquisition to the strip story. In order to do the strip story it is essential that some of the learners understand the sentences that must be put in order. As anyone who has seen the strip story technique in action knows, there is usually a great deal of interest in understanding and thus reaching a solution. This interest arises from the challenge in the activity. The material itself need not be particularly interesting. The amount of new material that is met can come from two sources, from the sentences in the strip story or from the language used to carry out the activity. To ensure this kind of input it would seem desirable to have groups of mixed ability. The fourth condition for acquisition is low anxiety. Because the strip story is a combining activity with each learner being dependent on the others, there should be less likelihood of the threat which could be present in a superior-inferior arrangement (Nation 1976). We have yet to look at the opportunity for participation in the strip story. In order to study this, the sentences spoken during an exercise were classified into three types and were counted for each learner. The first type was repetition of the memorized sentence by the 'owner' of that sentence. The second type was ordering of the sentences like *I'm the third, You have the first, If we can make an order, we have to express our sentence and after discussion we put the order, I think we both close together*. The third type involved seeking and giving clarification. This included sentences like *What's your sentence?, v-o-y-a-g-e?; You mean travel, Yes travel, by ship, O.K?, Your sentence start with what word?*, and

repetition of someone else's memorized sentence.

Eight persons were involved in each exercise on the same story. Four different groups were studied, one high proficiency group, one low proficiency group, and two groups each with four high proficiency learners and four low proficiency learners.

Repetition

In all groups the repetition of the memorized sentence was evenly spread. All the learners in a group repeated their sentences about the same number of times. The average number of repetitions depended on the particular ordering strategy used. Some groups checked several times to see if their order was correct by saying their sentences one after the other. In the high proficiency group each sentence was said three or four times. In the low proficiency group each sentence was repeated about ten times. The two mixed groups averaged five and ten repetitions.

In the mixed groups, because overall speaking was generally dominated by the high proficiency learners, the repetitions made up 40 per cent and 60 per cent of the low proficiency learners' speaking and only 20 per cent and 25 per cent of the high proficiency learners' speaking. In the homogeneous groups, repetitions made up about 30 per cent of the speaking.

The value of the repetition part of the strip story is that it makes each person participate and this participation is equally spread, no matter what kind of group is involved. To increase the value of this part of the activity it is worth encouraging the strategy of repeating around the group to check the order.

Ordering

In homogeneous groups the spread of ordering sentences was more even than in mixed groups. In mixed groups two out of the eight speakers did around 50 per cent of the speaking and four speakers did around 75 per cent of the speaking (see Table 1).

Producing ordering sentences involves taking a directive role in the activity. Learners who feel inferior especially in their English proficiency are not so likely to take part in the ordering parts of the strip story. All learners however produced at least one ordering sentence, whereas several learners in mixed groups produced no clarification sentences. The difference between these two types of

sentences could be that ordering sentences direct attention away from the speaker to those being organized. Clarification sentences — however direct attention towards the person seeking clarification — a potentially more embarrassing situation.

The ordering sentences are an essential part of the strip story, and of the three types of sentences they were the most frequent type in all groups, accounting for 40 per cent — 60 per cent of the utterances. It is sentences of this type that present the greatest opportunity for language learning during the exercise. This is because such sentences are frequently used, they can be used without directing much attention to the speaker (indeed, several of them seemed to be used as comments rather than as commands), and they are an essential part of the exercise.

If teachers wanted to prepare elementary learners for the strip story exercise the following patterns could be the most useful.

I am	first
_____	second
You are
You are	after me (because your sentence contains...)
	before my _____ is about

Clarification

More than any other type of speaking during the strip story exercise, the amount of clarification sentences depends on proficiency in English and relationships within the group. The group consisting solely of advanced learners used very few clarification sentences. The low proficiency group used many more, and the mixed groups were in between. In most groups, the clarification was dominated by a few of the members of the group. In mixed groups it was usually the advanced learners who dominated.

There are several possible reasons for the uneven spread of clarification sentences in mixed groups.

