

The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In the attempt to call the attention of Malaysian English language teachers to the Communicative Approach to language teaching, this article asserts the need for the re-emergence of the Communicative Approach to language teaching in Malaysian classrooms as opposed to the traditional patterns of language teaching still widely used in many classrooms throughout Malaysia. A new model within the Communicative Approach to language teaching is proposed. This model affirms that the Communicative Approach to language teaching is a viable approach which allows as well as encourages students autonomous interaction in the classroom through genuine communication instead of participating in teacher manipulated and structured activities.

ABSTRAK

Kertas ini menitikberatkan pendekatan 'Communicative' sebagai pendekatan yang lebih berkesan sekiranya dibandingkan dengan pendekatan-pendekatan tradisional di dalam kaedah pengajaran bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia. Penulis telah mencadangkan satu model baru di dalam konteks pendekatan 'Communicative' di mana model ini membuktikan pendekatan 'Communicative' sebagai satu kaedah pengajaran yang menggalakkan pelajar-pelajar berkomunikasi dan berinteraksi dengan lebih berkesan.

INTRODUCTION

To be able to consciously adjust the perceptions of our Malaysian students with regards to the basic function of the language classroom is perhaps the most trying task a language teacher has to encounter. My own experience in teaching the English language to Malaysian students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has compelled me to make the following observations. A majority of UKM students come into the language classroom with the preconceived notion that the language classroom is an occasion for teacher guidance from an official textbook or for the revision of their own mastery of a textbook. As such, even though their attendance in the language classroom is a rewarding behaviour in itself, students still per-

ceive that the main function of the language classroom is to expose them to well regulated materials that will ultimately reappear in chunks or in toto on some critical evaluation scheme—the mid-semester or the final examination. Years of previous ‘school’ thinking in which officially approved textbooks and centrally produced examinations uniformly tried all over Malaysia has inculcated these perceptions in our students.

Many times, as soon as students are introduced to a variety of communicative exercises in the language classroom, these exercises, to my dismay, are treated merely as tasks for memorizing ‘correct answers’—in patterns or in linguistically accurate but stilted exchanges. More often than not, I find students overtly demonstrating their disappointment that my class sessions end leaving them with unspecified pages or units to be covered on some future examination or without a handout of ‘correct answers’ to be memorized for the next class session. If this seems familiar to you, think about the following questions: Have our language students been told not to think about what they are saying but rather to see patterns?; Have they been plunged into language learning through drills and exercises that border on the tasteless, lack of imagination but linguistically accurate exchanges about Ali, Ah Chong, Samy and Mary?; and Have they been imprisoned into expressing and memorizing like mathematical formula the meanings of the teacher or the textbook writer and not their own? My own experience in language teaching has compelled me to answer a disturbing ‘yes’.

The general purpose of this article is to call your attention to the Communicative Approach to language teaching by highlighting what this approach can offer in helping you overcome some of the problems mentioned above. However, more specifically, this article aims :

1. to assert the need for the re-emergence of the Communicative Approach to language teaching in Malaysian classrooms as opposed to the traditional patterns of language teaching.
2. to describe the Communicative Approach to language teaching.
3. to propose a new model within the Communicative Approach to language teaching.
4. to call your attention to the need for language practice authenticity and students’ language autonomy in the language classroom and to suggest the ways these two areas can be developed by our Malaysian English language teachers within the Communicative Approach to language teaching.

THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING—WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR CHANGES?

According to Deckert (1987:19),

Schools that perpetuate the more traditional pattern of language study in the form of classroom drills and non-authentic manipulated activities are in danger of not

stimulating ordinary uses of language in the classroom. More often than not, students in this teaching environment learn new vocabulary items with little regard to context, learn language forms which are unnaturally manipulated, learn rules of the language which are confused with the language itself, and are given language samples which are learned by rote. Thus, in this process, the language fails to attain its true character as a system of conveying meaning. In fact, the language assumes the character of a pictureless puzzle which students manipulate for the satisfaction of superior grades and resulting status.

