THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH. A LINGUISTIC - PHILOSOPHICAL RAPPROCHEMENT. 1995 - 2000

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ABSTRACT

In first place, this piece of work discusses the importance that English represents in the world of today. Effectively, this language has become, as was Latin in its day, the common code for trans-national commercial transactions, scientific events, diplomacy and technology among others. Because of this, thousands of individuals take on the task of studying this language. However, not everybody who begins this task is successful. This is due to methodological and epistemological problems that are apparent in the teaching and learning of this language. Therefore the following piece of work is justified, taking as a starting point a case study of the communicative approach which is ever present in the English teaching programs offered by the University of Nariño. The analysis of the information gathered, through

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in depth interviews with teachers, students and alumni and with the revision of documents of the syllabi of the Conversational English subjects, using the respective processes of triangulation. This allowed for the aforementioned process to be detected and in turn to discover that it has been governed by technical rationality and pragmatism. All of which has led to memorization and the reiteration of material from texts, thus implying the formation of habits. Faced with these findings a transition is proposed from these paradigms toward a linguistic turnabout, as an alternative to rescuing pluralism, difference, the construction of a collective sense, an augmentation of knowledge as a process in permanent construction, the conception of language not only as a system of communication but also as a means that forms part of our thinking, of how we conceive the world and even how we act.

KEY WORDS: Communicative Approach, Technical Rationality, Pragmatism, Linguistic Turnabout.

RESUMEN

En primera instancia, en este artículo se desea discutir la importancia que representa el inglés en el mundo de hoy. En efecto, este idioma se ha constituido, como en su momento lo fuera el latín, en el código común para las transacciones comerciales transnacionales, los eventos científicos, la diplomacia, la tecnología, entre otros aspectos. Por ello, miles de individuos emprenden el estudio de esta lengua. Sin embargo, no todos los que inician esta labor tienen éxito, debido a problemas epistemológicos y metodológicos que se presentan en la enseñanza y en el aprendizaje de este idioma. Por ello, este escrito es el resultado de una investigación, que a partir de un estudio de caso aborda el concepto de Enfoque Comunicativo que subyace en la enseñanza del inglés en las licenciaturas en idiomas ofrecidas por la Universidad de Nariño. El análisis de la información recolectada, a partir de entrevistas a profundidad con profesores, estudiantes y egresados y de la revisión documental de los programas analíticos de las asignaturas de Inglés Conversacional, mediante el respectivo proceso de triangulación, permitió detectar que el proceso en mención se ha regido por la racionalidad técnica y el pragmatismo, lo

cual ha inscrito dicho aprendizaje en la memorización, en la reiteración de información tomada del texto guía, en la práctica de lo mismo. Ante estos hallazgos se propone hacer la transición desde estos paradigmas hacia el giro lingüístico, como una alternativa para rescatar el pluralismo, la diferencia, la construcción de sentido compartido, la asunción del conocimiento como un proceso en permanente construcción, la concepción del lenguaje no solamente como un sistema de comunicación, sino también como un medio que incide en nuestra forma de pensar, de concebir el mundo e incluso de actuar.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Enfoque Comunicativo, racionalidad técnica, pragmatismo, giro lingüístico, currículo.

INTRODUCTION

It is believed that nowadays more than a billion people in the world speak English, but only a third of them speak it as a first language; the other two thirds have learnt it as a second or foreign language at some time in their lives.

This   situation   shows that English is the first international language. Effectively, this language has become, as was Latin in its day, the common code for trans-national commercial transactions, scientific events, diplomacy and technology, among others.

