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THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN REVIEW (1)

—in case of a small group—*¹

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In recent years, especially after 1988 when the new MONBUSHO guidelines for teaching English were introduced, the idea of the Communicative Approach(CA) has started to be adopted in English classes at the Japanese Secondary School. Two experimental researches regarding the effects of CA were conducted to investigate the effects of CA. This review summarizes the findings generated by these two experimental researches. The review will be organized around three major issues: (1) The effects of participation in CA class on academic achievements; (2) The effects of participation in CA class on motivation to learn; (3) The suitability of CA for children with different aptitudes.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the development of communicative competence in English teaching at the Japanese secondary school. This movement has occurred in response to the needs of the present situation in Japan where opportunities to use English have been increasing. Therefore, communicative competence has replaced linguistic competence as the main purpose of English teaching at the Japanese secondary school.

The Communicative approach (CA), born in Europe at the beginning of 1970's, is a teaching theory designed to develop the learners' communicative competence. The Audiolingual method, based on structural linguistics and behaviorism, has focused on linguistic form and pursued grammatical accuracy through oral-aural drills. However, the shortcomings of the audiolingual method were beginning to be discussed by the early 1970's. There was a general acceptance of the need for learners to have the experience of authentic communication in the language classroom and to acquire not only grammatical competence but also practical competence.

In recent years, especially after 1988 when the new MONBUSHO guidelines for teaching

English were introduced, the idea of CA has started to be adopted in English classes at the Japanese Secondary school. Nevertheless, systematic and objective feedback regarding the results of CA has not been provided so far. Therefore, our teaching project*² conducted two experimental researches regarding the effects of CA in order to provide systematic, objective feedback concerning CA. The research was considered to support the adoption of CA at the Japanese Secondary school.

The remainder of this review will be devoted to a summary and discussion of some of the findings generated by these two experimental researches. The review will be organized around three major issues: (1) the effects of participation in CA class on academic achievements; (2) the effects of participation in CA class on motivation to learn; (3) the suitability of CA for children with different aptitudes. Discussion of these issues will be preceded by a description of characteristics of the Communicative approach (CA).

2. RATIONALE OF CA AND DESCRIPTION OF EXPERIMENTAL CLASSES

2.1. Rationale of CA

The rationale underlying the CA as was developed in our project was based on educational psychological, psycholinguistic and social psychological research and theories.

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Very briefly, work by Stern (1984) and Bretta (1987) had indicated that problem solving activities in CA enhanced motivation to learn which resulted in promotion of the communicative competence. On the bases of these types of findings, it was argued that problem solving activities in CA promote motivation to learn. Similarly, from a psycholinguistic perspective, it was proposed that language classes should have a lively atmosphere in order to diminish the role of affective filters which are considered to interfere with learning. It was argued that interaction among learners in CA will give the required lively atmosphere and give learners deep self involvement in the class.

Educational psychological and psycholinguistic justifications for CA were supported by social psychological arguments. Negotiation of meaning by target languages in CA was thought to result in positive attitudes towards the target language and the target language group (Genesee 1983).

Taken together, all the perspectives favoured CA. Notwithstanding the previous theoretical positions, the empirical evidence indicates that on the one hand, the classes of CA can enhance motivation to learn and academic results, if the duration of CA classes is relatively long and if the learning stage is relatively advanced. Other research, on the other hand, indicates that CA is most likely to achieve lower academic achievements compared to regular classes*, if given short duration and lower learning stage. Therefore, effects of CA cannot be dissociated from the question of learning duration and learning stages. The relative effectiveness of CA with different learning stages will be reviewed later.

The most distinctive feature of CA is the use of the target language in meaningful and interesting communication. This approach was adopted in order to create the same kinds of conditions that characterize first-language acquisition. Thus, problem solving activities among students are carried out to give students authentic experience of communication. Typical problem solving activities in CA involve a learner or a group of

learners getting the information from another learner through negotiation of information to perform a given task. Here the primary purpose is not to learn grammatical accuracy but to gain experience of authentic communication. Accordingly, in CA, grammatical errors are not corrected strictly as long as the meaning is communicable.

