

Emerging Interaction Patterns in the Use of the Communicative Approach: A case of a 9th Grade English Language Classroom*

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Abstract: In emphasizing the development of communicative competence, the communicative approach aims to enable learners to use language as a tool to negotiate meanings. Since its appearance in the 60s and 70s, it has been keeping its popularity in language teaching contexts in many countries in the world. Although the national foreign language curriculum depends on the principles of the communicative approach in Turkey as well, it is seen that foreign language teaching is not performed in a communicative way due to some challenges and problems (Coşkun, 2011; Özşevik, 2010). The purpose of this study is to evaluate the use of the communicative approach in a 9th grade classroom to describe the features of the interaction patterns and to understand the situation from the perspectives of the teacher and the students. The participants are the students and the teacher 9th grade class of an Anatolian high school in 2012-2013 academic year. The class was observed for one hour per week for a semester to determine the communicative features of the classroom activities and interactions. The data were collected via COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) observation schemes (Allen, Fröhlich & Spada, 1983) and interview questions. The data from the observation schemes were analyzed by proportion calculations whereas a content analysis was carried out with the data from the interviews. The results have revealed that the 9th grade language class reflects important characteristics of a communicative classroom. However, the learners mostly produce pre-prepared and rehearsed interaction, and so they need to be guided and trained to use the target language in a more meaningful and creative way as it happens in natural discourse.

Key Words: Communicative approach, interaction, communicative competence

1. Introduction

The birth of the communicative approach goes back to the late 1960s when situational language teaching started to gain importance in Britain and when it was discovered that the functional and communicative potential of language had a crucial role in language learning and teaching. In early 1970s, Wilkin's studies on the communicative meanings resulted in a new way to describe the core of language: notional categories and communicative functions rather than the traditional concepts of grammar and vocabulary. Thus, he produced "notional syllabuses" which led to the development of the communicative approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2002).

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Apparently, the communicative approach puts the emphasis on communicative competence which is defined by Brown (2000, p. 246) as “our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts”. There are four components of communicative competence:

- a. Grammatical competence: It is also referred as the linguistic competence which means knowing about lexical items, rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics and phonology.
- b. Discourse competence: It is managing to connect sentences in discourse and to make up a meaningful whole out of a group of utterances.
- c. Socio-linguistic competence: It is the knowledge of the socio-cultural rules of language and discourse.
- d. Strategic competence: It is the knowledge of the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to cope with the breakdowns in communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2002; Brown, 2000; Weir, 1988).

While the traditional language teaching methods put the emphasis solely on the grammatical competence, the communicative approach values all the components and requires the development of each one. Moreover, what is meant by communicative competence is not only the knowledge about the language but also the skill of using that knowledge in actual communication (Canale, 1983). Therefore; if learners are made to deal with activities consisting of real communication, and use meaningful language to carry out meaningful tasks, this will enhance their learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2002).

Harmer (1987) explains the learning principles in accordance with the communicative approach:

Communicative activities are the ones] in which students use language as a vehicle of communication, and where the students’ main purpose is to complete some kind of communication task. Because this task is of paramount importance the language used to perform it takes, as it were, second place. It becomes an instrument of communication rather than being an end in itself. (p. 37)

It is surely beyond doubt that it is the teacher who plays the key role in creating a communicative classroom. Richards (2006) highlights the fact that the application of the communicative approach varies depending on the teacher’s understanding of the methodology. Likewise, Crawford (2004) emphasizes the significance of the teacher’s implementation skills in the application of a new curriculum. However, it is seen that foreign language instruction practices vary and show inconsistency in Turkey and teachers face some difficulties with the implementation of any innovation or change in the educational programme (Ari, 2014; Oral, 2010). Especially for the teachers with established teaching practices of long years, it is not an easy task to replace their habits with a new approach (Akpınar-Dellal & Çınar, 2011). Altan (2006) states that foreign language teachers in Turkey encounter serious challenges while meeting the demands of the 21st century and therefore need efficient support to improve their quality and to continue their professional development. It is also argued that foreign language education policies determined by contemporary political events and governmental policies without analyzing the needs and demands of the target group in a scientific way have led to an