Despite the importance of the aforementioned language, its study is not always successful. This is the case for example in the Language Teacher Programs offered by the University of Nariño, where this doctoral research was conducted, a summary of which is presented in this paper. As a matter of fact the learning of English in the aforementioned programs presents difficulties due to problems of a methodological and epistemological nature; a statement that comes from the assumption outlined in this research which is thus expressed: *'The use of the Communicative Approach in the teaching of English in the Language Teacher Programs offered by the University of Nariño reflects the absence of the epistemology and the correct methodologies for this approach,*

because of which, such a use has generated a technical paradigm and the pragmatism that governs it still'. This assumption is formulated in reaction to the research problem which is stated as follows: "What concept of the communicative approach underlies English teaching in the Language Teacher Programs offered by the University of Nariño, what factors have generated it and what discourses of innovation or resistance can be induced by such an act?

Philosophical considerations

In this order of ideas, the learning of this language has been reduced to the memorization of vocabulary and structures taken at face value from textbooks, a fact that leads to the supposition that students learn the same in a similar way and that the words are restricted to their literal meaning or to a superficial style. That is to say, learning is homogenized, giving rise to universal truths and the conception of knowledge as a process duly finished and consolidated.

Regarding pragmatism, the data analyzed for this research, reveals the application of the same laws, that is to say, the implementation of identical practices that constitute the beginnings per se of uniformity, a framework in which things are reiterated, repeated until mechanization. For this, habits are acquired that formulate the law for doing the same, very much in spite of the discontinuity that we are provided with by nature, in which irregularity and difference will never be the exception. Along with this, one must take into account that the universe of students is made up of various structures, following the terminology of Maturana (2002), in which, one cannot ask all to follow the same line or use the same words to express an opinion or a point of view. Expressed differently, in a learning/teaching process, uniformity literally has no place. In general terms, this would be a rapprochement to the idea of 'tiquismo', conceived from the researched problem. To this idea, 'sinequismo' is added to the data, which for effects of this study reveals an amazing continuity. A fact that is made apparent in the procedure followed to carry out classes, which for different generations of students and

alumni, practically has become a ritual that extends day after day until the point of saturation, thus transforming into the acquisition of customs or law-customs, using the terminology of Peirce (1978).

Therefore, it is necessary to give to this process an epistemological foundation that takes on the axiological, attitudinal and philosophical, so that this does not perpetuate into the day to day function, governed by the paradigms mentioned, but into recovering its pedagogic and scientific essence. For this end, psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, pedagogic and didactic suggestions are proposed, supported by a philosophical standpoint, which allows for the assumption that language is a means to understand the other, to make sense of interaction, to give rise to pluralism and disagreement and metaphorically to conceive the world as a structured entity.

The Communicative Approach

General Aspects

For this research, the works of such authors as Canale (1985), Ellis (1994), Halliday (1991), Harmer (1996), Krashen (1991), Larsen-Freeman (2000) and Richards and Rodgers (2001, 1988) were consulted among others. The two last authors mentioned, maintain that the Communicative Approach is conformed by a *theory of language* and a *theory of learning*. The former, at the same time contemplates the *functions of the language* and the *communicative competence*. In the following section, the main points of the theory of language are highlighted in order to be able then to tackle the theory of learning.

Theory of language

In general terms two strong ideologies stand out concerned with the notion of language. Firstly there is the most traditional called the 'structural vision', according to which language is a system of elements related structurally

to the codification of the meaning, an assumption that means that the objective of learning relates to the mastering of language elements such as phonological units (phonemes), grammatical units such as clauses, phrases, sentences and grammatical operations such as addition, combination, transformation, etc. and lexical items that include content and function words. In this vision of language traditional methods are apparent e.g. Audio-lingual and other more recent, like Total Physical Response and the Silent Way (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

The second notion of language corresponds to the functional, which addresses this system as a means to express the functional meaning. This train of thought favors the semantic and communicative dimension of the grammatical aspect, evidence of which can be seen in the organization of the contents of a syllabus of an English subject. These are organized into categories of meaning and of function rather than in grammatical structures. It is precisely within this area that the Communicative Approach is based; in so much as the functions of the language play a fundamental role. These pave the way for the development of the communicative competence (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Regarding this competence, Hymes (1972) maintains that a person who acquires communicative competence assimilates knowledge and skills for using the language as well, thus taking into account aspects concerning what is possible and appropriate, according to the context, grade of intimacy and purpose of conversation.

