

Effective Communicative Language Teaching in a Test-Preparation Class: Is It Possible?

Reflection paper

Jihye Kim

Introduction

In my experience taking test preparation courses for the TOEIC and TOEFL in Korea, most of the teachers emphasized how to get a higher score on the exams rather than how to improve overall language proficiency. Students in the classes believed that the best teacher was one who could teach how to get a perfect score. It never occurred to anyone that the students should have a chance to talk to each other using English; rather the class was totally teacher-centered which only required them to take notes without asking questions or interacting with other students in the classroom. They just concentrated on the teacher's explanation about strategies to get a better score on the tests. Nobody in the classroom wondered whether or not they were on the right track with their learning because students in Korea, including me, were and are still used to learning in that way. In fact, the teacher-centered way of teaching in those classes turned out to be effective for students to get a higher score on the reading, writing and listening sections of the TOEIC and TOEFL; however, it was not effective on the speaking sections.

According to Card (2006), Korean students spend around 752 million dollars on cramming for English tests produced by the US company ETS every year. Also according to Card, although South Korea is the world's largest market for TOEFL, from a 2004 report by the Korea Government Information Agency, Koreans are 110th on global TOEFL rankings. At this point, I wondered why Korean students ranked significantly lower on the overall score even though they spend a lot of money every year to prepare for the English exams. I wondered if this was a result of

their much lower speaking proficiency than that of reading and writing in English.

This question triggered my interest in the problem of improving oral proficiency and the score on the oral component of the TOEFL. I know that oral proficiency is best improved through ample oral communication practice. In this regard, it seems that the communicative approach might be a solution to the problem. However, it seems contradictory to think about teaching a test-prep class with a communicative method. I was surprised and delighted to discover that this is not the case. In fact, the communicative method can be used very successfully. I discovered this during my observation of two test-prep classes in Honolulu which used the communicative approach very effectively.

When I entered both of the classrooms I was surprised right away by the small class size and seating arrangements. This was because in Korea I was used to studying for the TOEIC and TOEFL with at least fifty classmates in a room which had seats in row after row. I found that the small class size and the semi-circular seating arrangement positively affected students and allowed them to have many chances to talk with their classmates in English while acquiring knowledge related to English tests. This observation reminded me of what Dornyei and Murphey (2003) wrote, "The semi-circular seating structure allows students to have direct visual contact with each other to increase communication" (p. 81). The classes were also very different because the teachers in these TOEIC and TOEFL classes used several physical activities that elicited students' interest in the test preparation class. Using the activities in the test preparation classes drew my attention since they



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showed me that the activities could definitely liven up a boring test-preparation class such as the one I had experienced as a learner in Korea.

The teacher in one of the classes started the class every day with sentence-checking homework. The homework required the students to make short sentences with provided TOEIC vocabulary words, and the sentences had to be related to real situations in students' lives. The teacher had each student say these sentences to the whole class rather than just reading what he or she wrote on a notebook. The rest of the class repeated, then guessed the meanings of the words from the sentences by talking to each other. If no one could get the meaning of the word, the student who made the sentence came to the front of the classroom and wrote more sentences using the word to help classmates to understand. While observing this way of learning vocabulary for the TOEIC, I could see how teaching and learning among students effectively contributes to an active environment in a test preparation class. That is, the students communicated in English with their classmates to complete their homework. During this task, the teacher elaborated on students' sentences and taught pronunciation of the vocabulary. To help the students differentiate between aspirated and non-aspirated sounds, the teacher asked the students to practice pairs of words by holding up a paper or their hand in front of their mouth. This also promoted students' physical movement during the class. As well as pronunciation and vocabulary, grammar and listening were covered in a communicative way. The teacher used a betting game and role-play. All this looked new and interesting to me since I had never imagined in Korea that learners in the TOEIC preparation class could practice pronunciation, play language games, and talk with one another in English about the test contents.