Another feature of CA is the lack of grammatical explanation during the elementary stages. This strategy is intended to reflect the stages of first-language acquisition whereby children's use of the language generally precedes the grammatical explanation of the language. These characteristics of CA, compared with those of the contrastive regular grammatical approach (GA) are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Communicative approach (CA) and Grammatical approach (GA)

	Communicative approach (CA)	Grammatical approach (GA)
Presentation	Orally in the target language	Literally in the mother language
Class activities	Cooperative learning Exchange of information	Individual learning Learning of grammatical rules
Teaching process	(1) skit (2) communicative activities (3) practices	(1) explanation of rules (2) practices (3) grammatical activities
Learning process	(1) use of rules (2) inferences of rules	(1) learning of rules (2) use of rules

2.2. Description of the courses: Early beginning CA and late beginning CA

Early beginning CA was a 10-day course (approximately twenty hours) for forty-four fifth graders. All the subjects were completely beginners of English language and had no experience of living in English speaking countries. Participants were assigned to each of the four CA classes and were taught by four different Japanese teachers. Each teacher

Table 2. Experimental conditions

	Early beginning	Late beginning
Duration	20 hours (10 days)	60 hours (nine months)
Students	CA : 44 fifth graders GA : 45 fifth graders	CA : 30 sixth graders GA : 30 sixth graders
Classes	4 classes each	3 classes each
Teachers	4 teachers	3 teachers
Items to be learned	Be verb have, like (first, singular)	Adjectives Comprison Verbs (third, singular) Progressive form there is/are

Table 3. An example of both the curricula (the first lesson)

Time (minutes)	Communicative approach (CA)	Grammatical approach (GA)
0-10	A demonstration of introduction between the Japanese teacher and the native speaker	An explanation of the existence of rules in English
10-20	Introduction between students in pairs (I am/You are)	An explanation of the relationship between the subject and verb in English sentences (Be verb)
20-30	A demonstration of greetings between the Japanese teacher and the native speaker	Drills of Be verb using stationary goods (it is)
30-40	Pronunciation game using confusing words such as bath, bus	Introduction between the teacher and the students (I am/You are)
40-50	An introduction of one's own things (It is) Guessing game	Sentence making game (Be verb)
50-60	Reading of today's important sentences	Reading of today's important sentences

taught one CA class and one GA class.

Late beginning CA was the following nine months course (approximately sixty hours) for thirty sixth graders. The reason why the number of students was different between two courses was that fourteen students did

not want to continue the classes. The participants were assigned to each of the three CA classes and were taught by three different Japanese teachers. They were the same teachers as the early beginning course. Each teacher taught one CA class and one GA class. Detailed experimental conditions and the syllabi are shown in Table 2 and curricula of typical CA class and GA class were contrasted in Table 3. The curriculum of CA was designed by Teacher 1 and the curriculum of GA by Teacher 2, since Teacher 1 was an experienced teacher and a researcher of CA and Teacher 2 a researcher of GA. Both curricula were planned based on a unit of ten minutes in succession. Before starting the course, teachers had both curricula explained to them by the curriculum designers so that they understand and follow them correctly.

In both the classes a native speaker joined the class at times and taught with the Japanese teacher.

3. EVALUATION OF RESULTS

3.1. Academic achievements

Academic achievements of CA students were assessed by comparing their written and oral performance by those of control students attending regular grammatical approach (GA) classes. CA and GA students had been assigned to be comparable with respect to ratio of boys and girls, intelligence and affective aptitudes which will be described later. Written tests were designed to evaluate grammatical competence and consisted of basically five parts: (1) Translation of English words or sentences into Japanese; (2) Translation of Japanese words or sentences into English; (3) Rearrangements of words in the correct order to make a sentence; (4) Finding out grammatical errors; (5) Completion of a conversation by the adding of sentences. Oral tests were administered individually to evaluate a communicative competence and consisted of four parts: (1) Free talk about a picture; (2) Questions and answers about a picture; (3) Personal questions about learners related to the picture;

Table 4. Results of statistical comparison between the academic achievement in CA and GA

Stage	Early beginning		Late beginning					
	1		2		3	4	5	
	written	oral	written	oral	written	written	written	oral
CA	50	79	62	58	66	75	60	65
GA	57	71	70	54	77	87	83	61

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

(4) Similar questions from learners to the teachers.

Table 4 shows the results of written and oral test. CA students fall behind GA students in written tests. The difference between CA and GA widened as the class proceeded. Nevertheless, the finding of a deficit in written achievements among CA students is not surprising in view of the lack of formal explanation. What is surprising is CA students' actual level of written competence (approximately 60%) despite this lack of formal explanation. It is then suggested that if grammatical explanation is added in CA, CA students would reach parity with GA students in written performance.

