

Podcast transcript: Communicative language teaching

Dia is Muire duit. Welcome to this podcast about communicative language teaching, or *an cur chuige cumarsáideach*. It's part of a series of NCCA podcasts and you can find more information and more podcasts on www.action.ncca.ie. Today I am talking to Dr. Kènia Puig i Planella, and Kènia, can you tell me a little bit about yourself.

Hello Marie. I am a Project Leader with the Modern Languages in Primary Schools Initiative. I am the Spanish project leader, but I work with teachers on a regional basis, supporting them across the four languages of the initiative. Prior to this I lectured in the school of Applied Languages and Intercultural Studies in DCU, where I did my PhD in second language acquisition.

Thanks. So as I said this podcast is about the communicative approach to language teaching, and this is the approach recommended in *Curaclam na Gaeilge* and in the *teacher guidelines for Modern Languages in Primary Schools*, and it can also be used teaching English as an Additional Language (EAL). It is an internationally recognised overarching approach, rather than a teaching methodology linked to any one language.

But to start off Kenia, can you tell me what is communicative language teaching all about?

Well, communicative language teaching focuses on language as a medium of communication. We use language to get things done. It recognises that there is something that we need find out, or something that we want to say and communicate and it takes that as the reason why we speak language, why we want to communicate with others. For this reason communicative language teaching concentrates in fulfilling specific language functions or tasks, for example such as greeting, introducing yourself, you may want to express likes and dislikes, you might want to enquire about somebody's hobbies, interests, you might want to find directions to someplace. So they are actually very concrete things that you want to do with language.

Great, and what are the other features of the approach?

Well, communicative language teaching focuses on the interests and needs of the learner, so the learner is the starting point: What do you want to learn in the language and what is it that you want to do with it? So at primary level, for example, children are still very interested in themselves and their immediate environment, so you will take that as the starting point for the teacher, so it will be relevant to their own life, depending on where they are, what's available in their locality.

So to give you an example if you were teaching or talking about hobbies, expressing things you like to do ... you would think about what do the children do in their life? So you would take if they play hurling or if they play tennis, and you would use their life as the starting point for what they are learning.

At the same time we must remember that children should learn in an environment which recreates this real life situations, where there is a need to communicate, and to provide information. So the use of a communicative task-based approach to language teaching allows children have opportunities to use Irish or any other language that they are learning in a range of contexts and for different purposes.

Now it's also important to remember that real life situations include the four skills. So if you are going to a restaurant ... and you want to order a meal ... you are going to have to read the menu, before you can speak and say what you want, and listen to the waiter. So the skills in real life all come integrated and we should try to duplicate this integration of skills in our classes.

And Kenia, as a primary school teacher, why should I actually use the communicative approach? What's the benefit of it for me?

Well, using this approach, it's very rewarding for the children, because you are using language in a very active way, and they are very engaged in their own language learning. Because you are fulfilling a specific communicative goal ... there is something they want to achieve; once they complete this goal they have increase in ... it's very rewarding, it's very satisfactory, and therefore it increases their motivation as well.

If a child, at the end of a lesson is able to introduce themselves, or order something in a shop, that's going to make them want to do more and more things with the language they are learning.

...

Because you are taking, as we were saying earlier, their life and the topics that interest them ... they are going to want to participate in the class because they are talking about things that are relevant to them, and it makes it very enjoyable for them. And all of these things, together, as we were saying, contribute to increase their motivation because they see they are engaged in something that they can actually do.

And the whole idea also about the communicative approach is that because you are going to be engaged in a number of different tasks and activities you are going to be able to cater for all the different language learning styles. So everybody can take part at all times.

So it's much more enjoyable for the children and they get a better sense of ... achievement and they are more rewarded by their learning?

Exactly, and at the same time you are making them more autonomous learners. Because they are doing their tasks that you have set out for them, and they are able to work out how they can do things; how they can use the language they have to accomplish [the

tasks] and they can use other cognitive strategies, so they are learning also about *how to learn*.

Great, I think you've convinced me Kenia, but if i now want to actually go ahead and use this approach in my language lessons, how can I be sure that my lesson is really communicative? ... what should a communicative language lesson actually look like?

Well, a communicative language lesson can be divided into three parts. Now, it is important to consider two things about the lesson. First is the time available, and that you will have time to complete the three parts, because they're integral to the lesson. And the second one is that the task is achievable. It's very frustrating for children if they can't finish an activity because they run out of time.

So, in the first part of the lesson, as a teacher you are going to set the scene. So basically in this part of the lesson you are going to introduce the vocabulary, and the structures that they need to carry out the task that you are going to set up in the second part of the lesson.