(1) Low proficiency learners might not know how to seek or give clarification. This is unlikely for two reasons. First, there are very simple ways of seeking and giving clarification, such as saying *What?*, *Again please*, repeating what was just said with question intonation and giving a simple paraphrase of a word. Secondly in the group consisting solely of low proficiency learners, 17 per cent of the

sentences used were clarification and they were fairly evenly spread among all learners in the group.

(2) Another possible reason for an uneven spread of clarification sentences is that low proficiency learners want to participate minimally in the strip story exercise. There is little evidence to support this as a general rule. Minimal participation would involve only repeating the memorized sentences. However, with one exception in each mixed group, each low proficiency learner used as many ordering and clarification sentences as repetitions. Moreover, in the group of only low proficiency learners, repetitions made up only 30 per cent of the utterances.

(3) Another possible reason is that in mixed groups, low proficiency learners might feel a need for clarification but are too shy to ask for it. The evidence supports this reason. In mixed groups low proficiency learners who made up half of the group produced less than 25 per cent of the clarification sentences. Some learners did not produce any. In the group made wholly of low proficiency learners, every learner produced several clarification sentences.

The Spread of Participation

Table 1 shows if the various types of speaking were dominated by a small number of people or not. If the speaking is evenly spread, among the eight members of the group then two people should do around 25 per cent of the speaking and four people should do around 50 per cent of the speaking.

Table 1

The Domination of the Types of Speaking by Two and Four People in the Groups of Eight People

	Mixed 1		Mixed 2		High		Low	
	2	4	2	4	2	4	2	4
Repetition	33%	58%	28%	54%	30%	57%	30%	57%
Ordering	50%	75%	44%	81%	40%	62%	43%	69%
Clarification	64%	88%	50%	76%	71%	100%	37%	65%

In mixed group 1 for example, two people spoke 33 per cent of the repetition sentences. These two plus another two spoke 58 per cent of the repetition sentences. Because 33 per cent and 58 per cent are not too far from 25 per cent and 50 per cent, this indicates the speaking of the repetition sentences were fairly evenly spread among the members of the group. The figures show this for the repetition sentences for all the groups. It is also true to a lesser degree for some of the types of speaking for the High and Low groups.

The low proficiency group used more clarification sentences than the high proficiency group. The less adept learners are at speaking the greater the need for clarification.

The Optimal Group for the Strip Story Exercise

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that the optimal group for the strip story exercise is a reasonably homogeneous group of low proficiency learners. There are several reasons for this. First, the overall spread of participation is more even in a homogeneous group. Second, the types of speaking involved are most evenly spread among the learners in such a group. Third, there is less reason for learners to feel anxious about speaking when they are among learners of similar proficiency. Fourth, low proficiency learners need to speak much more than high proficiency learners in order to complete the exercise. So, although mixed proficiency groups might seem intuitively desirable because of the possibility of new input to low proficiency learners, study of the exercise in action gives a different result.

The Superior-Inferior Arrangement

Let us now look briefly at two other types of learning arrangement to see how they might provide the conditions for language acquisition. In the superior-inferior arrangement (Nation 1976), one person has all the information that the others need. This is a typical arrangement for teacher-led classes. The arrangement is also possible with pairs of learners. The 4/3/2 technique (Maurice 1983) is a good example of this. In this technique, each learner in a pair prepares a talk on a particular topic. Then the learners spend four minutes each presenting their talks for each other. After that, they change partners. They present the same talk to their new partner, but this time in only three minutes. Then partners are changed again and the same

talks are presented in two minutes. This technique clearly provides plenty of opportunity for participation. The repetition of the talk to new partners with the pressure to increase fluency because of the decreasing time ensures the interest of the speaker. The interest of the listener will depend on the topic and partly on the knowledge that the listener will soon become the speaker on the same topic.

