

COMMUNICATIVE GRAMMAR TEACHING IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: DIDACTIC SEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyze the communicative grammar, which teaches us a way to impart grammar without focusing on mechanical exercises, to teach English as a second language. At the same time, we research about task-based activities, which gives us some reasons as to why and how one can use more focused activities inside the classroom. Both communicative grammar and task-based activities work well on explaining why one should focus on a communicative approach to teach English as a L2. Based on studies by Larsen Freeman (2003), David Nunan (2004) and other authors, we create didactic sequences to implement in a real class environment. These sequences focus on teaching grammar communicatively and each of them targets different grammar topics: modals verbs and verbs in the simple past, which can be used in both regular schools and language institutes, as long as teachers use the sequences with teen students. I also hope that the classes are useful as molds to create new and more communicative activities with the focus on task based activities.

Keywords: Communicative Grammar, Task Based Activities, L2 Learning.

1 - INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the acquisition of a second language once the mother tongue or first language acquisition is established. It is the study of how learners create a new language system with only limited exposure to a second language (HOQUE, 2017, p. 1). SLA is worried with whether the student is going to learn and why

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and why he fails to do so. ESL (English as second language) puts our focus on the learning of English.

A big influence on how teachers write their lesson plans nowadays is having to prepare students to pass a particular standardized examination, for instance. That can be a powerful influence on what they teach (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 5). Since grammar is a big focus on most proficiency tests, there can be an overreliance on teaching grammar to students. However, according to Larsen-Freeman (2003, p. 14), “grammar is not simply about form, it is about meaning as well”. Many teachers nowadays barrage their students with rules, forms and long explanations to every single subject known in the English grammar, “grammar is about accuracy of form, meaningfulness and appropriateness” (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 14).

However, what happens when we do that is an overreliance on teaching grammar to students, since that is a big focus on most proficiency tests. And the question that I pose is if teaching with a focus on communication would not give us better results.

If we go by Diane Larsen-Freeman, an applied linguist known for her work in SLA, she describes at length how, “grammar is not simply about form, it’s about meaning as well” (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 14). Many teachers nowadays barrage their students with rules, forms and long explanations to every single subject known in the English grammar; however, grammar is, according to the author, about accuracy of form, meaningfulness and appropriateness, which, in summary, explains what I will discuss in this chapter: what teaching communicatively means.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to develop English lesson plans to teach grammar communicatively in the second language. In section 2 of this paper, the theoretical basis will consider the studies of Larsen-Freeman (2003), Thao and Linh (2019), authors who discuss how to teach L2 grammar communicatively and of Nunan (2004), who researches about task-based activities in the L2. In section 3, lesson plans of my own authorship with different grammar topics will be presented and I will show how those plans focus on grammar in a communicative way, based on the theory presented in section 2. After that, the final considerations will provide an overview of the article and future possibilities for lesson plan design.

2 – COMMUNICATIVE USE OF GRAMMAR

Nowadays, many teachers go into either an exclusive grammar focused path or communicative focused one, especially in our current environment in Brazil, where most teachers have different levels of proficiency in the second language. It is common to see teachers either using simple texts with no context, asking students to fill the blanks with words that they barely know, or putting a song up for their students to sing along and talk about it, again with not much context. That is the first change in paradigm teachers should make: to teach a language in a communicative way, because grammar is more than rules and functions activities should have context and be relatable to the students. “acquisition is a gradual process involving the mapping of form, meaning, and use” (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 87). By following those general guidelines, instead of focusing on one or the other, teachers should, in theory, give a much more fruitful and entertaining class.

Therefore, the question we want to answer in this study is how can teachers impart grammar to students in a communicative way. Teachers “will not ask students to merely memorize rules and then wonder why they do not apply them in communication” (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 13). Teachers should use examples that put students as the creators of their own speech, instead of making them simply repeat what is said to them.

For example, Larsen-Freeman (2003, p. 22) has a great idea on the type of activity we should be using. She created an activity where students closed their eyes while she changed her appearance. Then, she asked her students to look at her and asked the students what changed in her appearance. Students have a very well contextualized situation, simple to understand, and they will use the new grammar without even noticing it. That is the type of exercise we should strive for class. The only way for students to acquire grammar is to get exposure to comprehensible input in the target language, finely tuned with their level of proficiency (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 90)

Larsen-Freeman (2003, p. 117) also gives us some essential criteria on how to design activities. First, the activities should be meaningful and engaging. Second, they should be focused. More specifically, teachers should design practice activities in such a way that learning challenge is in focus. This narrows down what teachers need to focus when they create something for students to learn from.