On the other hand, CA students performed better than GA students in oral scores, although the difference is small if all the teachers are combined. The oral profit among CA students is attributable to the teachers. Regarding oral scores the difference between teachers became significant as the classes proceeded. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 were picked up for analyses, because Teacher 1 was an experienced CA teacher and CA curriculum designer in this project, whereas Teacher 2 was a researcher of GA and GA curriculum designer in this project. The changes of oral scores by these two teachers are presented in Fig. 1. Teacher 1 produced much higher results in CA as well as GA. In fact, the GA scores of Teacher 1 was higher than CA scores of Teacher 2. These results suggest that experience of teaching is of critical importance in the oral achievements.

In sum, there is evidence that CA without grammatical explanation had unfavourable effects on students' written achievements as

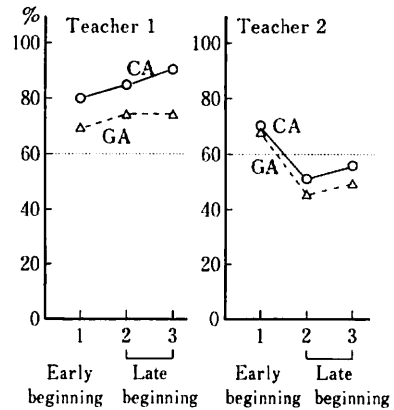


Fig. 1. The change in oral scores by teachers.

the classes proceeded. Also, the research indicates that participation in CA classes has favorable effects on students oral proficiency. Moreover, there is evidence that teacher's experience is of critical importance in English oral proficiency.

3.2. Motivation to learn

The motivation to learn was assessed by two measures: (1) Learner-assessed motivation; (2) Observer-assessed motivation.

Also, in order to examine the long-term effects of CA on attitudinal aspects, students were asked to write a composition titled "On participating in this English course" two months after the experiment. All the learners were asked to write their frank impression about the English class and English in general.

Learner-assessed motivation was measured repeatedly in the course by a 4-point scale questionnaire consisting basically of 10 items. These items are listed in Table 5.

Observer-assessed motivation was assessed by two experienced observers repeatedly at

Table 5

Items of learner assessed motivation questionnaires

1. I am interested in today's topic (pets).
2. Talking about pets in English is pleasant.
3. I am confident in talking about pets in English.
4. I now feel familiar with English.
5. I feel involved in today's English lesson.
6. Talking about pets in English is interesting for me.
7. Studying English has become enjoyable.
8. I now feel competent in speaking English.
9. Today's English activities are pleasant.
10. Teacher forced me to study.

Items of observer assessed motivation schemes

1. Listen attentively when teacher speaks.
2. Is interested in materials.
3. Pay attention when the teacher is explaining grammatical points.
4. Speaks out in choral response.
5. Responds quickly in his/her turn.
6. Looks happy when teacher praises him/her.
7. Tries hard when he/she makes mistakes.
8. Understands quickly when teacher corrects his/her answers.
9. Listens carefully to what classmates say.
10. Looks carefully when teacher writes on the board.
11. Concentrate on writing in writing time.
12. Concentrate on activities in activity time.

the same time as learner-assessed motivation. Observers were asked to code the learners' motivation with a 4-point scale observation scheme. This scheme included 12 items which were considered to signify various aspects of motivation (Table 5).

Regarding learner-assessed motivation scores, the results were not consistent with the expectation that CA might enhance motivation to learn. As shown in Fig 2, the scores of CA and GA are about the same consistently during the course. Both the scores were around 3 which signified relatively positive assessments by the students. The most possible reason for this positive assessments might be that both sets of learners could have belief in themselves that they were motivated learners. Indeed, learners who came to the class voluntarily for nine months in succession were highly motivated learners. Also, another interpretation for these positive assessments might be that

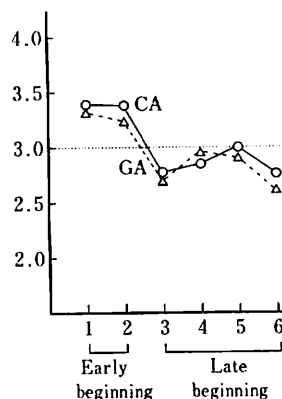


Fig. 2. The change in learner-assessed motivation scores.

students became too accustomed to the questionnaires to complete them in a sincere manner. Thus they might tend to pick regular point 3 unthinkingly. Indeed, the time spent on assessments decreased as the classes proceeded.