Theory of learning

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001, 1988) a theory of learning answers basically two questions. The first deals with the cognitive and psycholinguistic processes involved in the learning of a foreign language and the second has to do with the conditions that must be created for the putting into practice of the aforementioned processes. Naturally, not all

methods measure up to each one of these questions equally. That is to say, some methodologies focus on processes, whereas others favor the conditions. In so much as the Communicative Approach, based on the studies carried out on this methodology, it can be assured that it focuses more on the processes, as is explained in the following:

One of the principles of these processes, which is described as the communicative principle, establishes that the activities that involve real communication promote learning. A second element is the task principle, which stipulates that the activities in which the language, which is used to carry out meaningful tasks, promotes learning. A third aspect is made up of the meaningful principle; this is when the language which is useful to the student to express his / her own interests and wishes, strengthens the learning process. Therefore, learning activities are selected, taking into account that it is better to involve the student in a meaningful and authentic use, rather than in a mechanical practice of linguistic patterns (Richards and Rodgers 2001, 1988). This category includes the following aspects:

Aims, which for Richards and Rodgers (2001, 1988) demonstrate a concern for the implementation of the communicative competence for negotiating meaning in interaction, taking into account the individual needs for learning, a process which must take place in a relaxed context, characterized by a marked sensitivity for the affective component, therefore contemplating the possibility of making judgments about oneself or others. The aims are to be formalized through contents that are located in a syllabus. Regarding this, it is believed that notions like 'future' and functions, like 'promise' must be balanced so that the grammar (notion) becomes a means to promote an end, which is the communication (function). In the carrying out of the aims and content, *the teacher* plays an important role, which in the area of this approach should be a facilitator, guide and needs analyst. Despite this, the information gathered in this research shows the roles of the teacher as the contrary e.g. as a director or controller of what needs to be done. It is a fact that in a teaching / learning process, in addition to the teacher, *the students* are the

'stars' of the process. As a matter of fact, the Communicative Approach contemplates the student as someone who assumes his / her own learning in order to negotiate meaning or solve problems. Nevertheless, the data gathered from students' interviews show contrary results, in so much as they are considered passive, destined to repeat the input generated by their teacher, generally taken from their textbook. This textbook, incidentally, according to the data analyzed, makes up the fundamental axis on which the methodology of the English classes revolves. Of course, it should be an important element, but the use materials in a communicative environment also implies other options, like those based on tasks and realia.

Research Methodology

Now, the most essential concerning the methodology implemented in the carrying out of the research, governed by the case study method, is presented.

The Case Study is defined as a complete and detailed revision of a facet, phenomenon, individual or even the events that occur in a geographical framework throughout time. Patton (1990) understands it as a particular way to collect, organize and analyze information. Authors like Bogdan and Biklen. (2003) believe that case studies are a method that implies the collection and register of information of a case or cases and the presentation of a detailed report, that they call the case presentation; still other authors maintain that a case study is characterized by being singular, descriptive and inductive. It is singular in the way that it focuses its attention on a particular situation, event, program or phenomenon. The specificity highlights the value of this method for the analysis of practical problems, and in general, of situations and events that arise in everyday life. Its descriptive character is shown in its narrative and literary techniques that lie underneath so as to produce images and analyze the different situations that structure it. Its inductive nature is revealed in the discoveries that delving provokes.

Taking into account that a case can be a person, a group of people, an entity or a teaching program that possess a physical or social limit, thus giving it identity; the current study examined deeply the interaction of factors that have generated the concept of the Communicative Approach that underlines the teaching of English in the Language Teaching Programs of the University of Nariño. It should be noted that the information collected was submitted to processes of validation. For example, the preliminary findings were discussed with alumni and students who didn't form part of the focus groups but were aware of the research and with retired teachers. In this way, the partial and final results were discussed by those involved in the study and the interviewed were later contacted in order to clarify doubts or concepts. Even the actual interviews were analyzed by experts. This helped to consolidate the information in order to carry out the respective triangulation. This activity allowed for a constant revision of the information collected. Hence, a spiral shape was formed in the process, making it more interesting and meaningful.