Even perfectly tuned activities do not guarantee that all students will learn the form being taught with acquisition being a process involving the mapping of form and meaning and use (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 87). Teachers should not expect an entire class to speak perfect English the moment students start doing some new activities. However, with more context and engagement, a higher return should be wielded from the class in question, even if said return is only visible later down the line.

One type of activity that teachers think is good, is to emulate real life situations, such as, pretending to order a pizza, buying groceries, asking for directions. That should be avoided due to the reflex fallacy: the assumption that it is the teacher's job to re-create the natural acquisition present in the external environment. Instead, what language teachers need to do, is to improve upon natural acquisition, not emulate it ((LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 20) since if teachers just emulate the process they will not get very far. Natural acquisition would mean that students would be submerged in the language which, for a large majority is not the case, for the most part (Brazilian) students only interact with the English language when they are at school. A lot of them also listen to songs; however, as mentioned before, songs with no context, where students are not looking for something or using the form that is being worked with cannot be considered a meaningful activity (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2003, p. 118).

We must also understand what the communicative approach is when it comes to teaching. Communicative teaching lays down three ground rules that we must follow. First is being authentic: tasks should be "close to life" and give the opportunity to use the full contents of the grammar in the lesson plan. That means we cannot use out of context activities or simply put something on the blackboard for the students to copy and expect good results. Second is making the context informative and easy to remember: tasks should be simple and easy to understand with clear goals for the students to work towards it. This means we must focus on easy to follow tasks that will give the students

opportunities to use and learn the grammar being taught. Lastly, Thao and Linh (2019) state that students feel interested in real context, and that activities should be “seductive” so that students do not resist the activities and interact with them by themselves without the need for the teacher to force an interaction out of the students.

It is important to point out that even though we are talking about communicative grammar, the grammar part is not as important as communication. Spada (2007, p. 275) points out that “communicative teaching means an exclusive focus on meaning”. However, that does not mean that grammar does not have a place in here. Thao and Linh (2019, p.185) say that being good at grammar will not only boost the rate of learning for students but it will also help them find the meaning in the English sentences. In short, better grammar means better and more meaningful learning.

To see that line of thought in action we should look at the “shallow cut approach”, where in it, Thornbury (2003, p.18) says that first we need to include grammatical structures used in communication. Next, teachers should provide students with examples that would make them, in theory, infer the rules by themselves and give more opportunities for the students to practice as that would stimulate their critical thinking abilities.

The next point that must be addressed is what to look for when creating a task properly. Thao and Linh (2019) state that the most important thing is for the tasks to be related to the target structures, and that, based on the structure chosen, teachers may choose a wide variety of tasks, such as role plays, games, pair work. Hedge (2000) affirms that the presentation of grammar should facilitate learning since it can give new input types and that should speed up learning. It can also give information on the communicative use of language since students should be contextualizing both written and spoken forms of the grammar.

3 - TASK-BASED TEACHING

When we talk about task-based teaching it is hard to find a better authority than David Nunan. He says that a pedagogical task is when learners are comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting with the target language, while the interaction is

focused on expressing meaning (NUNAN, 2004, p. 4), which goes to the idea of meaning that Larsen-Freeman (2003) presents. Van Der Branden also describes task-based activities place communication at the heart of teaching (2012, p. 133). With those two ideas it is easy to link them together and figure out that a task designed in the communicative style described earlier should complement each other greatly.

The question then becomes what should we strive for while creating an activity based on this style. Luckily, both of the prior authors help us find a more concrete answer on what exactly a task is.

Van der Branden (2012, p 133), points out that in a task based approach, students are confronted with approximations and simulations of the kinds of tasks they are supposed to be able to perform, which shows we should contextualize and bring topics our students should recognize and understand, all things that have been pointed out in chapter 2. As for the way tasks should be formulated, Nunan (2004, p. 40) gives an excellent blueprint by pointing out six key elements a task should have. Although not all of them will be present every time, they are a good starting point. The tasks need to have a) the content - the subject of the activity; b) materials - the things the learners manipulate; c) activities - what the learners and teachers do; d) goals - the general aim of the task; e) students - what they need and want; f) social community - the class as a whole.

Nunan (2004, p, 35-37) also points out seven the principles that should be followed applying this approach: a) scaffolding - the materials should provide support to the students; b) task dependency - tasks should build upon the other; c) recycling - maximizing usage of language; d) active learning - students should use the language for better learning; e) integration - learners should know how the topic links to other situations; f) reproduction to creation - learners should go from recreating to being creative with the language and g) reflection - students should have a moment to absorb what has been passed on to them.

To give a better idea on how this all mingles together, it is better to see some examples by Nunan (2004):

8 Express Yourself

A Take out an item of yours (for example: a pen, keys, a jacket) and write a description of it on a small piece of paper.