undesirable failure in language teaching in Turkey (Nergis, 2011; Işık, 2008). Thus, it is not possible to claim that a change in theory will guarantee a change in practice and whether the application of the communicative approach in actual teaching contexts is as successful as it is in the theoretical base still remains as a question. Consequently, there is a need for an effective feedback about the successful and inefficient facets of the mentioned approach in terms of its application and this study aims to meet this need.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What are the participant organization patterns in the 9th grade English class of a Turkish Anatolian high school?
2. What constitutes the content of communication in the 9th grade English class of a Turkish Anatolian high school?
3. What are the common modalities used by the learners in the 9th grade English class of a Turkish Anatolian high school?
4. How often is the target language used in the 9th grade English class of a Turkish Anatolian high school?
5. To what extent is the interaction based on real information gap in the 9th grade English class of a Turkish Anatolian high school?
6. How often do the teacher and the students react to form and meaning in the 9th grade English class of a Turkish Anatolian high school?
7. What do the teacher and the students think about the communicative features of their lessons?

2. Method

2.1. The Model of the Research

This is a qualitative study which is based on descriptive data and which aims to describe behaviors by looking at the emerging patterns and by interpreting them so as to find out why they happen in that particular way (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Richards, 2003).

2.2. Participants

In this study, typical sampling technique was used. Typical sampling is a technique which allows the researcher to choose the most typical one or ones to study among the contexts in which an application is being implemented. With this technique, the aim is to study the average contexts in order to get a general idea about a particular phenomenon. (Yıldırım & Simsek, 1999). The sample of this study included the students and teacher of a 9th grade class from an Anatolian high school in 2012-2013 academic year. This high school was chosen because it was a typical anatolian high school following the foreign language programme of the Ministry of National Education. There were 29 students in the class: 15 females and 14 males aged from 14 to 16. These students were admitted to this school according to the scores they got from a national exam called SBS (Level Determination Exam). In other words, they were academically

selected students. Seven of them participated in the interviews. Out of this group of seven, four were males and three were females. This class was instructed by a 45-year-old female teacher. She graduated from Atatürk University, Kazım Karabekir Education Faculty, English Language Teaching Department. She had been teaching English for 21 years, almost always in Anatolian high schools and it was her eighth year in this school.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

2.3.1. Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) Observation Scheme

The data were collected via the COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) observation scheme designed by Allen, Fröhlich & Spada (1983). The scheme has two parts: Part A depicting classroom instruction at the level of activities and Part B revealing the communicative features of verbal interaction within the activities (Allen, Fröhlich & Spada, 1983). The three parameters of Part A included in this study are participant organization, content and student modality. The analysis started with the calculation of time for each activity and episode and then the percentage of the time spent on each of the categories was calculated under the major parameters. Coding was done by putting check marks into the appropriate boxes under each category. To achieve reliability, the coding was done many times at different times with the help of the tape-recordings and controlled by three different supervisors until a full agreement was reached. The interrater reliability for the coding was calculated as .98. For the validity in the observations, the class was observed for seven weeks and within this period the participant students got more accustomed to the presence of the observer and tended to behave more naturally. This helped the effects of the observer on the participants to be minimized. Likewise, the three categories of Part B considered in this paper are target language, information gap and reaction to form or message. The analysis was carried out for two lessons by calculating the proportion of the check marks under each category. These two lessons were chosen because they represented the typical activities of a regular class by the participant teacher. In the first lesson, the students dealt with some grammar structures and a drilling activity. The second lesson consisted of dialogue presentations as a group work and doing and checking workbook exercises.

2.3.2. Interview Questions

The participant teacher and seven voluntary students were interviewed. The interview questions were prepared based on the categories on the observation scheme so as to determine both the teacher's and students' perceptions of the way in which the language was taught. To achieve validity and reliability in the interviews, all the questions were asked to the participants exactly in the same wording and they were assured that they would not be penalized because of what they would tell since their identity would not be revealed. Additionally, some random parts of the interviews were transcribed twice at different times to check consistency (Seferaj, 2009; Türnüklü, 2000).

3. Findings

3.1. Findings for the Classroom Observations (Part A)

The results for the analysis of the classroom observation data collected with the COLT Part A have been presented in this section under the three main categories provided in the observation scheme.

3.1.1. Participant organization

This parameter describes basic patterns of classroom interaction organizations such as whole class, group work or individual work. If it is a whole class activity, the interaction can be between the teacher and a student or the whole class; between two students or a student and the whole class, or finally it can be choral work. It is also possible to describe whether the whole class, the groups or the individual students are busy with the same task or with different tasks.