On a more serious note, Brumfit and Johnson (1979:1) assert that

language teaching has shifted emphasis away from 'mastery of language use to mastery of language structure' where the syllabus is a syntactically built-up inventory of structural items with strategies designed to teach these structures; we present a structure, drill it, practice it in context and then move to the next structure. In assessment, we reward structural correctness and chastise structural inaccuracy. Thus, success or failure in language learning, interpreted (both through examination results and through students or teacher judgement) has generally come to be assessed in terms of ability to manipulate the structures of the language.

Language teaching by far has looked to structures as a primary end in itself and because of this, language teaching has tended to depreciate language use in classroom situations. It should be noted at this point that the structural view of language is not sufficient on its own to account for how language is used as a means of communication (Littlewood 1981). If observations about how language works in the social process of communication have been used principally to demonstrate the insufficiency of purely grammatical approach to language teaching, (Wilkins 1979) I must hereby argue for an approach which recognizes that the acquisition of receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) knowledge of a language must involve the learning of not just rules of grammar but also learning of rules of uses (in situational settings as well as in communicative acts). Of equal importance is that we must realize and not lose sight of the fact that linguistic forms provide a means to an end as well, and that the end is communication. Greater concern should be given to seeing that what is learned has communicative value and that what has communicative value is learned.

WHAT IS THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING?

Littlewood (1981:1) explains that

one of the characteristic features of the Communicative Approach to language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language combining these into a more fully communicative view.

A Communicative Approach opens up a wider perspective on language. In par-

ticular, it makes us consider language not only in terms of structures (grammar and vocabulary), but also in terms of the communicative function that it performs. In other words, we begin to look not only at language forms, but also at what people do with these forms when they want to communicate with each other. For example, the form – ‘Why don’t you close the door?’ might be used for a number of communicative purposes, such as asking a question, making a suggestion or issuing an order. Littlewood (1981:x- xi)

He further explains that the Communicative Approach

makes us aware that it is not enough to teach learners to manipulate the structures of the language. They must also develop strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in real situations and real time (1981:xi).

In the language classroom, the language teacher as Littlewood(1981:xi) suggests

must provide learners with ample opportunities to use the language themselves for communicative purposes. We must remember that we are ultimately concerned with the learners’ ability to take part in the process of communicating through language, rather than with their perfect mastery of individual structures (though this may still be a useful step towards the broader goal).

Hence, with this approach, it is possible to provide language students with meaningful task practices, to improve their motivation in language learning, to encourage natural learning in the language environment, and to create a context that supports learning. As Maurice (1987:9) puts it :

If communication is to be the product of language teaching, then it seems reasonable that it needs to be included in the process as well. To avoid doing this, is to surrender before the battle, to withdraw from a solid approach before even giving it a try.

THE NEED FOR THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

More appropriate in the present language teaching situation in Malaysia is my calling attention to the re-emergence of the Communicative Approach to language teaching. At present, English language teaching in the Secondary School environment is focussed upon the newly introduced Integrated Syllabus (also known as KBSM – its Bahasa Malaysia acronym) for the English Language Programme with its special feature being a departure both from the structural orientation of the current Forms I-III Syllabus, and from the greater focus given to speaking in the Communication Syllabus of Forms IV-V (Kong Chooi Peng 1986). My discussion of the Communicative Approach to language teaching is directed mainly to language teachers whose learners need to acquire a general communicative ability in the English language which will enable them to cope with everyday situations. In

Malaysia, we can no longer deny but begin to realize that despite the increase use of Bahasa Malaysia in most areas of real-life situations, the needs for the English language in certain areas in the job market still remains and therefore, provisions for communicative ability in the target language must be made for the average school leavers heading for a variety of jobs in the real world and for those who will be potential tertiary students (approximately 10% of the total population) who need to excel in academic and nonacademic areas in the target language. More importantly, in the tertiary level, students must be provided with the opportunity to use the target language so that they will be able to communicate effectively in the target language in real situations—on campus, in the community and in future job situations.

