Topic: Task-oriented language teaching: role plays, global simulation, projects and case studies

From the grammar-translation-method towards communicative language teaching:

In the eighties, the main key word for up-to-date language teaching was “communicative language teaching”. Its aim was to teach the learner to communicate in the foreign language and to enable him / her to handle everyday situations while being abroad. This has to be considered as a reaction to the negative experience made with the grammar-translation-method. This method imparted good theoretical knowledge about the language and also improved the learner’s competence in translating written text, but it hardly offered possibilities for oral communication. Opening up borders, particularly within the framework of the development of a united Europe, has intensified personal contacts and has made exchange and co-operation between speakers of different languages easier. This change requires communicative competence and a sound knowledge of other languages.

In order to improve the learner’s communicative skills, role plays were often put into use. Particularly in English classes, role plays used to be – and still are – very popular. The learners are confronted with authentic problems from everyday life or from business life and practice different dialogues in given scenarios. This way, they can put the new vocabulary and the new grammatical structures they have just learned into practice. Typical examples of role plays that can be carried out in beginners’ courses are ordering food in a restaurant or going shopping. To simulate the situation in a restaurant, one of the students has to take over the part of the customer, another student the part of the waiter. In the “shopping situation” the participants will take the roles of the salesperson and of the customer.

In the beginning, the students are usually rather reserved and not very keen to present themselves in front of the whole group. But as soon as the participants get to know each other better, they normally enjoy simulating different situations.

From “communicative language teaching” towards “task-oriented language teaching”:

This new concept of task-oriented language teaching challenges the idea of role plays: Very few managers, after an tiresome day in the office, are really interested in taking the role of an Italian Cameriere. Furthermore, this is of little use to them, as they are probably never going to work as a waiter in Italy!

Role plays simulate reality, but don’t always correspond to this reality: Learners take over roles that they would never play in real life. The situations that are simulated are not embedded into a specific context. Quite often only one particular situation is dealt with, i.e. the students listen to
short dialogues on a tape, then they read the texts in their textbooks and afterwards the teacher explains the vocabulary and the grammar. At the end, the students simulate themselves this or a similar situation.

However reality is different from such a setting: In real life no one devotes two hours to nothing but ordering drinks in a restaurant. Furthermore, some participants have to play roles that do not correspond to their personal situation. The same problem appears when course participants are asked to simulate situations where they negotiate in everyday business life. On the one hand, our students are not very likely to become the owner of an American company; on the other hand, the motivation for a negotiation scene is very different when real products are sold and the two partners have a real financial interest.

The underlying so-called “communicative” approach is also criticised, because it reduces communication to oral communication only. Language in its use is a lot more complex and also extends e.g. to writing, gesture /mimics and facial expression, the linguistic surrounding. The only aim of this teaching approach is to make the students speak, no matter what they say. Efficiency and effectiveness of interaction are neglected.

Task-oriented language teaching tries to compensate for these deficiencies by giving the learner tasks which are not only focused on language and where the learner has to act, i.e. to do something. The chosen situations and scenarios should be authentic, or at least as realistic as possible, and have close links to the knowledge and competence of the learner on a specific topic and in a specific context. This means, that every participant can play his / her part in the classroom situation and that the course is based on his or her personal knowledge and interests. Furthermore, the learner does not have to hide his true personality behind a fictitious personality. In this context, the students are much more motivated to solve the tasks as they are personally addressed. In contrast to role plays, the tasks are taken from the daily life of the learners. The students handle different tasks in the foreign language and improve their language competence in an indirect way, nearly as a side effect. Language acquisition becomes a lot more efficient, as the students really do solve the tasks and do not only work half-heartedly, as is often the case when traditional teaching methods are used.

**Types of “task oriented language teaching”:**

**1. Global simulation**

In the concept of a ‘global simulation’, participants create a fictitious world where people meet and interact, such as a residential house, a village, a company, a farm etc. The teacher gives the course participants only a framework and basic guidelines, e.g. information on the number of flats in the residential building, the number of inhabitants, the share of male and female, children and adults, nationalities etc. The students decide by themselves on how to fill in this framework. Then the teacher gives tasks for activities taking place in this framework. During the whole course, the learners will collect their dialogues and written material and develop a brochure they can take with them.

In this fictitious world everything will stay fictitious, but greater authenticity is achieved by embedding this “new world” into a larger environment, because the students are dealing with an “almost-real” situation. This way we are moving away from the “illusion of reality” towards the “reality of illusion”.

Global simulations can be very suitably combined with traditional teaching methods and traditional teaching material.
2. Working with projects

In this context, the students are given a certain project as a task, i.e. they have to develop something, e.g. a course diary, a brochure, a poster or an Internet website. The aim of using project work in language teaching is to make the students work on a project and also to improve their language competence. Unlike global simulations (where the fictitious framework is ‘only’ the setting for the language learning and the end-of-course booklet a side product), the realisation of this project itself is an intended outcome of the teaching and learning situation. Similar to the global simulation, the students will have a final product at the end of the course, i.e. a brochure, or a poster, or a website. On the other hand, the students are not dealing with a fictitious situation but with a real project. The advantage in comparison to global simulations is a higher degree of authenticity and the usefulness of the end-of-course product. On the other hand, very often linguistic aspects are not always covered with the necessary regularity and intensity.

3. Case Studies:

Concerning the degree of authenticity, case studies can be situated somewhere between global simulation and project work. Case studies normally require significantly less time input for the learner and can be easily integrated into an existing syllabus. The learners get authentic or ‘nearly authentic’ material on a given situation and have to solve a problem, which is closely linked to reality, by solving tasks. Whereas in global simulations and project work the students are creating a written (or spoken) text, by analysing given examples, in case study activities the learners are provided with the material about the case and have to analyse the material and present their results (in speaking and possibly in writing). Reading comprehension thus plays a major role in this method. Therefore this kind of exercise allows an ideal training for effective reading comprehension and for speaking. The learner will not search the text for unknown words (as he / she very often does when reading shorter text in language classes), but will analyse the content of the text in order to be able to discuss the case in the group and to present the results of the analysis or his / her proposals and recommendations in the whole class.

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