With regard to observer-assessed motivation scores, analyses by teachers showed interesting results as presented in Fig. 3. Teacher 1 yielded higher motivation in CA than in GA, whereas Teacher 2 yielded higher motivation in GA than in CA. These results suggest that teacher's deep involvement in a teaching method as a curriculum designer makes a significant contribution to learners' motivation in that method. These results

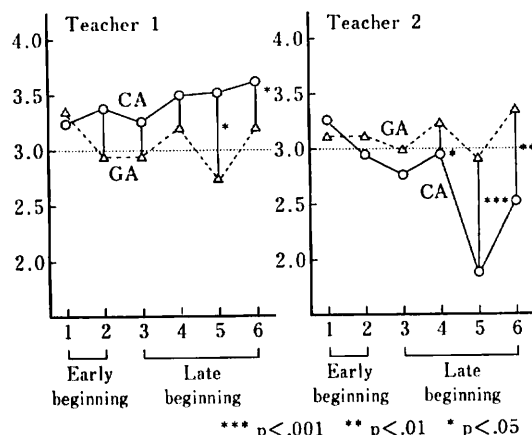


Fig. 3. The change in observer-assessed motivation scores by teachers.

Table 6. Results of the analyses of the composition: number of students who showed motivation

	(1) feels familiarity	(2) likes rules	(3) has confidence	(4) feels relaxed	(5) has overall interest
CA	7	0	12	14	16
GA	0	1	8	8	3

number of students in CA : 20 number of students in GA : 21

also suggest that experience of teaching CA is of critical importance in successful teaching of CA.

Regarding the composition which was interpreted to show long-term effects of the two instructional methods, positive attitudes towards English were measured and the results are presented in Table 6. As expected, students in CA reported more positive feelings than students in GA in so far as CA students felt familiar with English, had confidence, felt relaxed in English class and had a general interest in English. These positive feelings and attitudes might play an important role in subsequent academic attainments.

In sum, there is an indication that CA has favourable effects on students' motivation to learn and on attitudinal aspects from the long term perspective. Also, it is suggested that in CA teachers played an important role in motivating learners, since students' motivation depended deeply on teachers.

3.3. Learners' aptitudes and two instructional methods

The regression analyses were used to test the interaction between learners' aptitudes and the two instructional methods (CA, GA), namely, ATI effects. Two affective variables, that is, the communicative orientation and the English class anxiety, and one intellectual variable, that is, IQ were used as aptitudes measures.

"The measure of communicative orientation" refers to the degree of willingness to communicate inside and outside of the class. The measure was constructed from 14 items, using items developed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) (e.g., "I think it is pleasant to talk with classmates in English", "I feel relaxed when I talk with native speakers").

"The measure of English class anxiety" refers to the degree of anxiety in the English class. The measure was constructed with 9

items, using items developed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) (e.g., "I always feel uncomfortable in English class", "I feel anxious when I cannot understand what native speaker says").

As a result of regression analyses, educationally significant interactions were found for both the intellectual aspect and the affective aspect.

Firstly, regarding IQ, CA is a method which compensates for students who have low intelligence, so that CA produces higher written achievements at the early beginning stage as shown in Fig. 4. Interestingly this interaction reverses at the late beginning stage, so that CA capitalizes on intelligence as shown in Fig. 5. A possible interpretation for these phenomena might be that at the early beginning stage, CA might promote self involvements in materials or in classes for learners of lower intelligence, which results in producing higher written results,

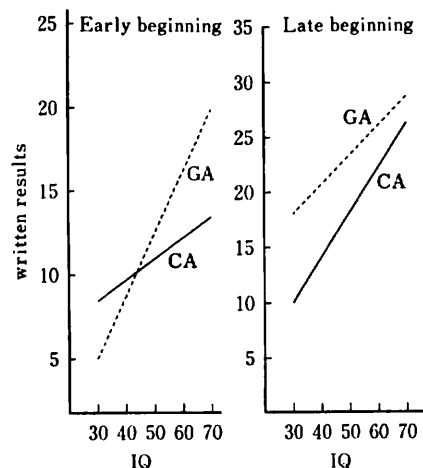


Fig. 4. Interaction between IQ and the two instructional methods at the early beginning stage.