The KBSM Syllabus according to Khong Chooi Peng (1986:81) states that 'the syllabus proper makes reference to English as 'one of the languages to help Malaysia keep abreast of scientific and technological development in the world and to participate meaningfully in international trade and commerce' and he further asserts that 'a lot of what exists in technology and international dealing as the syllabus acknowledges, is in English.' If this is the case, I feel that the Communicative Approach to language teaching should have a significant, nondecorative place in our Malaysian classrooms where communicative ability of the target language is the goal of language teaching. I am not calling for an affirmation of any new 'method' or calling for an adherence to just one method, but rather calling attention to the support which the Communicative Approach offers to Malaysian teachers (in schools or in the tertiary level) who would like to break from rigid adherence to a particular method and to develop an approach to teaching which is more responsive to the needs of their students. This suggests that it is possible to create a learner-based syllabus to replace the subject-based, grammatical syllabus where concentration lies largely upon the forms of language that are most appropriate to students' needs.

PROPOSING A NEW MODEL

A new model of the processes in language learning must be considered for all working in the area of language teaching where the general aim or goal for the language learner is the ability to communicate in the target language for the normal purposes of language. This means a model which, in agreement with Rivers (1963:26) prepares students who can speak spontaneously in the target language as well as one which allots a full role in interaction or skill-using as an essential complement to skill getting (cognition and production). Russo (1983: v) explains that

making communication an integral part of the daily class gives immediacy and coherence to the language learning process. It breathes life and purpose into the fatigue routine that is necessary to master grammar and pronunciation.

Montgomery and Einsentein (1985: 331) reports that

students want and need real conversation language use will enhance progress in the area of grammar and the teaching of grammar does not need to be restricted to formal rules of pattern practice. Both adults and children need learning experiences which present language as a means of satisfying their everyday needs and interests.

In the past, language learners did not expect to be able to use language communicatively as soon as the learning effort has begun, i.e., until their learning has proceeded for some years. Therefore, since the learner has been plunged into a situation where the occasion to use the language rarely arises, it did not really matter if the development of communication ability was deferred. With this model, from an early stage in language learning (from the beginning) authentic situations must be devised where students participate in unrehearsed conversational transactions, drawing upon their own experiences, interests, and resources to get information and ultimately cease to rely upon somebody else's support (mainly the teachers's). In practice, this model features students bridging a contrived or natural information gap or pooling their information and insight toward solving various problems (Littlewood 1981). This will undoubtedly help students pass from the point of storing linguistic knowledge and information about how this knowledge operates in communication to actual using of this knowledge for the multitudinous, unpredictable purposes of an individual in contact with other individuals. Language teachers must remember that unless this adventurous spirit is given time to establish itself as a constant attitude, most of what is learned will be stored unused, and we will produce learned individuals who are inhibited and fearful in situations requiring language use (Rivers 1963).

Although the language teaching profession pays lip service to the realization that mastering of the mechanics of a language does not ensure the ability to use the language for communication, current language teaching practice delays experience in authentic, autonomous communication until the student has acquired a basic set of grammatically correct utterances totally disregarding Smith (1976:221) when he states 'In order to learn you must take a chance.' Our past failures do not teach us a thing, for language teachers are still too satisfied with students who perform well in non-authentic situations (typical language teaching activities e.g., pattern practice, structured dialogs, question and answer exchanges, repetitions and rehearsals, corrections, test of discrete points, assignments and the like), we fail when we take things for granted and assume that there will be automatic transfer to performance interaction. For years the proponents of the structural/grammatical approach have cautioned language teachers against moving too fast from controlled drills to free expressions on the assumption that allowing students to say somethings before they are first taught how to say it results in ungrammatical utterances which are later difficult