The distributions of the participant organization in the 9th grade English class at Fatma Saygın Anatolian High school (FSAL) have been given in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Organization

| Participant Organisation | | | | | | | | Total |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|-----------|-----------------|------------|-----------------|-----|-------|
| Class | | Group | | | Individual | | | |
| T- S/C | S-S/C | Choral | Same task | Different tasks | Same task | Different tasks | | |
| 42.96* | 2.96 | - | 32.22 | - | 21.85 | - | 100 | |

As can be seen in Table 1, the teacher at FSAL spent the 45.92% of the time in whole class interaction, the majority of which was between the teacher and the student or the whole class (42.96%) while the 32.22% of the time was devoted to group work and the 21.85% was used for individual studies.

3.1.2. Content

This parameter describes the subject matter of the activities like management or explicit focus on language. This is basically related with what the teacher and students are talking, writing, reading or listening about. The aim is to understand whether the primary focus is on meaning or form.

Table 2 shows the distribution of the content of the classroom interaction in the 9th grade English class at FSAL.

Table 2: Content

| Content | | | | | | | | Total |
|------------|------------|----------|----------|-----------|--------------|--------|-------|-------|
| Management | | Language | | | Other topics | | | |
| Procedure | Discipline | Form | Function | Discourse | Socioling. | Narrow | Broad | |
| 2.59 | 1.48 | 54.07* | 4.44 | - | - | 8.51 | 25.92 | 100 |

According to Table 2, the teacher at FSAL spent the 4.07% of the time for management, the 58.51% for language and the 34.43% for other topics.

3.1.3. Student modality

This parameter focuses on students and aims to find out which skill or skills they are dealing with since the communicative approach favors the integration of language skills to reflect a more authentic use of the language.

The distributions for the student modality in the 9th grade English class at FSAL have been presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Student Modality

| Student Modality | | | | |
|------------------|----------|---------|---------|-------|
| Listening | Speaking | Reading | Writing | Total |
| 29.62 | 38.88* | - | 31.48 | 100 |

According to Table 3, the students at FSAL spent the 29.62% of the class time by listening, the 38.88% by speaking and the 31.48% by writing.

7.2. Findings for the Classroom Observations (Part B)

The results for the analysis of the classroom observation data collected with the COLT Part B have been presented in this section under the three main categories both for the teacher and the students.

7.2.1. Use of Target Language

This parameter describes the frequency of the use of the native language or the target language by the teacher and the students. The percentages of the use of L1 and L2 in the 9th grade English class at FSAL have been given in Table 4.

Table 4: Target Language

| | Target Language | | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|--------|-------|---------------------|--------|-------|
| | Teacher Interaction | | | Student Interaction | | |
| | L1 | L2 | Total | L1 | L2 | Total |
| Lesson 1 | 60.37 | 39.62 | 100 | 65.95 | 34.04 | 100 |
| Lesson 2 | 16.49 | 83.50 | 100 | 4.93 | 95.06 | 100 |
| Mean | 38.43 | 61.56* | 100 | 35.44 | 64.55* | 100 |

As can be seen in Table 4, the 60.37% of the teacher interaction was in L1, the 39.62% was in L2 in the first lesson whereas just the 19.49% of the teacher interaction was in L1 and the 83.50% was in the target language in the second lesson. When the mean of the percentages for the teacher interaction is considered, it is seen that the teacher used the target language more often (61.56%) than L1 (38.43%) in her lessons. The findings concerning the student interaction reveal that the 65.95% of it was in L1 and the 34.04% was in L2 in the first lesson while the majority (95.06%) was in the target language and just the 4.93% was in their native language in the second lesson. The mean of the student interaction also indicates that the students used the target language more often (65.55%) than their native language (35.44%).

7.2.2. Information Gap

This feature refers to whether the information requested or exchanged by the teacher and the students is unpredictable; that is, whether it is not known in advance or not. This is significant in terms of the communicative approach because there is a high degree of unpredictability in natural discourse.

The percentages for the features of information gap for the teacher and student interaction in the 9th grade English class at FSAL have been given in Table 5.