In a superior-inferior arrangement interest can also come from the challenge of the task. In the following technique the opportunity for participation is maximised. Learners work in pairs. Let us call the learners in one pair Learner A and Learner B. Let us also imagine that Learner A has higher language proficiency than Learner B. Learner A has the task of writing about Learner B. Learner B can tell A anything about himself but he is not allowed to write. A can ask B any questions she wishes in order to write the description. In this exercise the low proficiency learner, B, is superior to A because B has all the information necessary to complete the task. A however, has the job of putting this information into an acceptable written form.

This technique meets all the conditions for language acquisition including providing excellent opportunities for participation. Study of the nature of this participation could give useful information to teachers.

The Co-operating Arrangement

In the superior-inferior arrangement one learner has all the information. In the combining arrangement each learner has different information. In the co-operating arrangement, each learner has the same information and they work together, on the two (or more)-heads-are-better-than-one principle, to complete a task. Typical techniques using this arrangement include group composition, discussion of a reading text, and the use of buzz groups.

Co-operating activities need careful study to see what conditions and types of organization provide the best opportunities for participation. This is a task that teachers can carry out in their own classrooms. Careful observation of learning activities can provide useful information for the improvement of learning. One of the most useful effects of co-operating is the reduction of anxiety. If responsibility is shared, it becomes less of a burden. A weakness in such activities is that the activity is dominated by the learner in the pair or group.

The Communicative Approach and the Teacher

Some advocates of the communicative approach (Allwright 1979) have played down the role of the teacher in language learning. I have tried to show here that even in activities where the teacher's participation is minimal, the teacher still has an important role to play in providing the most favourable opportunities for participation in language activities.

The communicative approach has much to recommend it. It has directed attention to how language is used and to language features beyond the sentence. It has provided an impetus for the development of an exciting range of teaching techniques for both oral and written skills. It also brings with it several dangers. One that I have given attention to here is the down-playing of the role of the teacher. The teacher has one job, and that is to make learning easier. Any avoidance of this role so that the teacher becomes merely a provider of communicative activities seems to me to be totally unprofessional. Other dangers include the equation of communication with spoken activity, and thus a lack of emphasis on reading, and the rejection of many tried and tested techniques and procedures because they do not suit the new orthodoxy. If teachers direct their attention to improving learning rather than following a particular approach most of these dangers will be avoided.

Table 2
Number of Sentence Types in a Mixed Group Exercise
Mixed 2

Learners	Repetition	Ordering	Clarification	Total
L	12	1	1	14
O	11	10	0	21
W	11	7	1	19
	4	9	6	5
H	5	9	21	35
I	6	10	19	33
G	7	9	31	46
H	8	11	33	51
Total	82	128	29	239

Table 2 (continued)

Reasons for preferring a low proficiency homogeneous group:

- 1 Even spread of total participation for each learner, no one out of sync.
- 2 Even spread of types of speaking.
- 3 Less anxiety.
- 4 Need to speak more.

(* = a low proficiency learner. Italics are used to show the sentences in the story)

M* *He believed that ... the good trade of nations depend on the existence of friendly relations between them.*

H Yes, and yours, please.

T* *He enjoyed the long voyages which gave*

H He enjoyed what? excuse me

T* *the long voyages which gave him the chance to make new friends who helped him to expand his business.*

S So her sentence and mine and yours.

H He doesn't believe? (= asking S to say his sentence)

S *He doesn't believe in separating business*

H in separating business

S *from pleasure.*

H So her sentence goes along with mine and yours as well.

H And yours is?

W Actually my sentence is the first or the last sentence.

H *A good knowledge of English was necessary for a man in his position.*

H This is like ... a conclusion.

H A conclusion, yeh. A conclusion.

S So we'll take this sentence.

H Is my sentence before yours?

S *He practised tennis and practised speaking English.*

S Well why don't we pick out the first and the second ... first and then go down. Probably hers should be the first one.

W How about yours? Yours is also about this man and you have the name.

S Well I think my sentence should be as close as possible to her sentence.

W Oh, to her sentence. Maybe your sentence is the first one. It tells us how this man goes by sea. Yours is the purpose.

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