to eradicate. Thus, this insult to students' intelligence has meant devoting early lessons largely to dialogue memorizations and structural drilling. When so called 'directed communication' is introduced, under the disguise of communication, it is not communication at all because the structural frame if not the lexical content remains in the control of the teacher. Free expression, if and when it does follow, consists of a careful recombination of previously memorised material. Further insult to students' intelligence is perpetuated when expression of ideas which require lexical or syntactical items beyond those already introduced are not permitted and teachers are plunged into uncreativity when they are expected to keep strictly within the limits of the material the students are learning. There is no acknowledged training in trial-and-error communication until the intermediate or even the advanced levels of instruction. Not until students reach these levels are they encouraged to be innovative in the use of the language as they interact with native or near native speakers. Most often this is too late as many students I know bow out not only with their existence as social beings threatened, but also with available adequate defense mechanisms for rationalizing failure in a target language course—'It's boring', 'The teacher is not good', or 'I'm simply not good at languages' and so on. Students are then plunged into confusion after having been insisted on accuracy and rapidity of response in the beginning stages, they are now suddenly confronted with the delicate task of attempting slowly to say what they really want to say in the target language this time without the aid of well memorized, detailed, ready-made phrases or linguistically accurate complete sentences. The students are only now fending for themselves.

THE NEED FOR LANGUAGE PRACTICE AUTHENTICITY AND STUDENTS' LANGUAGE AUTONOMY

Because language learning in the classroom remains to this day a special, non-ordinary, artificial exercise which lacks authenticity, the first question I would like to raise is how to create authenticity in the language classroom and because progress towards student autonomy is hindered by artificiality of language learning through non-authentic, non-active drills and exercises, the second question I would like to raise is how can we make students free to say what they mean rather than being limited to saying what they already know how to say. At this point, I am focusing upon the nature of the language practice: is it the practice of speech in artificial settings or is it the practice of real conversational transactions? Gautam (1988: 34) warns language teachers that

knowledge of the rules of grammar gives the students only some measure of algebraic 'accuracy' which by itself can, and perhaps generally does help them to pass the examinations in English but does not give them the ability to communicate meaningfully in real life situations.

Language teachers must realize that language use is a normative concept. There are rules for conversational transactions and these rules are given by the interpersonal practices of a speech community. Coupled with this, there must also be an awareness that ability to use a language for communicative purposes in ordinary conversational settings is not visibly related to an individual piecing together knowledge about language as a system; it is the product of language study. Nor am I referring merely to the obvious fact that 'practice' is necessary to achieve fluency and automaticity in phonetic output as well as in pattern recognition of others' fluent speech. I have in mind instead the provision of the relevant kind of practice for conversational transactions in the classroom bearing in mind language use referring to what people do with words and utterances, and what people do with utterances in a simulated setting is not what people do with utterances in a real life setting.

HOW TO DEVELOP AUTHENTICITY IN LANGUAGE PRACTICE

If the goal of language teaching (in Malaysia or else where, in the school environment or in the tertiary level) is communicative ability on the part of the student, the language teacher must first and foremost take into account four broad domains of skills which can make the student 'operative' in the 'communicative way' (Littlewood 1981). The summarized domains of skills presented here from the student's perspective are as follows:

- The student must develop the skill in manipulating the linguistic system to be able to use it spontaneously and flexibly where the intended message can be expressed.
- The student must be able to recognize that items mastered as part of a linguistic system must at the same time be understood as part of a communicative system.
- The student must develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meaning as effectively as possible in concrete situations and he must learn to use feedback to judge his success and if necessary, remedy failure by using different language.
- The student must become aware of the social meaning of language forms. For many students this may not entail the ability to vary their own speech to suit different social circumstances, but rather the ability to use generally acceptable forms and avoid potentially offensive ones (Littlewood 1981).

