Back to Basics: Emphasising Grammar in the ESL Classroom

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The information era is here and advances in technology have dramatically improved the way in which we can communicate electronically. Worldwide communication is now made possible with the explosion of the Internet. Given this scenario, the ability to communicate concisely and accurately has become even more crucial.

In the last 10-15 years, many language educationists have expressed concern over the declining mastery level of the English Language among undergraduates at our local universities. Time and again, we hear of graduates failing to secure jobs due to their weak communication skills and poor command of English. Many job advertisements usually have at least one of the following as part of their requirements:

- able to write and speak English fluently
- able to make effective presentations
- able to prepare/write reports
- able to communicate well

Indeed, we have great cause to worry as the advent of globalization requires our workforce to not only have the technical knowledge but also the much needed skill to communicate in the English Language—the lingua franca of business.
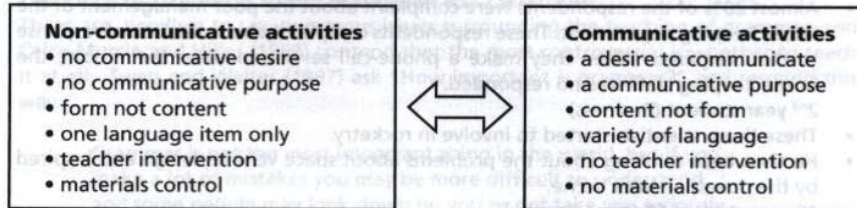
Approaches and Methods

This paper would not be complete without touching on the various approaches and methods to language learning and teaching. As is well-known, the audio-lingual methodology, which owed its existence to the Behaviorist models of learning, reached its period of widespread use in the 1960s. There was heavy dependence on drills to form good learning habits; substitution is built into drills and learners play a reactive role by responding to stimuli. Chomsky (1966, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986), however, felt that much of human language use is not imitated behavior – sentences are not learned via imitation and repetition. Chomsky contended that sentences are generated from the learner's underlying competence. Thus the audio-lingual method which de-contextualised language and carried little communicative function came under severe attack.

There was a need to focus on communicative proficiency as opposed to the mere mastery of structures. In the 1970s, the efforts of the Council of Europe, and the writings of Wilkins, Widdowson, Candlin, Brumfit, Johnson and other applied linguists—which were based on the communicative approach to language teaching and rapid acceptance by British language teaching specialists and governments—gave prominence to the Communicative Approach/Communicative Language Teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). With this method students are given lots of opportunity to use the language and typical activities center around real communication – accuracy is not as important as the

ability to perform the communicative task. The focus is on the content of what is written or said by the learner, rather than on a particular language form. As seen in Figure 1, Harmer (2001) succinctly illustrates the marked contrast between communicative activities and non-communicative activities. An activity in which learners have to go around asking questions with a communicative purpose with some language restriction would be nearer the right-hand end of the continuum, whereas a game which requires the use of only one language structure will come nearer the non-communicative end.

Figure 1: The communication continuum, Source: Harmer (2001)

Non-communicative activities
- no communicative desire
- no communicative purpose
- form not content
- one language item only
- teacher intervention
- materials control

$\longleftrightarrow$

Communicative activities
- a desire to communicate
- a communicative purpose
- content not form
- variety of language
- no teacher intervention
- no materials control

In the 1970s and 1980s, a few other methods (commonly regarded as humanistic approaches) made a considerable impact on language teaching in the ESL classroom. Total Physical Response, developed by James Asher, involves gamelike movements and physical actions, thus creating a stress-free environment. Another humanistic approach is Community Language Learning, developed by Curran, wherein the teacher takes on the role of a counselor or a knower, and the student the role of a client. One of the most significant features of another humanistic approach, The Silent Way, is the behavior of the teacher who should remain silent as much as possible while the student is encouraged to produce as much language as possible. The use of color charts and cuisenaire rods was based on Caleb Gattegno's experience as an educational designer of reading and mathematics programs. Georgio Lozanov, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of physical surroundings and the atmosphere of the classroom, in Suggestopaedia: When students have confidence and feel relaxed, their affective filter is lowered and learning is enhanced.

In a nutshell, there have been radical changes in the approaches to the teaching of English as a second language. Indeed, with so many methods and approaches available, teachers often find it difficult to choose one that is right for their students.

What writing skills are undergraduates required to learn?
I shall now turn to the skills that a typical undergraduate at a Malaysian university needs to acquire before he steps into the working world. Based on my experience in teaching writing courses, Malaysian undergraduates generally have to go through courses which will require them to learn how to write, inter alia, formal as well as informal reports, minutes of meetings, sales letters, letters of complaint, letters of adjustment, or letters of application for jobs and resumes. The ability to pen such documents is critical, as these students someday will venture into the workforce. But are our undergraduates ready? Based on my experience and those of my colleagues at various universities in Malaysia, many undergraduates are unable to compose simple sentences, let alone write sophisticated letters or reports.

I would now like to provide you some samples of undergraduates' writing quality, which will not surprise those who have worked with today's college and university students and graduates.