In so much as the sample of population selected for this study, it was carried out with 7 teachers, 6 full -time and 1 part- time (individual interviews), who have conversational classes in the Language Teaching Programs. Equally, 2 focus groups of students were worked with belonging to the last two semesters (a group of 6 students per semester). The best students of each group were selected, based on their GPA. These samples were intentional due to the fact of the very nature of the research, in so much as it was supposed that the students had taken courses related to methodologies of foreign language and applied linguistics and were able to answer pertinent questions. Regarding, the alumni, 3 focus groups were worked with (6 graduates each). For this selection their GPA was taken into account and that their graduation date was registered in the established period of this study. A documentary revision of the programs was carried out of the conversational English classes.

In so much as categories, some were planned in anticipation, based on the works of Richards and Rodgers (2001, 1988); Larsen-Freeman (2000),

regarding the criteria established by Spadley (1979), a researcher who argued that it is possible to determine beforehand the categories from the existing literature on the topic. Thus, the categories were foreseen: theory of language and theory of learning, due to the fact that these are central and that they reduce the epistemological foundation as well as the procedures of the Communicative Approach. For this, they complement each other, although they still maintain their own identity, and include a conceptual definition as well as their corresponding categories. Equally, with the conceptual definition and some guiding questions or thematic areas that serve as a starting point for the consolidation of the instruments for the interviews and documentary revision.

Nonetheless during the study inductive sub-categories were suggested, taking as a reference the principles of Strauss and Corbin (2002) for whom the context and the action strategy can give rise to the generation of emerging categories and subcategories.

It should be noted that given the importance of English, as has been mentioned previously, in becoming the international language of science, technology and business and taking into account the problems that its learning causes students from the Language Teaching Programs of the University of Nariño, difficulties caused by the technical rationality and pragmatism, it is considered necessary to create options that lead to solving or at the very least minimizing the obstacles produced by the paradigms mentioned. To this end, a series of psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, pedagogic, curricular and didactic considerations, ever present in the historical and philosophical, are proposed. It is thought that this rapprochement will give this study a different outlook, in so much as other research does not touch on this perspective.

The following is a synthesis of the topics (chapters) of this thesis, in the hope of guaranteeing a more complete picture of this study.

Psycholinguistic Considerations

The results of this research uncover the lack of opportunities that students have, regarding their capacity to think, which they themselves expressed in the interviews. To overcome this shortcoming, it is worthwhile tackling the different elements that form part of the construction of concepts, since these are considered the base on which the flow of human thought must be formed, an appreciated and unending source of ideas and cognitive processes that have to be molded and strengthened in the trajectory of creating concepts. For this, it is dared to present in first place, in order to focus the attention, a definition of them and then in their structure, in their interior and exterior make up and in their relationship with the inherent level.

Sociolinguistic Considerations

Once the mental processes have been discussed in order to improve the learning of English, it is necessary to tackle the idea of putting into practice these processes, in the interaction with others, that is to say, the social context. For this, in this chapter the necessity for re-conceptualizing language, from a point of view guided toward pluralism, difference, the construction of shared meaning and inherent characteristics of conversational exchanges like those that must be generated in the context of the Communicative Approach. All this leading towards an alternative that must move in the direction of the destruction of universals, order, the flat style, the empire of the law of continuity, characteristics of the technical rationality and pragmatism. This rapprochement takes place from the point of view of authors such as Habermas (1999), Rorty (1998), Gadamer (2001), Bajtin (1989). In this train of thought, the learning of English has assumed a role of that of a mechanism that allows us to establish interpersonal relationships in order to learn about our own surroundings and negotiate meanings so as to be able to even understand our own way of reacting; a practice that encapsulates deep philosophical implications, powered by the Linguistic Turnabout, which contemplates among other things: metaphoric extensions,

speech acts, resources that mold our every day actions, actions that are told through language.