For language teachers to be able to help students communicate effectively in light of the skills above, types of interactive practice exercises must, then, be varied. Mere repetition and manipulation will help only a minor portion of what must be known. Passive exercises do not prepare students

for active use of the target language nor do completely controlled and directed activity prepare students for autonomous expression. How can we then make manipulative practice drills communicative? To make drills communicative and authentic, I feel that the practice in selection should be enforced in the classroom from the very start. Student participation in language drills must be innovative, providing for practice in the repetition and variation of language segments, but with simultaneous practice in selection, as students express their own meaning and not the accustomed meaning of the teacher or the textbook writer. It is necessary to relate content of the drills to students' own interests and activities which elicit personal involvement, the kind when the students are personally involved in correct selection from among the possible variations of the system must be provided. According to Christina Bratt Paulston (1974), classroom language practice and exercises can and must move from the manipulative stage to the meaningful stage and therefore ultimately move to the communicative stage. Each exercise in which students are involved must demand of the students close attention, abstraction (recognition of the requirements of the particular situation), and active construction (requiring recall of stored cognitive information and judicious selection). Manipulative, teacher directed (mechanical and artificial) practices and exercises are useful only for demonstration of the association of forms, of systematic patterns, or of relationship which serve as introductory functions, after which these exercises are no longer of use unless it appears later that students are confused, then only can these exercises be reintroduced for clarification or confirmation. Therefore, manipulative exercises just allow students time to see the picture: to observe the interplay of surface elements or to grasp the principle. Manipulative exercises must then lead directly to intensive practice in the type of construction which requires the students to produce utterances they themselves have selected (although the responses are predictable) until they show that they have control of what particular aspect of the language. This is the meaningful stage of the language exercise. Opportunity must then be given without delay for students to use what they have been learning within the wider syntactic system they have been building up. Here, in the autonomous, situationally realistic communicative stage, it is essential for students to understand meaning in order to respond. New information is conveyed and answers are unpredictable because students, maintaining dependence are relying on their own resources and using their ingenuity to say what they mean and not what others want them to mean (Paulston 1970).

In the teaching of language, before the classroom becomes 'cold, clinical and sterile (Encik Anwar Ibrahim, Education Minister, *Star* April 12, 1989) one has continually to make compromises and to adjust one's approach to the requirements of students and the exigencies of the teaching situation. Nothing in this approach is so specialized or difficult that

any competent Malaysian language teacher with common sense cannot adapt some or all of its features to amplify upon according to his/her own teaching style. Perhaps transition to a communicative approach is made difficult by the fact that traditional methods based upon extensive pseudo-communicative production practices (extremely directed, not self-originating and a dependent activity) are, to quote Wilga Rivers (1963:26), "less demanding for the instructor and students than trying to develop communication itself."

HOW TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' LANGUAGE AUTONOMY

As a first step towards the communicative approach to language teaching, the teacher should be willing to broaden his/her own objectives allowing for different interests and styles of learning which will increase the opportunity for individual students to experience success. Autonomous interaction in the classroom can be individualized with some amount of creativity and flexibility on the teacher's part in the sense that it should allow for different ways students learn, the different places in which they learn, how they learn, different things which interests them, and the different situations in which they prefer to learn. Students must be offered a choice alternatives for tasks with expansion of complexity (simple to complex and concrete to abstract) as the students advance—things to do, things to find out, problems to solve, situations in which to react and so on. Teachers must realize that an impossible task which bewilders and discourages the students too early in language learning is just as inhibiting of ultimate fluency as lack of opportunity to try what they can do with what they know. Students must then be allowed to choose their own way, their own place, their own time and pace, and company for handling tasks. The motivation to communicate must be aroused because the more students are interested in an activity in the target language, the more they feel the desire to communicate in the language, and this is the first and most vital step to learning to use the language forms spontaneously.

For any real language activity to succeed, language teachers must be willing to relinquish their authoritarian role so that students can be left to fend for themselves, to struggle with and hopefully flourish in real, though imperfect communication. To add, 'in more creative types of activities, unnecessary intervention on the teacher's part may prevent the learners from becoming genuinely involved in the activity and thus hinder the development of their communicative skills,' as Littlewood (1981:19) warns us. In Malaysia, our Education Minister, Encik Anwar Ibrahim has publicly called on teachers to do away with their 'dominant position' in the classroom and to act as 'facilitators in learning' (*Star* April 12 1989). In essence, this suggests that language teachers should change their roles at certain times