Table 5: Information Gap

| | Information Gap | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------|------------------------|------------|-------|---------------------|------------|------------------------|------------|-------|
| | Teacher Interaction | | | | | Student Interaction | | | | |
| | Giving Information | | Requesting Information | | Total | Giving Information | | Requesting Information | | Total |
| | Predict. | Unpredict. | Predict. | Unpredict. | | Predict. | Unpredict. | Predict. | Unpredict. | |
| Lesson 1 | 57.14 | 10.20 | 22.44 | 10.20 | 100 | 31.11 | 35.55 | 24.44 | 8.88 | 100 |
| Lesson 2 | 48.31 | 5.61 | 42.69 | 3.37 | 100 | 77.91 | 0.41 | 20.83 | 0.83 | 100 |
| Mean | 52.72* | 7.90 | 32.56 | 6.78 | 100 | 54.51* | 17.98 | 22.61 | 4.85 | 100 |

Table 5 presents that both the teacher and the student interactions were mostly based on giving and requesting predictable information. The 57.14% of the teacher interaction aimed to give predictable information and the 22.44 % requested predictable information in the first lesson whereas the percentages were 48.31 and 42.69 in the second lesson. The mean for the percentages given in Table 5 shows that the 52.72% of the teacher interaction intended to give predictable information and the 32.56% meant to request predictable information. On the other hand, when the student interaction in the first lesson is considered, Table 5 indicates that the 35.55% was based on giving unpredictable information, the 31.11% was for giving predictable information whereas only the 24.44% aimed to request predictable information. According to the table, the 77.91% of the student interaction in the second lesson intended to give predictable information and the 20.83% meant to request predictable information.

7.2.3. Reaction to Form/Message

This feature is intended to determine whether teachers or learners react to form; that is, the linguistic form such as grammar or vocabulary or to message which is the meaning or the content of the previous utterances.

The percentages of the reactions to form or message for the teacher and student interaction in the 9th grade English class at FSAL have been given in Table 6.

Table 6: Reaction to Form/Message

| | Reaction To Form/Message | | | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|---------|-------|---------------------|---------|-------|
| | Teacher Interaction | | | Student Interaction | | |
| | Form | Message | Total | Form | Message | Total |
| Lesson 1 | 17.39 | 82.60 | 100 | 0.00 | 100 | 100 |
| Lesson 2 | 68.42 | 31.57 | 100 | 16.75 | 83.24 | 100 |
| Mean | 42.90 | 57.08* | 100 | 8.37 | 91.62* | 100 |

According to Table 6, 82.60% of the teacher interaction was a reaction to the message in the first lesson while the 68.42% was directed to the form in the second lesson. When the means of the percentages for the teacher interaction are considered, it is seen that there was more reaction to the message (57.08%) than to the form (42.90%). Table 6 also indicates that in the first lesson, all of the student interaction focused on the message and also in the second lesson it covered the greatest portion (83.24%) as well. Therefore, the mean for the percentages of the student interaction points out that the 91.62% was a reaction to the message.

7.3. Results for the interviews

The results for the interviews with the teacher and the students have been presented in this section under three main themes concerning the parameters and categories revealed via the observation schemes.

3.3.1. Use of pair/group work activities

In the interviews, both the teacher and the students were asked about their opinions about the pair/group work activities in English classes and they stated that they found these activities advantageous for language learning and they should be included in the lessons since these activities:

- provide a chance to speak and practice the language (the teacher and four students),
- help students to learn from each other (one student),
- let students check what they have learnt (two students),
- are motivating, encouraging and fun to do and so improve learners' self-confidence (four students).

3.3.2. Use of L1 in the classroom

When they were asked to consider the use of L1 in the classroom, five of the participant students stated that their native language should be included in their lessons adding that this would be advantageous for their learning. Additionally, they preferred Turkish as their native language in teaching or learning grammar whereas they believed that they should be using the target language for meaningful and communicative activities. On the other hand, there are two students who favored using English all the time even though they found it challenging because they believed that being challenged would contribute to their learning. Likewise, the teacher stated that her prior responsibility as a language teacher was to urge and encourage her students to speak in the target language as much as possible.

3.3.3. Language skills

When the participants were asked to consider the significance of language skills for their learning, all of the seven students expressed that speaking should be given the priority because they perceived this skill as the main means of communication in real life. There were also two students who valued listening in addition to speaking as they believed these two skills were complementary. There was only one student who taught writing was important as well. However, except one student, they did not find themselves successful in these skills. They believed they were better at grammar, writing and vocabulary because they were not interrupted when they were writing something and so they did not feel much anxious. On the other hand, the teacher attributed equal importance to all language skills since she believed all were complementary for one another.

