ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

COMMUNICATIVE LESSONS ARE—

(1) Task-Oriented
- an exercise: has a purely linguistic application (often practice for practice’s sake)
- a task: has a real world outcome which the language helps achieve

Implications of task orientation:
- focus of a lesson is not on the present progressive tense, but on “talking about plans”—plans that learners could well make themselves—and ideally, plans they will actually carry out
- with pair or group work, there should be some resulting outcome that can be used in the next phase of the lesson, not just practice for practice’s sake, e.g., “you will practice this activity in pairs in order to…”

(2) Needs-Based
- when designing curriculum: how are my students most likely to use English?
- when modifying curriculum: how would my students most likely use this language?
- for data: query students, other teachers, former students—observe interactions that people like your students engage in (be they native or non-native speakers)

(3) Learning-Centered
- transparency: show why we are doing this and why we are doing it in this particular way
- personalize whenever possible
- exploit materials to the fullest and scaffold learners so that they always get to use the language “off the page” as well as “on the page”
- running notes can help teachers respond to “what actually happened” as well as “what was in the lesson plan”

(4) Contextualized
- relate to learner experience
- relate to course objectives and previous and future lesson features
- make lesson activities inter-related, as well having all activity items in the same context

(5) Authentic
in discourse (language presentations and all subsequent activities)
- use discourse that wasn’t created only the teach language
- develop topics and situations as we really interact in them
in communicative events
- engage in the kinds of things we really do with language in the real world
- ensure that the activity’s discourse structure is faithful to reality
- choose situations that learners can easily imagine themselves engaging in
in learning experiences
- appeal to a variety of learning strategies and styles
- structure activities to correspond to our notion of what effective learning is
(6) Aligned with Course/Instructional Objectives
  • great activities alone typically do not result in great lessons (See “Contextualized” above)

(7) Situated in Discourse (Gee: “Discourse is language plus all that other stuff”)
  • just getting the language right isn’t enough—we have to get the behaviors, conventions, roles, and practices that go with the language right as well.

(8) Sources of Comprehensible, Negotiated Input
  • maintain a high ratio of language use in relation to time spent talking about language
  • pair and small group problem-solving increases interaction and negotiation
  • activities are structured so that students have opportunities to experiment with language (at the appropriate moment in the lesson—you need a foundation before you can experiment)
  • scaffolding is highly valued
  • debriefing is encouraged

(9) Recursive
  • lexical items are reintroduced in and across lessons
  • attention is paid to reintegrating previously taught features into later lessons

(10) Sequenced with Attention to Learning and Acquisition
  • Movement from Inductive Learning to Deductive Learning (from discovery and deduction to clear explanation and models to practice/application of the models)
  • Movement from Acquisition Activities to Learning Activities (to Acquisition Activities)
    o Acquisition activities: engage in rich, authentic discourse for its own sake; the teacher scaffolds the student discovery process rather than following an explicit, directed, and pre-established activity structure
    o Learning Activities: are clearly sequenced and follow explicit explanation and models: they support the student’s learning and allow them to access structures and language they may not yet have acquired.
    o Provide students with the language, skills, and strategies necessary to successfully carry out the activities (e.g., you need a lot more than the present perfect tense to be able to carry out an authentic job interview role play).
Key question: How would your way of teaching this lesson to your English Language Learners be different from how you teach this same lesson to mainstream students?

Partial answer: Study the lesson’s language so that—through both learner discovery activities and explicit exposition (inductive and deductive learning, remember?)—learners’ attention can be called to the language that is used to present the content. Learners need first to notice this language and then to practice it through learning the content.

Note: with content-based instruction, authenticity may be less of an issue (successfully communicating about content matters is a very authentic goal), or acquisition (by definition, processing content instruction is an acquisition activity: learners explore a rich piece of discourse for its own value). Our goal as language teachers is to be sure that lesson language is focused on in an explicit, directed way (i.e., more a language learning orientation) so that learners can control the language they need to manipulate the content.