in the language classroom in order to be facilitators or language consultants (Maurice 1987). Furthermore, students' rapport with the language teacher is crucial because students come up from behind well memorized and detailed dialogues and are in vulnerable positions when they are communicating for the very first time. This important aspect in the language learning process must be clearly understood because a teacher who dominates communicative activities may leave the learners with nothing to communicate besides choral repetitions of key phrases (Maurice 1987). Above all, teachers must remember that communication in the language classroom as well as in the real world is not rapid fire exchanges of linguistically accurate, complete sentences but it is sometimes slow, sometimes painful, sometimes non-verbal exchange of thoughts between human beings. Because of this, language teachers must talk 'with' and not 'to' students. They must above all, show interest in what students have to say and teachers must give students help when they most need it. In agreement with Sandra Savignon (1972:69), the language teaching must first and foremost 'reveal his 'authenticity' as a human being.

Gattegno (1963: 13) states 'To require perfection at once is the great imperfection of most teaching and most thinking about teaching.' As such, I feel that there is no need for overt correction in the communicative approach because students in relating meaning to expression in the target language are acutely aware of their inadequacy. Rather, language teachers are called to react to what is said and not to how it is said ultimately encouraging students the efforts towards selfexpression. In this delicate stage of language learning, it is important to take into account feedback examples that rely on natural conversation strategies rather than on speech correction (Weissberg 1989). Take for example the following exchange between teacher (T) and student (S) :

Exchange A

S : Teacher, sorry. I couldn't came to class yesterday.

T : You couldn't come? Why couldn't you come to class yesterday?
Rather than :

Exchange B

S : Teacher, sorry. I couldn't came to class yesterday.

T : I couldn't come to class yesterday.

In the case above, when the language teacher has determined that a given error should be treated, the teacher should : respond following the natural model of feedback, not through direct correction (see exchange B) but through restatement (see exchange A). The reason for this kind of feedback is aptly discussed by Weissberg (1988: 7) who admonishes that traditionally, feedback in the English class meant teacher correction of student errors (see exchange B). Unrelenting feedback of this sort can pose a formidable ob-

stacle to the establishment of a natural conversation atmosphere. Speech correction, after all, occurs almost nowhere outside the language classrooms!

The restatement (see exchange A) may be the best form of feedback in the communicative approach because it not only provides the students with some acceptable language forms, but it also prolongs the exchange and contextualizes it as part of an on going conversation (Weissberg 1988). This change of attitude towards errors during interaction practices is imperative if we are trying to develop an attitude of innovation and experimentation in the target language. Constant correction or red marking would only dampen enthusiasm and effort when students are trying to express their own ideas within the limitations of their newly acquired knowledge of the language. "All beginners learn by making mistakes," Shaughnessy (1977:5); Fanselow (1977: 591) asserts that "errors are part of learning and mistaken hypotheses and wrong connections are normal"; and "we have come to regard errors in many instances as normal", and "we have come to regard errors in many instances as normal", and "we have come to regard errors in many instances as experiments, through which the learner tries to apply what he knows in expressing something which he is not entirely sure how to say," notes Kerr (1984: 96). Zamel (1981: 46) points out that "errors indicate not that the student has not yet learned but rather he/she is in the process of doing so" and Corder (1967: 167) acknowledges that errors are "indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn." Related to group or pair work, Cohen (1975: 419) assures us that "student self-correction and peer correction may do more to eradicate errors than teacher correction."

In the communicative approach, particular attention must be stressed on the types of errors that hinder communication. Language teachers should correct errors based on context and formal rules only when these errors interfere with communicative accuracy (Maurice: 1987). This means that in the freer and more communicative activities which allow for more tolerance of errors, the teacher can be a silent assessor of errors taking into account consistent and systematic errors (not slip of the tongue) made by the students. In doing so, the language teacher can over a period of time distinguish transitory developmental errors from those that appear to be fossilizing, reserving intervention only for the latter cases (Weissberg 1988). These errors should then be discussed with students at a time when the teacher is helping students evaluate their success in interaction. This analytic session and this useful technique can make the students more alert to their own mistakes and to other possibilities of expressing their meanings which they have not been exploiting.