Pedagogic Considerations

In this chapter, aspects are tackled that provide relevant elements to enrich the aforementioned re-conceptualization. Among these are divergent thinking, creativity with subsystems (invention and innovation, fluency, flexibility, problem solving, curiosity, productivity and motivation), intuition and discussion concerning its reliability and educability, autonomy, reflection, and learning strategies and their incidence in the field of languages.

As was noted previously, the results of the research show education based on the use of the memory, of a traditional nature, governed by the technical rationality and pragmatism. With the aforementioned topics of this chapter, innovative paths are suggested, leading toward the achievement of new goals in language learning, since these topics harmonize elements of reason ad logic, with gut feelings, among which intuition and in general the affective world of the students are to be found.

Curricular Considerations

The data analyzed belongs to the behaviorist curriculum, an affirmation that is corroborated by students and ex-alumni, who maintain that in their classes a recurrent tendency has been observed of memorization of vocabulary and un-contextualized structures; an idea that supposes that the student is a receptor and repeater of input generated by the teacher. Also the information shows a teacher trained to repeat, in a setting where the sensorial impressions of the outside world are written in the minds of the students, appearing like blank boards; ideas that correspond to an experimental curriculum. The information also shows a marked tendency toward the promotion of learning where the expected results are of the utmost importance, thus the concern rotates around what has to be learnt,

relegating to an inferior level the affective world of the students. For this a curricular design is needed that contemplates pre-established aims, planning, evaluation, key principles of educational technology that adjust to those of the curricular models of Tyler (1977) and Johnson quoted in Posner (1998).

Faced with these findings, it is believed that the teaching of English needs to be rethought, in the framework of a constructivist - cognitive curriculum, which impulses the notion of knowledge as an unfinished process that is built through the negotiation of meaning, the interaction with others; a stage in which all help and learn through the respect for differences. In this task the Linguistic Turnabout plays an important part.

Didactic Considerations

Following the recommendations of the previous chapter, the 5 C's are discussed, that is to say: concepts, communication, culture, connections and comprehension of the world. These are an adaptation of current standards for foreign language learning in the USA (1999) with a modification that has been carried out for effects of the data examined in this research. It has been deemed necessary to include recommendations, from the top-down and story-based (PACE) approaches, in so much as these strengthen the meaningful practice of the language, in contexts of construction and co-construction of meaning (Shrum and Glissan, 2005), making way therefore, for different stages which in turn give rise to different uses of the language or language games, following the terminology of Wittgenstein (1998), which in itself reverts to a re-conceptualization of the speech that should be managed in the class. This must be interesting and appropriate for the situation. Only under this perspective will it be possible to make way for the interpretative, presentational and interpersonal modes of the language in order to be able to reach a level of satisfactory communicative competence.

Conclusion

The conclusions of this thesis can be synthesized in the following: The analysis of the gathered information, from complete interviews applied to teachers, students and alumni and the documentary revision of the syllabi of the conversational English courses, through the processes of validation and triangulation of the case, allowed for the thesis (assumption) proposed for this research to be validated. This due to the fact that the gathered and processed information show that the use of the Communicative Approach in the teaching of English in the Language Teaching Programs of the University of Nariño, demonstrate the absence of the epistemology and the correct methods for this approach and in turn a technical and pragmatic paradigm has been created in this process. Certainly, these paradigms have been transformed into the everyday academic functions of memorization, in the reiteration of information taken from the textbook, in the separation between form and content in the treatment of grammar through the division between form and sense and in the empire of laws which constitute the routine of always doing the same. That is to say, in a practice that makes the generation of ideas, the creative and argumentative capacity of the students impossible. These aspects do not appear to have an important oscillation in the period considered in this study: 1995 - 2000, that is to say they are recurrent throughout this period.