Group work **B** Put your descriptions in a pile. Take one. Ask questions to find out who has that item. Fill in the information in the chart. Repeat three times.

Name	Item

Picture 1 – Example of Task-based Activity 1
 Source: NUNAN, 2004, p. 55

10 ROLE PLAY Can I help you?

Student A: You are a customer in a drugstore. You need:
 something for a sunburn
 something for sore muscles
 something for a sore throat
 Ask for some suggestions.

Student B: You are a pharmacist in a drugstore. A customer needs some things.
 Make some suggestions.



a can of sunburn spray



a tube of muscle ointment



a bottle of throat spray

Change roles and try the role play again. Make up your own information.

Picture 2 – Example of Task-based Activity 2
 Source: NUNAN, 2004, p. 155

7

Work In Pairs

Student A

Student B: Use page 108

- A** Look at the information below. Describe what Bill likes to your partner. Your partner will suggest gifts for Bill. Decide which suggestions are good.



- B** Listen to your partner and note down the things Connie likes. Suggest some gifts for Connie. Make a list of suggested gifts in the chart.

Connie likes...	Suggestions

- C** Decide with your partner which gifts you should get for Bill and Connie.



Try this

Which of the suggested gifts above would you like to receive? Why?

Picture 3 – Example of Task-based Activity 3
Source: NUNAN, 2004, p. 104

In examples 1, 2 and 3, the exercises present many of the factors mentioned before. The tasks do not make the students use specific phrases and make them create their own. Also, the tasks are not explicit about what type of grammar they are working on. The exercises are contextualized, which means that students control the language they are using and the exercise does not dictate what should be used. All the while students have some sort of objective, be that make a list or understanding something within the exercise, that in itself being the "task".

To finish this topic, we always need to remember another important aspect pointed out by Van der Branden (2012, p. 134), that being that the teacher should motivate their students. Without that, no amount of preparation and planning will move the students to interact with the tasks.

4- DIDACTIC SEQUENCES

I will now present two examples of classes of my authorship based on the ideas presented in this paper. First of I will start with a class about simple past. And the second activity is targeted towards general use of English.

The first didactic sequence, should be given to a sixth or seventh grade class. The lesson starts with the teacher striking a conversation with the students about what they have been doing nowadays with the way life is. Students probably say things like, "I study" or "I use the computer". Ask the students to, in groups make a list about things they do in their daily lives. Then, discuss this with the large group, and after the class is comfortable with the idea of the exercise, ask them to list things that they did the weekend before. Students will probably ask how you put a sentence in the past; however, tell them to try to guess the answer and do what they think is right. Students will fumble through the exercise and very likely get some sentences wrong. This is the time to compare both present and past on the board to the students. Finally, give them one last exercise by making them do a list of things that were done yesterday.

This class does follow a lot of the ideas I proposed, the first one being I contextualize and bring a topic about the students. I also do not force them to use the grammar being taught, nor do I make rigid phrases for them to follow. They create their

own examples. I also wait for the students to familiarize with the meaning of the structure before giving them the grammatical explanation near the end of the activity.

Daily life

What do I do every day?

- I eat
- I walk
- I drink Pepsi
- I watch Gremio vs Inter

What did I do last weekend?

- I ate
- I walked
- I drank Pepsi
- I watched Gremio vs Inter

Chart 1 – Communicative Exercise about Simple Past
Fonte: Aatoria própria, 2020.

SIMPLE PRESENT

- I eat
- I walk
- I drink Pepsi
- I watch Gremio vs Inter

SIMPLE PAST

- I **ate**
- I **walked**
- I **drank** Pepsi
- I **watched** Gremio vs Inter

Chart 2 – Explanation about Simple Past
Fonte: Aatoria própria, 2020.

The second activity does not have a target structure and is be more targeted towards general use of English. The class would start with the teacher prompting the students about things they buy on the supermarket, while the teacher lists the items on the board. After a while and after enough items have been listed, bring some flyers from the supermarket or images from the internet that contain generic images of items that people buy. Next, divide the class into two groups: the sellers and the buyers. Ask the buyers to create a list of items that need to be bought for dinner. And the sellers need to sell their stock, all done in English. The teacher should provide support with the pricing and listing of the items. The groups should, then, try to get the most money in the case of

the sellers or save the most money if they are the buyers. Picture 4 presents some ideas on what to use with your students.