To develop autonomous control of the target language for communication, language teachers must at all times allow students autonomy, and

conversely discourage them from maintaining dependence. This can be done through provision of interactional activities with other students, either in person, through pair or group work to achieve the goal of effective communication in the target language (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 1983). Furthermore, small group work, goal or task-oriented group projects, and information gathering have been strongly advocated to increase meaningful interactions for the purpose of communication (Allwright 1979; Celce-Murcia 1984; Johnson & Morrow 1981; Long & Porter 1985). It has been noted that student-centered interactional activities without teacher intervention, and spontaneous language use in authentic communication results in the unconscious development of the target language system (Littlewood 1981; Krashen 1982). Weissberg (1988:6) maintains that allowing student autonomy in

the small group (5-7 people) is the most effective format for students to develop their oral language skills. This setting allows for natural conversation to develop and permits students to activate previously studied syntax and vocabulary in a relatively non-threatening environment. The informal conversational atmosphere of the small group also allows students to develop discourse and sociolinguistic competencies in English, such as turn-taking and polite disagreement— aspects of language use they may not encounter in other segments of their language program.

Regardless whether students are paired, grouped or otherwise, language teachers should give students practice in relying on their own resources and using their own ingenuity so that very early in their language learning they realize that only by interacting freely and independently with others can they learn the control and ready retrieval essential to fluent language use. In order to do so, language teachers may restructure the traditional classroom environment to allow a variety of activities to take place simultaneously. Without being supported or assisted by the teacher, students may well be working with another or with other students: establishing social relations, seeking and giving information, expressing reactions, learning to do something, hiding intentions or talking their way out of trouble, persuading, discouraging, entertaining others, or displaying achievements. In these types of activities or practices, students should be allowed to use anything they know of the language and any aids (gestures, drawings, pantomime) to fill out their meanings when they are at loss for words. In this way, they will learn to draw on everything they know at a particular moment in their acquisition of the target language and to fight to put forward their meanings, as they would if they suddenly find themselves surrounded by monolingual speakers of the language. Nor is it any need to insist on strict adherence to the target language all the time when real communication is taking place. I feel that it is better to insert a word in the native language than to interrupt one's train of thought. An occasional lapse into the native language can save also to reduce tension and to redirect a floundering discussion.

In the process of allowing students to develop autonomous control of the target language for communication the language teacher therefore, has reason to consciously reorient our students in respect to the basic function of the language classroom. Our Malaysian students must be made aware that the classroom is a place to use and practice the target language and not essentially a place to memorize 'correct answers,' specify pages to be covered on some future examination or to recite teacher used phrases. Rather, "it is a place to use the language so as to bring together in holistic exercises the various elements of learning. It is, in fact, a small world of social relations in which needs are found or contrived and the target language is put to use and shown to make things happen," explains Deckert (1987: 18).

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that with the new model proposed within the Communicative Approach to language teaching, our Malaysian students can learn to rely upon their own resources by using their ingenuity to convey meaning within linguistic refines/restrictions and to gain confidence in their ability to do so even if the expression of their thoughts do not fit the confines of sample phrases from their teacher or from the officially approved textbook. Thus, students are weaned early from dependency on direction from without to dependency on direction from within for the uninhibited autonomy of the confident language user. With this model of "priority of conversational interaction over other modes of behaviour; in a syllabus of 'notion/function' as opposed to 'structure'; in the basing of language learning on individual and group needs rather than on a generalized language content; in the use of 'authentic' as opposed to 'non-authentic' materials; in an emphasis on 'process' rather than 'product' or in the desire to base autonomy in language learning in genuine communication rather than on participating in pedagogically motivated and structured activities," (Wilkins 1983) happiness for our language learners is never having to do only what the teacher says, but to think about what they are saying so that both language learners and teachers will ultimately be able to say, "This is what language should be for this is what it is" (Savignon 1972).

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