Fig. 5. Interaction between IQ and the two instructional methods at the late beginning stage.

whereas in GA learners of high intelligence could understand the grammatical explanations which results in better performance. Conversely, at the late beginning stage, grammatical rules became more complexed and students in CA had to find out the grammatical rules by themselves. CA then might be suitable for students of higher intelligence who could induce grammatical rules on their own.

Secondly, regarding communicative orientation, CA is a method which capitalizes on learners' communicative orientation at the early beginning stage so that CA produced higher oral results as shown in Fig. 6, whereas, at the late beginning stage, CA compensate for the learners' communicative orientation so that CA produced higher motivation to learn as shown in Fig. 7. A possible interpretation for these phenomena might be that at the early beginning stage when all the students were as yet unaccustomed to the communicative activities in CA, CA might be advantageous for the students with higher communicative orientation, but as the class proceeded, the relaxed atmosphere of CA might have helped to activate students of lower communicative orientation so that CA enhanced motivation to learn, but at the same

time too relaxed an atmosphere in CA for learners of higher communicative orientation might lower the motivation to learn of those students. A similar interaction was found between English class anxiety and the oral performance, which showed that CA had unfavourable effects for the learners who had high anxiety at the early beginning stage, whereas CA compensated for the anxiety at the late beginning course so that CA produced higher oral results.

These findings are especially meaningful because they took not only learners' aptitudes but also different learning stages into account.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results of these studies show that CA learners achieved lower written competence and higher oral competence than GA learners. Whether an explicit explanation of rules in CA produces higher written results remains to be examined. Also, CA has been found to be an effective method in promoting learners' motivation.

Furthermore, students in CA expressed more positive attitudes towards learning English. The communicative activities in CA might enhance these positive attitudes more than the teacher-centered explanations in GA. It is my expressed opinion that positive attitudes towards English is of critical importance in a sense that it might affect the willingness to use English and a future level of communicative competence.

Regarding the learners' aptitudes, it has been pointed out in the present review that not only aptitudes but also the learning stage should be taken into perspective. Comparisons of CA and GA support the following generalization: Regarding written performance, CA tends to compensate for intelligence at the early beginning stage, whereas CA tends to capitalize on intelligence at the late beginning stage. Also, regarding oral performance, CA tends to capitalize on the learner's communicative orientation at the early beginning stage but it tends to compensate for it at the late beginning stage.

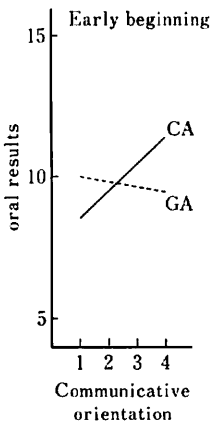


Fig. 6. Interaction between the communicative orientation and two instructional methods at the early beginning stage.

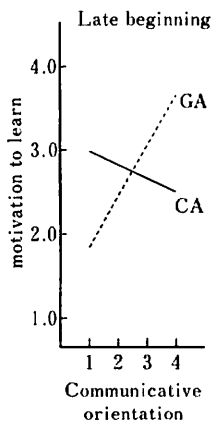


Fig. 7. Interaction between the communicative orientation and two instructional methods at the late beginning stage.

What is being suggested here is that at the more advanced stage, the aptitudes may function in a different way, which remains to be considered.

These empirical findings are fairly comprehensive despite the methodological difficulties in conducting research in a setting similar to a real classroom. In this research, the class size was somewhat smaller (about 12 students) than general classes in the Japanese secondary school (about 35). Therefore, additional research is needed under conditions with about the same number of students as the Japanese secondary school. No doubt it will continue to provide a rich source of additional information about CA as researchers' and educators' search for more and more effective foreign language teaching methods.

Notes

- *1 The full description of the researches reported in this paper were presented in the Japanese Journal of Educational Psychology 1992, 304-314. I would like to thank Associate professor Juko Ando of Keio University and Mr. Fukunaga (currently post graduate student at Keio University) for their cooperation. This research was supported in part by grant No. 03610137 from the MONBUSHO for scientific researches.
- *2 The department of educational psychology at Keio University started the Keio Educational project in 1989 and has conducted several researches regarding instructional methods. This research was conducted as a part of our project.
- *3 Regular classes are the classes based on a grammar translation method. Therefore the focus is on written competence.

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