COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES IN THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOMS IN QUANG BINH PROVINCE: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: *With the main focus on the practice of language use rather than mastery of language forms, designing communicative activities is always encouraged and motivating in English classrooms. The article describes the concepts related to communicative activities and investigates into how high school teachers of English perceive and design communicative activities in classes. Hence, some possible solutions are suggested to help teachers of English organize more communicative tasks in English language teaching.*

Keywords: *Communicative, teaching, activities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Many new methods of language teaching have been proposed to make English teaching and learning more communicative and effective. Among them, communicative language teaching is considered as the most effective one. In fact, the main emphasis of the communicative approach is to develop the learners' communicative competence through the "negotiating of meaning". The communicative classroom seeks to encourage learners to initiate and participate actively in meaningful interaction [1]. Because of such significant value, how to develop learners' communicative competence in English has been becoming a concerning matter of many teachers of English. Firstly, communication is the goal of language teaching. Secondly, communication is a part of the learning process. As we communicate, we make our formally learn

language more automatically available [3]. However, in reality, in many places, English language teachers are still subject teachers whose responsibility is to provide students with knowledge about the English language in the most effective way [2]. Moreover, learners' aim of learning is to get high marks or to pass examinations. They learn English because it is a compulsory subject, but not because they like English. Many learners are very good at the knowledge of grammar but fail to communicate with each other in English. In order to improve this situation, many educational policies, innovations and changes of English teaching methods have been suggested and experimented with in many universities in which teaching English through skills seems to be the most effective and appreciable way. One of the widely applied methods is communicative language teaching, in which communicative activities are always

centered.

2. CONTENT

2.1. Communicative activities

2.1.1. Definition of communicative activities

Harmer (1991:50) [4] defines communicative activities as those which exhibit the characteristics at the communicative end of our continuance. Students are somehow involved in activities that give them both the desire to communicate and a purpose, which involves them in various uses of the language. Such activities are vital in a language classroom since here the students can do their best to use the language as individuals, arriving at a degree of language autonomy.

Another definition of communicative activities is that a communicative activity is one which "brings the language to life" by providing a real basis for speaking and interactive exchange of ideas, opinions, and feelings with another person [5].

2.1.2. Characteristics of communicative activities

Harmer (1991: 50) [4] suggests the following elements in communicative activities.

A desire to communicate: Whatever activity the learners are participating in, it should create in learners a desire to communicate. If learners do not have a motivation to take part in the activity, it means that activity is not communicative and effective.

A communicative purpose and content but not form: Learners must be aware that they will achieve their objective of communication when taking part in activities. If learners have a purpose of communication, their attention should be centered on the content of what is being said or written and not the language form that is being used.

Variety of language and no teacher intervention: Learners are asked to use many kinds of grammatical points during communication. Learners cannot express their ideas by just one grammatical construction. Besides, while learners are engaged in the communicative activities, the teacher should not intervene. Because intervening in learner's communications means telling them mistakes, asking for repetition... However, learners may be involved in the activities as a participant or a co-communicator.

No material control: Often learners work with materials which force the use of certain language or at least restrict the learner's choice of what to say and how to say it.

According to Rod Nolasco and Arthur (1988:59) [5], some characteristics of communicative activities are:

- They involve using language for a purpose;

- They create a desire to communicate;

- They encourage students to be creative and to contribute their ideas;

- They focus on message and students concentrate on "what" they are saying rather than "how" they are saying it;

- The students work independently of the teacher;

The students determine what they want to say or write. The activity is not designed to control what the student will say.

In the same way, Freeman (1986:132) [5] pointed out Morrow's three features of communicative activities: information gap, choice, and feedback.

2.1.3. Types of communicative activities

According to Harmer (1991:122) [4], there are two types of communicative activities. They are oral communicative activities and written communicative activities.

- Oral communicative activities can be divided into six categories:

Reaching a consensus;

Discussion;

Relaying instructions;

Communication games;

Problem solving;

Stimulation and role play.