The starting point is always something very concrete. So rather than saying '*Today I am going to teach the words for food*', or animals, you are going to start with something like '*At the end of this lesson the children should be able to ...*' maybe order food from a menu, or they might go shopping for the ingredients for a particular recipe, or they might talk about their likes and dislikes when it comes to food, or they might do a survey of what are the favourite foods of the people in the class.

So I have to choose an objective like this to start my lesson?

Exactly. And then it's very easy as a teacher to sit down and say '*Well, what vocabulary do they need, what grammatical structures do they need, to carry out this function?*'

So then you are going to use different types of activities to practice those things. So for example, you might use mime, you might use flash cards, movement, games – for example like Kim's game or something like that.

If you are starting by teaching your vocabulary and you have the topic of food, and you are going to teach them a few words, you might be teaching chicken, cheese... Instead of just saying that [those words] you might say *I like chicken, I like cheese, I don't like butter, I don't like milk*, so that you are teaching the structure and the vocabulary that they need the for the next phase of the lesson.

Ok, that sounds quite achievable, I plan out what I am going to teach and I ... it's a little bit traditionalist in a way in that the teacher is teaching [the language] and you know exactly what you're doing. What's the next part of the lesson?

The next part of the lesson is what we referred to as the communicative part of the lesson. Here you are going to get the children to do their task, which could be, for example,

carrying out a survey. So the children in this part of the lesson usually work in pairs or in small groups. That way ... you are maximising the speaking time for the children and it's actually more [like] real life because we don't speak to thirty people at a time, you speak on a one-to-one or on a small group basis.

So in this part of the lesson the teacher is going to take a step back, leave the children engage in doing the task, and the teacher goes around the room making sure that things are happening correctly, taking notes of mistakes to bring them up at a later stage, and ... seeing how the children respond to the task. In actual fact that allows for more assessment than in a traditional class where the teacher is at the front.

And could you give me examples of the kinds of communicative tasks that I might give the children? Would it be mainly oral tasks, or would I be using listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well?

Absolutely! Exactly! Because as we mentioned before, in real life the skills don't happen in isolation. So the tasks should try and duplicate that. So for example you could have a task where you have pupil A and pupil B, and they have to complete, for example, a school timetable with the information they all have, so they would have to say *Well, what's on Monday at nine o'clock? It's PE.* So they are reading whatever is on their card, saying that to their partner, and the opposite, and writing it in. So in actual fact, in that little activity you have: reading what's your card; speaking to your partner; listening to what your partner says back to you; and writing it into your card.

Great. What's the next part then—when I've done my pre-communicative and my communicative stage where they have done their task?

Now, before we move on, what is important about the communicative part of the lesson, is that you tell the children how much time they have to do that [the task], so they are focused, and have a realistic time to do it. You can't hurry them, but you can't not say *Well, time to finish, we don't have more time to do this*, because then they can think *Oh, we didn't get time*, and then they become frustrated and think that they are not able to do it.

And time is always an issue in primary classrooms.

Exactly, yes. So that's why you need to think about time when you are planning your lessons.

So... you need to move on then to the third part of the lesson, and this absolutely needs time. I do feel very strongly that it's a very important part of the lesson, it's what we refer to as the post-communicative phase.

In this phase you are going to do two things. One is that you are going to go back, with the class as a group, about the language used, so this is your time to deal with errors, see where the stumbling blocks were, and you're going to take note of that. You are going to use the time to maybe address those with the class as a whole. And it's also time to ask

the children and get feedback on their own assessment. *What did they learn today?* So that they have a sense that *Yes, today we have learned ...* these very concrete things. *What was enjoyable about that task? What did I do to complete the task?* So, again, they are looking at ... cognitive strategies. *I had to analyse, I had to predict,* that type of thing. It's very important that I get this done so that you are actually completing the cycle of the lesson.

Great. It sounds to me very much like my role as a teacher in the last phase is all about recapping, and ... assessing, and then helping the children develop the strategies. And in the pre-communicative phase it's quite teacher driven I suppose, in that I'm teaching [language or structures] but what about during the task part of the lesson? What's my role as a teacher there?

Well, as we were saying, overall in the communicative approach the teacher very much becomes a facilitator, and the children are agents of their own learning. So in a way you are a facilitator, you are a monitor. You are guiding them through the learning process, you are giving them the tool and then guiding them to carry out the task. So when they are engaged in completing the task you are going to go around, you are going to help them with whatever help they need, so that you are facilitating that, giving them the sense that they can do this; they might do it with a little bit of help but they can do it. So you are facilitating the learning and you are monitoring the learning.

You mentioned earlier about how I can integrate the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing into my lessons. But what about grammar? How can I integrate the teaching of grammar into my communicative lessons?