4. Results and Discussion

The study has aimed to evaluate the use of the communicative approach in a 9th grade classroom, to describe the features of the interaction patterns and to understand the situation from the perspectives of the teacher and the students.

First, the dominant participant organization in the observed lessons is between the teacher and the students whereas a considerable amount of group work and individual study is also included. So, it is possible to conclude that there is a tendency for a teacher-centered instruction, but there is also encouragement for the interaction among the learners. This is consistent with the participants' opinions concerning the group work activities since both the teacher and the students seem to be highly aware of the advantages of such activities and favor the inclusion of them in their lessons. Likewise, the related literature (Altınuç, 2012; Coşkun, 2011; Hunutlu, 2011; Özşevik, 2010) also reports that although language teachers in Turkey recognize the invaluable benefits of pair work and group work activities they usually claim to be facing some challenges in their implementation due to such constraints as big classroom sizes, traditional grammar-based testing and the time pressure to catch up with the school program. Likewise, the participant teacher of this study stated that she wanted to have more group work in her classes, but she did not have enough time for this. Therefore, she suggested that the time for teaching English should be increased for the 9th graders.

Despite the primary focus on meaningful interaction in the communicative approach, the dominant content of the interaction in the observed classrooms was language; namely language form. However, the students spent some significant proportion of the class time to communicate about other topics thanks to the group work activities. As a result, the class under the study spent more time to learn about the usage of the language. Similarly, Phipps and Borg's study (2009) suggests that language teachers in Turkey tend to adopt a focus-on-forms approach in their language instruction.

The findings of this paper have also revealed that not only the teacher but also the students reacted to message more than to form in their interaction. Moreover, reaction to language form was observed a lot more often within the teacher utterances which could be explained with the fact that it was mainly the teacher who provided the feedback on the usage of the language.

The communicative approach highlights the significance of information gap in interaction since there is a high degree of unpredictability in natural discourse. That is, speakers normally do not ask the questions the answers of which they know, or they do not provide the information which they think is known or anticipated in advance. However, such things happen quite often in language classrooms for the sake of practice (Spada & Frölich, 1995). Likewise, the findings of this study have shown that both the teacher and the student interactions in the observed classes intended to provide predictable information most often. This indicates that the students did not create any conversation based on a real information gap. This is mainly because the students dealt with the pre-prepared and rehearsed dialogue presentations and the teacher provided feedback for the mechanic exercises within the observed lessons. As a result, more classroom interactions and activities in which the information or the answers are not known in advance can be included in the lessons so that the learners can practise and use the target language in a more creative and natural way.

Moreover, the findings of this study have revealed that the student modality is distributed almost equally among the three language skills excluding reading in the observed lessons. This is a true reflection of the teacher's perception regarding the issue as she deems all skills as complementary and believes that they should be addressed equally in the teaching process. On the other hand, the students give the priority to speaking considering it is the primary skill in real life. Although there seems to be no reading at all, the students did some amount of reading, but it was not the primary focus of the activity and so it was not included in the calculations. Additionally, the only writing activity done by the students was writing down the exercises and their answers. Therefore, it would be appropriate to say that the students used writing as a primary medium within the activities, but not for the sake of improving their writing as a language skill.

The communicative approach values the important benefits of L1 knowledge since the research has proven that there is a significant transfer of conceptual knowledge and skills across languages (Spada, 2007). The majority of the participants in this study also believe in the advantage of using their native language while teaching or learning grammar structures since it would be harder and more time-taking to understand such structures in the target language, but they prefer using the target language for meaningful and communicative activities. This is exhibited in the teacher and student interactions

since the use of L1 increases when a grammatical structure is dealt with despite the overall dominant use of L2 in the lessons.

In conclusion, it is possible to suggest that the 9th grade language class studied in this paper reflects important characteristics of a communicative classroom such as inclusion of group work activities, dealing with all language skills, practice in the target language and reacting to the meaning rather than to the language form. However, because they mostly produce pre-prepared and rehearsed interaction they need to be encouraged to use the target language in a more meaningful and creative way as it happens in natural discourse. Finally, as the communicative approach suggests, learners should not only practise the target language mechanically, they should learn how to use it creatively in unrehearsed situations as well so that they become capable of communicating in a real sense in that language.

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