Confronted with these facts, the transition from the paradigms mentioned toward the linguistic turnabout must be made. This, as an alternative to rescuing the pluralism, the difference, the construction of shared meaning through argumentative exchanges that are negotiated and complemented, the surge of knowledge as a process in permanent construction, the conception of language not only as a means of communication, but also as a metaphoric system that participates in our way of thinking and in the way in which we conceive and even act in the world.

It is considered that the re-conceptualization of language, as was expressed in the previous paragraph, contributes consistently with the improvement of the panorama that the information has revealed, above all taking into account a series of psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, pedagogic, curricular and didactic considerations foreseen in the proposed objectives for this research. A complete vision of the language is proposed which contemplates not only a didactic dimension of English teaching, but also a series of theoretical principles, supported by a historical and philosophical perspective, in order to give this study a scientific character.

It is thought that a large number of the studies carried out in Applied Linguistics, reviewed in this study, have been characterized solely in tackling the learning and teaching of English from a linguistic and instrumental point of view. For these studies the epistemological element has been taken away and according to Hegel (1998), this essence is considered fundamental for students to be able to have access to a superior learning experience. In their condition as students, this bridging allows for a deciphering of a new linguistic code in order to penetrate other conceptions of the world, other trains of thought and other life styles.

In this train of thought, language as Heidegger (1990) maintains, must serve to give rise to the 'Dasein' in order to construct a living being in the language. Thus, in this way, a living and historical language is set up that widens its confines toward the social and the philosophical. Hence, safeguarding the value of the myth, of metaphoric language and spheres that demolish the rationalist and pragmatic conception, that in the area of this study have served in a way as to conceive language as something that is still, typical of traditional history, present in the canons of reason, the flat style, the mechanization and the formation of habits.

The study as has been mentioned, has served in order to recover the notion of knowledge as a process in permanent construction, therefore

valid in determining moments and circumstances. In this direction, knowledge recovers its historical dimension, which must serve as the transformation of the community and of man himself who has formed it. Hence, converting it into a constant process of interaction with the outside world and with the other in dialogical process thus, giving importance to this process in a composite, argumentative and complementary nature.

The previous affirmations do not intend to show that one must always hope to make great discoveries for the benefit of a particular field; a task that obviously is not easy for anyone in any specific area. However, what is hoped in this study is to look at the teaching of English from a different perspective that includes the historical and the philosophical as elements that give a necessary epistemological foundation to the field of Applied Linguistics. Expressed differently, it will not always be possible to provide something totally new, but there will always exist areas in which one can examine topics from other standpoints, other hypotheses that lead us to find new or different things; an exercise that we will always be able to carry out in so much as that we are interested in walking other paths; in looking toward the grey areas, because it is here that we can be taught as well as illuminate the human imagination.

Given the importance of English in an international context, we consider that the present study will have an interesting impact, regarding the way in which it affords a different perspective on learning this language. Furthermore, this study will contribute in a meaningful way so that those interested in foreign languages tackle this topic with a greater possibility of success. Thus, its study constitutes a valuable commodity in the world of today for accessing current information in varied areas of knowledge. Hence, English makes for a priceless tool when traveling to English speaking countries and when accessing high level educational and research processes; an exercise in which individuals will increase their research and scientific possibilities significantly. These individuals after studying abroad, in places that normally have a recognized track record in terms of science

and technology will, on the one hand be able to spread the knowledge of what was learnt, and on the other, be able to fulfill a role of greater importance, in so much as they can lead far reaching projects, an activity that will motivate the development of countries like Colombia, generally forgotten and rife in poverty. Of course, the application of technology and of foreign theories need to be adapted to our particular context, as a means of preserving personal identity and in attention to the notion of knowledge as something in constant construction, subject to factors from different environments where man builds his lexis and his world.

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