Well, I'm glad you asked this question because it's actually a misconception to believe that grammar does not have a role in communicative language teaching. Because, to use language, we need two things. One, we need a pool of vocabulary, and then we need a set of structures to actually construct sentences with. So you can't have one without the other. Therefore when you're teaching them, you also need to teach them together. You need to teach grammar in context.

What actually do you mean by that, though? 'Teaching grammar in context'.

That you will link the vocabulary you are teaching to the structures. Do you remember my example of the flash cards, and *I like, I dislike*? So you will find a function, and the grammar and vocabulary to go with that function.

The other thing that's very important when you are teaching grammar is to let the children work out the rules by themselves. They really enjoy that, and it also means that if they have worked it out, and if they have had to think about it, they are more likely to remember. Language detective activities are very useful in that regard. So for example you wanted to teach ... plural formation. You might want to give them a few words, a list of words in singular and in plural, and let them look at it and let them think *Can you come up with any rules? How do you make the plural? What happens if a word finishes*

in e, or in a consonant? Are there any changes? So they can work in pairs and help each other work it out, so they are much more likely then to remember. It actually makes it very enjoyable for them, so you are teaching grammar—because they need to know the plural—but you are not doing it in a traditional style, so to speak.

And then, what about things like common mistakes? So let's say I have taught something like this, and allowed the children to work out the rule, but maybe some weeks, some months, maybe even some years later they're still making the same mistake – why is that?

Well, there could be a couple of reasons for that. One is because sometimes we teach something in a lesson, and we think *That's it, I have taught that, tick the box* whereas in actual fact, for language learning as for many other things it's a spiral, you need to revise things and you need to recycle language. So you might do plural formation when you are learning ... to talk about things in your classroom, but you might want to address it again when you are talking about clothes. So you are presenting the same grammar and the same structures but in a different context.

And you must also remember that different children have different levels of ability. So some children will get it first time, and there are some children who will need to go through something three or four times. So it is very important to revise and recycle the language that you use.

And are there any particular things that I should be watching out for when I want to use the communicative language approach?

One thing that I think it's very important to consider is differentiation. Very often we see teachers setting the same task for everybody in the class, without considering the different learning styles or the different levels of ability in the classroom. So there is room for ... setting a task that is not quite the same for everybody, so that everybody can achieve something and complete something.

The other thing is the issue of time allocation and we touched on that [earlier]. Make sure that there is enough time in your lesson to cover the three phases of the communicative lesson. And also consider that they don't all have to be, for example, 15 minutes or 10 minutes, and that the same phase might not always take the longest. So it's not always the communicative phase that's the longest; there are lessons maybe where you would want to spend more time, maybe, on the post-communicative phase. So to consider how you are going to use your time is important.

Also bear in mind that you won't always be able to predict what they are going to do and what they are going to say. So you might want to set up a set of [language] structures to do a particular task, but the children might find a shortcut and end up using a different set of structures, and that is all right too. That's why it's important that in that phase of the lesson that you go around and you monitor what's happened. You will never predict everything they are going to say or how they are going to say it, but if you go around then you can address it in the post-communicative phase, so that's important.

So I should watch out for differentiation, and time allocation, and monitoring.

And lastly, just think when you are setting up your lessons, that you have considered a variety of activities that include, and reflect, all the learning styles in the classroom, so that there will be something for everybody. There are children who need to see the written word, for example, or there are children who need to speak and to say things to remember them. So it's very important to consider that as well in your lessons.

So, Kènia, we've talked about the communicative approach generally now, and we've gone through the phases of the lesson and some of the things I should watch out for, but is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish up?

Well, I think it's important to remember that communicative teaching is not only about oral skills; communication – as we have mentioned – involves written communication, it involves listening and it involves reading, and that should be reflected in the classroom and in the lessons as well.

Don't forget that the communicative approach doesn't mean that it's all games and songs. Yes, these types of activities do have a place in the lessons, and they are good in a pre-communicative phase, or a post-communicative phase, but remember also that language, grammar and structures ... still need to be taught.

And don't forget, that you do have to find a place to address errors. Some people may believe that the emphasis is solely and purely on communication and that it doesn't matter if errors are made, and while it's important during the communicative phase that the children get on with the task and actually do communicate, it is important to take a step back and deal with error correction.

To finish up, just to stress the fact that communicative language teaching is not a "method" as such. But it is an approach to teaching that focuses on communication of meaning and messages and getting your point across. Because learners learn in a variety of ways many methods strategies and activities for teaching and learning will be used in a communicative language lesson.

Thank you very much Dr. Kènia Puig i Planella.

Thank you.