- Written communicative activities can be divided into four categories:

Relaying instruction;

Writing reports and advertisement;

Cooperative writing;

Exchanging letters.

2.2. Problems of communicative activities in English classrooms

In order to understand the reality of how high school teachers of English in Quang Binh province deal with problems of communicative activities in English classrooms, the author randomly selected a group of 30 teachers. The subject of the study is the communicative activities and the mainly research methodology is questionnaire data analysis. Participants of the research include 30 teachers coming from 6 high schools in Quang Binh province. They are all asked to seek the answers to the following issues:

2.2.1. Teachers' perception of the communicative activity

Question: According to you, what are the characteristics of communicative activities?

Table 1. Teachers' perception of the communicative activity

Characteristics	A desire to communicate	A communicative purpose	Content not form	Variety of language	No teacher intervention	No material control	All characteristics
No of teacher (30)	16	22	5	15	3	2	5
Percentage (%)	53.3	73.3	16.6	50.0	10.0	6.7	16.6

The question is mainly to check teachers' perception of a communicative activity. As indicated in table 1, we can see that the teachers of English at Quang Binh high schools perceive the characteristics of a communicative activity variously. 53.3 % of the teachers said that one of the characteristics of a communicative activity is a desire to communicate. This figure shows that a few teachers in Quang Binh high schools deeply perceive the characteristics of a communicative activity. About 73.3% of them thought one more characteristics of a communicative activity is a communicative purpose. According to Harmer (1991) [4], learners should be using the language in some ways to achieve an objective, and this objective should be the most important part of the communication. If learners have a purpose of communication, their attention will concentrate on the content of what is being said or written and not the language form that is being used. Unfortunately, very few teachers (16.6%) answered that "content not form" is a characteristics of a communicative activity. Half of them (15 out of 30 teachers) affirmed that another characteristic of a communicative activity is "variety of language". Learners cannot

use one grammatical construction to express their ideas. They express their ideas by many different means of language. However, 10% of the teachers were aware that "no teachers' intervention" is also a characteristic of a communicative activity. Many teachers think if they intervene, they can tell their learners about mistakes... They do not see that by intervening, they would undermine the learners' communicative purpose of the activity.

A communicative activity must consist of the six above characteristics. If teachers are conscious of the importance of those characteristics of a communicative activity, they will be skillful at designing communicative activities for their English classes. A noticeable finding is that only 16.6% of teachers answered that all of the above characteristics belong to a communicative activity. This is an unpleasant figure that leads to the demand that teachers need to be equipped with better knowledge of characteristics of a communicative activity.

2.2.2. Teachers' frequency of organizing patterns of interaction

Question: How often do you suggest your learners to work in forms of interaction below in an English lesson?

Table 2. Teachersu' frequency of organizing patterns of interaction

| Patterns of interaction / Frequency	often	sometimes	rare ly	never
Individually	19(63.3%)	10(33.3%)	1(3.33%)	0(0.0%)
In pairs	12(40.0%)	14(46.6%)	4(13.3%)	0(0.0%)
In groups	8(26.6%)	16(53.3%)	5(16.6%)	1(3.33%)
Whole class	5(16.6%)	9(30.0%)	9(30.0%)	7(23.3%)

The results on table 2 indicate that about 63.3% of the teachers often ask their learners to work individually in an English lesson. Ten out of thirty teachers sometimes require their learners to work individually and 3.33% of them rarely suggest learners to work in a form of interaction like that. Many teachers here usually ask learners to work individually. This will not of course enhance learner's competence of communication. By contrast, this pattern of interaction should be limited as much as possible so that learners can have chances to talk together. Students should be encouraged to work in pairs or in groups. About 40% of the teachers often suggest their learners to work in the pattern of pairs and 26.6% of them do the same in the form of groups. Similarly, 46.6% of the teachers sometimes organize their learners to work in pairs and 53.3% of them sometimes do the same in forms of groups. The figures remind us that the learners' patterns of interaction in pairs and in groups are not usually carried out in some high schools. An explanation that can be made here is that most of the teachers are not aware of the importance of learners' patterns of interactions in pairs and groups.