The second test-preparation class also showed me the effectiveness of communicative teaching for TOEFL preparation. This time, I had the chance to not only observe the class, but also teach the students TOEFL listening and speaking as a student teacher. Teaching the class was a great opportunity for me to conduct communicative teaching on my

own, as I based my teaching on my observation of the previous TOEIC preparation class. I tried to design the class in a communicative way, focusing on eliciting students' interest and active participation in my class.

As I had noticed the advantages of the communicative language teaching approach in the TOEIC class I had observed, when it became my turn to teach I directed the students to spend most of their time working in pairs and groups. Dictation was the first activity I tried to implement in the TOEFL class in a communicative way. My intention in using this activity for the listening part of the TOEFL was to help students build schemata before listening exercises as well as to practice speaking in English with classmates. The content of the dictation was a synopsis of a famous movie. I had my students work in a group for the dictation. Their job was to listen to what I said to them, write and guess the title of the movie with group members. The winning group had to have written the sentences correctly as well as guessed the title of the movie first. Another communicative listening activity was having the students practice listening to dialogues with a partner and then present the dialogue in front of the class. Even though I had had doubts about using these communicative activities in a test-preparation class, which normally required students to use a pen and answer questions in the textbook, I was impressed that every student spoke in English through the activities. Especially, I was happy to see that the five Korean students in the class enjoyed talking to each other in English. This would have been unimaginable in a TOEFL or TOEIC preparation class in Korea.

From these observation and teaching experiences in Hawaii, I believe that conducting the test preparation classes with a communicative language teaching approach is a possible solution for the Korean context. In the next section, I elaborate on the key concepts of communicative language teaching and relate how it can be used for effective language learning in test-preparation classes.

Communicative Language Teaching in Test-Preparation Classes

Although test preparation classes are meant to improve students' scores on standardized tests, in fact those scores are supposed to be a measure of language proficiency. According to Littlewood (2000), "A communicative approach opens up a wider perspective on language. In particular, it makes us consider language not only in terms of its structures (grammar and vocabulary), but also in terms of the communicative functions that it performs" (p. x). That is, in CLT, language teachers should ultimately enable students to utilize the language to interpret and express real-life messages rather than only develop mastery of linguistic structures. It is true that learning linguistic forms is also important during the process of second language acquisition, but I think students should be able to utilize appropriate forms among what they have learned in context, including real-life or simulated situations such as those used in tests.

Rationale for Using CLT in Test-Preparation Classes

Although many teachers are convinced of the importance of being able to communicate in a language as an important part of language learning, I think that they may find it difficult to rationalize the use of CLT in a test-prep class. A first reason to use CLT in test-prep classes is that it is feasible. Lee and VanPattern (1995) wrote, "We might not really be able to 'teach' language, and we can only create conditions in which language can be acquired by the learner" (p. 35). In other words, as a facilitator of students' learning, a language teacher can make a test preparation class become interesting, and at the same time meet students' desires to acquire English test knowledge. The key for it is communicative language teaching.

An important reason to use CLT in a test-preparation class is that the goal of language teaching should be to develop students' proficiency and not just to score high on a test. Students preparing for the TOEFL in Korea are overwhelmed by a system that is still rather test-centered. Moreover, inappropriate teaching methodology and poor resources negatively affect a student's performance. The

students need to have time to apply their knowledge rather than memorize it, and be able to demonstrate what they have learned in real life situations. That is, teaching in test preparation classes should be designed to prepare students for real life, not only for a test. In order to do this, it is important that language teachers teach English communicatively in English as much as possible. The teachers in the test preparation class have to provide students with many chances to exchange and negotiate ideas about the test contents, with the teacher as a facilitator promoting students' communication.

Finally, the communicative activities I observed in the TOEIC and TOEFL classes also motivated the students to actively engage in the test preparation class. It seems that when the activities enabled students to participate in negotiation of meaning with their peers, the students were more interested in learning, both for the test and to develop their proficiency. This level of motivation was not something I had seen in my test-prep classes in Korea.