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Tomate comum a granel kg 1,28	Carrotos a granel kg 1,28	Batata-doce moída a granel kg 1,98	Quais leites grandes bombas com 30 unidades 9,90	Uvas cristalinas sem semente Quantidade 300 g 3,98
Laranja-pêra a granel kg 1,75	Maçã melissa a granel kg 2,98	Manga beta a granel kg 2,98	Albacorj fresco unidade 3,98	Pará para cozinhar a granel kg 3,98
Mandioca a granel kg 1,58	Abóbora japonesa a granel kg 1,95	Beterraba a granel kg 1,95	Milho verde Quantidade 700 g 3,98	Melancia personal a granel kg 1,99
Banana-cacau a granel kg 2,89	Uva preta sem semente Quantidade 300 g 4,98	Maçã mel importada a granel kg 6,99	Kitel gold 200g 40 g 11,90	Manteiga sem sal para tabletes Quantidade 300 g 3,99
Alface-crespa Quantidade em sacos e embaladas unidades 1,49	Alface-estrelada em sacos e embaladas unidades 1,49	Capote-manipiga embalagem Quantidade unidade em embalagem a granel kg 1,79	Queijos Quantidade 300 g 3,49	Brócolis Quantidade 300 g 3,49

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MÁXIMO R\$ 10,00 EM CASHBACK POR COMPRA

Picture 4 – Example of leaflet to use in a Task-based Activity

Source: <https://br.promotons.com/images?fileName=production/promotons-br/newspapers/615ad023-4807-4ab0-8d4d-8a1a0b80258e/1.jpg&f=jpeg&w=1920&q=50>



Picture 5 – Example of leaflet to use in a Task-based Activity

Source: <https://www.corelvancar.com.br/item/-Panfleto-Promocional,-Oferta-para-Supermercado.html>

This class follows the same ideas as task one: we contextualize the idea, do not make apparent what we are working on, and do not explicitly say what we are working on to the students. Students are expected to create new phrases, as well as – using the target language to ask for prices or how much they want of an item.

A third task targets modal verbs. In this class, the teacher first strikes a conversation about what new abilities students have been able to develop the last year, and they also talk about what they cannot yet do. The teacher asks students about super heroes and about how they can do almost anything.

The teacher asks the class for examples of superheroes and about what they can do. Finally, s/he divides the class in small groups and asks each one to design a super hero, with both strengths and weaknesses. S/he asks the classes to show case their super hero to the class. During the presentation, the teacher should be helping the students to get the modal verbs correctly and guide them towards the correct structure. It is useful to show an image of super heroes to get the conversation going with the students.



Picture 6 – Supplemental Image

Source:<https://assets.entrepreneur.com/content/3x2/2000/20190104201654-GettyImages-143431367.jpeg>

Again, in this class, the focus is not on the form of the structure being taught. Even if they do not get it correctly on their first try, guide them towards the right form. Again, the teacher does not explicitly state what is being worked on. The class also focuses on not restricting the students aside from the topic and letting them control the discussion. Besides, all the classes discussed followed the idea of the task based approach working towards an objective. In this case, it was a short term activity, but one could be created with a mid or long term task in mind depending on the time of the class and the students' needs.

5- FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As for my final opinions on this paper, I found it challenging to create task-based activities. Unfortunately, due to the scope of the project, the classes could not be tested out in a real classroom. However, that does leave room for a bigger research. It should be noted that if this were ever to be tested out a bigger amount of classes and a larger timeframe should be given to the research since two classes are not enough to see big changes in the class. Some of the expected results should be more autonomy from class in regards to using the language as well as more participation from the class.

RESUMO

Neste artigo nós analisamos a gramática comunicativa, que nos ensina maneiras de transmitir a gramática sem ter o foco em exercícios mecânicos, para ensinar o inglês como uma segunda língua. Ao mesmo tempo, nós pesquisamos sobre atividades baseadas em tarefas, que nos dá algumas razões sobre como e porque nós podemos usar atividades mais focadas dentro da sala de aula. Ambas, atividades baseadas em tarefas como a gramática comunicativa explicam bem o porquê se deve focar na abordagem comunicativa para ensinar o inglês como uma segunda língua. Baseado nos estudos pela Larsen Freeman (2003), David Nunan (2004) e outros autores, foram criadas seqüências didáticas para serem implementadas em um ambiente de aula real. Essas seqüências focam no ensinamento da gramática de forma comunicativa e cada uma delas tem como alvo tópicos de gramática diferente: verbos modais e verbos no passado simples. Ambos podem ser utilizados em escolas assim como em institutos de línguas, desde que os professores usem as seqüências com alunos adolescentes. Eu também espero que as aulas sirvam como um molde para criar novas e mais atividades comunicativas com o foco em atividades baseadas em tarefas.

Palavras-Chave: Gramática Comunicativa, Atividades baseadas em tarefas, Aprendizado de L2.

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