2.2.3. Teachers' sources of materials to design communicative activities

Designing communicative activities depends on many factors. Apart from objective factors, subjective ones always decide the success of the activity as well. Activities themselves are sometimes very communicative and sometimes are not very communicative. Many teachers feel embarrassed when designing communicative activities due to the sources of materials. Because of this reason, the answer to the following question has been found out.

Question: Which sources of material do you usually base on to design communicative activities?
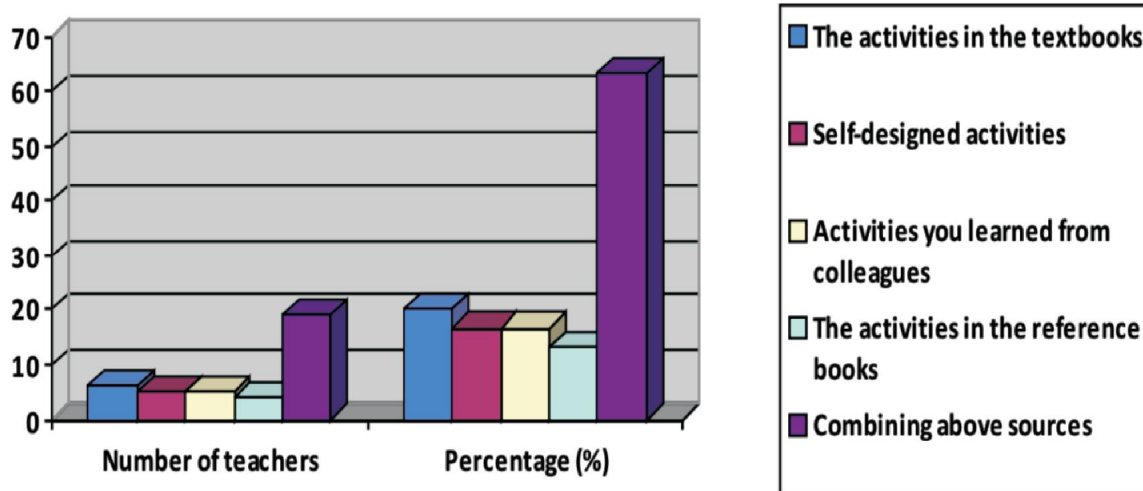
Figure 1. Teachers' sources of materials to design communicative activities

A noticeable finding in the table is that 19 out of the 30 who were asked answered that they usually combine among activities from different sources of material when designing communicative activities. Only 20.0% of the teachers usually base the activities on the textbooks. Teachers seemed not to be dependent on textbooks very much. 13.3% of them often base their lessons on activities in the reference books.

Nevertheless, the numbers of teachers who usually combine many different sources of material to design communicative activities should be increased more and more.

2.2.4. Teachers' disadvantages for implementing communicative activities

Question: Which disadvantages do you often encounter when designing communicative activities?

Table 3. Teachers' disadvantages for implementing communicative activities

Teacher's disadvantages	No of teachers	Percentage (%)
Limitation of time for preparation	6	20.0
Limitation of time for a period of class	12	40.0
Limitation of materials and facilities	14	46.0
The class size is not suitable for the activities	15	50.0
Learners' lack of knowledge of English to express ideas	19	63.0
Learners use mother tongue	9	30.0
Activities in the textbooks are not suitable	17	56.6
Learners are not eager to participate in activities	8	26.6
Learners' demands of communication are different	9	30.0
Other problems	1	3.33

There are many reasons that make teachers feel hesitant to use communicative activities in high schools. The collected results reveal that 63.0% of the teachers said that their disadvantage was learners' lack of knowledge of English to express their ideas. Teachers usually felt disappointed and failed when their learners could not implement the suggested activities. How to encourage learners to practice English is a concerning matter for teachers of English?. The table also indicates that 56.6% of the teachers said

that the activities in the textbooks are not suitable, so teachers have to self design activities. However, not many teachers spend much time on this task. Another disadvantage is that the class size is not suitable for the activity. This was reported by 50.0% of the teachers. 46.6% of the teachers said that their disadvantage for implementing communicative activities in class was the limitation of materials and facilities. 40.0% of the teachers do not have enough time to carry out their tasks in class. Beside those serious disadvantages, many

other complaints were also voiced, such as learners' different demands of communication and learners' use of mother tongue.