Since I now realize that CLT can be used in test prep, I did some further research on the activities and techniques which might be most suitable.

CLT Activities and Techniques in Test-Preparation Classes

According to Stryker and Leaver (1997), "Learning a second language has been compared to learning to ride a bicycle, learning to play tennis, or learning to play a musical instrument" (p. 3). They indicated that the best way to learn the skills is by doing, not just by studying about them. In the TOEIC and TOEFL preparation classes, the teachers in my observation classes (as well as myself as a student teacher) implemented some interesting pair and small group activities which were relevant to test content. That is, teachers can use a communicative approach to encourage students to not only produce English but also acquire test-taking strategies while doing the activities.

Larsen-Freeman (2000) also offered some relevant advice. She wrote, "Students use the language a great deal through communicative activities such as games, role-plays, and prob-

lem-solving tasks” (p. 129). Therefore, these communicative activities need to be used in the test preparation class. Larsen-Freeman (2000) in addition stated that “True communication is purposeful. A speaker can thus evaluate whether or not his purpose has been achieved based upon the information she receives from his listener” (p. 129). That is, the activities that language teachers use for the communicative approach should be meaningful and purposeful. I would like to present below some communicative activities to help communicative language learning and teaching in the English test preparation class.

First of all, using interesting games is a great way in the English test preparation class. This is because playing games related to the test content not only promotes students’ motivation in learning but also contributes to a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom. Case (2008) lists the following as examples of interesting TOEIC games:

- *Reading race*: As students will need to read really quickly to finish the test in time, it is very easy to justify adding a race element in even a very serious class. A teacher can combine this with practice of students choosing the easiest questions to concentrate on by cutting up photocopies of a test so that each text only has one question. Students race to choose a text and question from the middle of the table, answer it as quickly as possible, have it checked by the teacher, (whether the teacher gives them another chance or not if they are wrong is up to us), choose another text etc until the time limit is up. The winner is the person who has answered questions correctly the most.
- *Find the synonyms race*: this reading racing game is a little more complicated but even more useful than the game above. Students race to find words or sentences that mean the same as what the teacher says, e.g. “The client is unhappy” for “The customer isn’t satisfied”. This is great practice for when the words in the

question and the text are not the same (fairly often).

- *Picture slap*: to practice Listening Part One and add some speaking, put a whole selection of exam photos on the table between students and read out sentences from the tape script. Students race to slap their palms down on the correct picture, not moving their hands if the sentence doesn’t match any of the pictures. The teacher can then continue with the students reading out the tape script sentences and then making up their own sentences.

Through these interesting games, students’ participation in the class could be maximized while reducing stress. The students engage in learning subconsciously by joining communicative games relevant to the test contents.

In addition, group and pair work is also effective in the test preparation class as ways to promote communicative activity. Harmer (1987) suggested, “Students will be teaching and learning in a group exhibiting a degree of self-reliance that simply is not possible when the teacher is acting as a controller” (p. 207). Instead of teaching linguistic rules and giving direct answers to the English test tasks in a textbook, teachers give students chances to learn with their peers through group and pair work. Here, the teachers’ role should be recognized as less dominant, and they could be a facilitator of the students’ works. Larsen-Freeman (2000) also states that “During the activities a teacher acts as an advisor, answering students’ questions and monitoring their performance” (p. 128). If the teacher follows these suggestions, I have no doubt that their test preparation classes will encourage students to participate in active conversation while acquiring test knowledge.

Conclusion

In short, it is possible to use communicative language teaching in test-preparation classes. As the goal of the communicative language teaching is to give the students chances to discover what they need and ask for the need in English, teaching test-preparation classes with the communicative approach could encourage

students to acquire test knowledge in a meaningful way.

The communicative test preparation class would be promoted by conducting various learner-centered activities relevant to the test content. It is important for language teachers

to keep in mind that the activities should be meaningful and can draw students' interest. The effectiveness of the students' test preparation will increase when the students are excited and involved in the class activities.

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