2.3. Possible solutions to difficulties of designing communicative activities

2.3.1. For teachers

- Teachers of English should always encourage learners to study by planning interesting and useful lessons.

- Teachers of English should participate in methodology workshops to update new knowledge of English teaching methods.

- Teachers of English should study and read more materials that are concerned with the methodological innovation and consult many books to get knowledge of communicative language teaching.

- Teachers of English at high schools should activate in preparing teaching aids for English lessons to make them more attractive and easier so that learners can have more motivation in their learning.

- Teachers should be allowed to change or adapt exercises in the textbooks to make them more suitable to learners' levels.

- Teachers of English should increase time allocation in class for communicative activities.

- Teachers should visit classes together to exchange and share experience and knowledge.

- Teachers must be limited from opening extra classes at home so that they can spend more time and energy for lectures in classes.

2.3.2. For educational managers

- Authorities should hold many workshops and seminars to discuss the innovations of English teaching and applications of new methods of teaching.

- Specialists should regularly attend and visit classes to consider the real situation of English teaching and learning and to increase teachers' responsibilities of teaching.

- The examination and tests should be centered on learners' communicative competence, not only on linguistic competence.

- Materials and facilities for English teaching should be updated and equipped widely.

- Class size should be reduced from 35 to 25 learners in every language class.

2.3.3. For learners

- Learners are encouraged to take part in communicative activities actively.

- Learners should speak English as much as possible both inside as well as outside classes.

- Learners should regularly participate in English speaking clubs and excursions to practice English.

- Learners should find chances to communicate with native English speakers.

3. CONCLUSION

Communicative activities always play a very special role in English language teaching. They are important for teaching of any skills: listening, writing, reading or speaking. Hence, the article examines the concepts of communicative activities and describes a real picture of the situation of teachers' communicative language teaching by understanding and analyzing

the issues: teachers' perception of the communicative activity, teachers' frequency of organizing patterns of interaction, teachers' sources of materials to design communicative activities, and teachers' disadvantages for implementing communicative activities. Each matter was clearly analyzed and proven by words and figures based on the questionnaire. The collected results revealed some concerning matters. Teachers' perceptions of communicative language teaching are different. Teachers did not usually organize communicative activities in classes. Teachers lacked materials to design communicative activities and had many other difficulties in implementing communicative activities. As a result, some solutions to problems are suggested as a guide line to help teachers and relative authorities to consider the problems more significantly.

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THỰC TRẠNG TỔ CHỨC HOẠT ĐỘNG GIAO TIẾP TRONG LỚP HỌC TIẾNG ANH Ở TRƯỜNG PHỔ THÔNG TRÊN ĐỊA BÀN TỈNH QUẢNG BÌNH

Tóm tắt. Với mục tiêu chủ yếu chú trọng vào việc thực hành ngôn ngữ hơn việc nắm bắt các hình thức thể hiện của ngôn ngữ, việc thiết kế các hoạt động giao tiếp luôn được khuyến khích và thúc đẩy ở các lớp học tiếng Anh. Bài viết mô tả những quan niệm về hoạt động giao tiếp, điều tra thực trạng giáo viên tiếng Anh bậc phổ thông trung học về nhận thức và tổ chức hoạt động giao tiếp trong lớp học ngoại ngữ từ đó làm cơ sở đề xuất một số giải pháp giúp giảng viên tiếng Anh thiết kế nhiều hoạt động giao tiếp hơn nữa trong hoạt động giảng dạy.

Từ khóa: Giao tiếp, giảng dạy, hoạt động.

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