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Role of a Teacher in Teaching Speaking by Following a Communicative Approach: To What Extent is this Possible in an ESL Context like Bangladesh?

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Abstract- This paper is predominantlya short research which investigates the issue of how a teacher can promote the practice of speaking English by following a communicative approach within the traditional context of Bangladeshi language classrooms. The paper thus consists of four segments of literature reviews based on some secondary data collected from contemporary online journals and books. In a brief overview, it can be said that the paper starts with an assessment of the role of teachers in case of prioritizing fluency over accuracy in our language classrooms. This is followed by a discussion on the common sorts of speaking activities which an ESL teacher is ought to follow to promote fluent speaking within the classroom contexts. After this, the second last section focuses on some basic problems which act as hindrances in case of teaching speaking communicatively; for example the negative impact of Bangladesh's language based identity and its influence on teaching English Speaking. Lastly the paper sheds light on the controversial issue of whether it is even possible to teach speaking communicatively to our young school learners or not; and if so than to what extent is it actually possible.

Keywords: communicative approach, speaking activities, ESL speaking context, role of a teacher.

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Role of a Teacher in Teaching Speaking by Following a Communicative Approach: To What Extent is this Possible in an ESL Context like Bangladesh?

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I. Introduction

a) Introducing Speaking and its Importance

Why different schools of South Asia are promoting English teaching in the recent years? What could be their main purpose behind teaching English to their young learners? Is it just for the young kids to know English by heart? Or is it to gain practical interactional skills in the language? If the latter one is the main motive, then why the young learners of the South Asian countries including our country are studying English by means of traditional methods? (Haider & Chowdhury, 2012, p.13). Usually any language learner will first have an interest to speak and therefore function successfully in the language. However, in this part of the world, especially in Bangladesh, learning English to speak and function could sound quite challenging over the last few decades. This is because in our country, teaching of speaking is not done in the way Nunan, Ara and other ELT specialists has suggested. As explained by Nunan (2003), teaching speaking could include not only learning speech sounds/ patterns, use of words and sentence stress, intonation patterns, use of appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter but also the fluent use of language as a means of expressing values and judgments(p. 330).

b) Research Purpose

Therefore the main purpose of this paper is to focus on how teachers can teach speaking fluently by means of communicative approach within the Bangladeshi language classrooms. Thus a Bangladeshi perspective has been under taken in this research work to analyze the following issues: What can be some main barriers that are actually keeping the students away from speaking English fluently? What happens in the classrooms where speaking is taught to the young learners? And why is it being considered less important than the other productive skill (writing)?

As stated in a current research done in Bangladesh, it can be said that "this is not the right way of teaching speaking" (Ara, 2009, p. 167). According to Ara (2009), students should learn speaking English by means of fun activities since some traditional educational approach has prevented learning rather than facilitating it (p.167). Moreover, it is a country where both formal and informal speaking skills are being taught by following the most common traditional methods since its independence (Imam, 2005, p.474). The truth is, most of the primary sections of different schools (both Bangla and English medium) are practicing traditional pedagogy where students are

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nothing more than passive recipients (Haider & Chowdhury, 2012, p.13). Actually something that has been always missing in this context, is the practice of teaching speaking fluently with the help of different 'free activities'[1] like information gaps, role plays, simulations, games, brainstorming, storytelling, picture describing etc.(Gower, Phillips & Walters, 1995, p. 99-110). So basically, this study consists of works of some language researchers who tried to emphasize on how teaching speaking can be done in a much more communicative[2] way even within an existing traditional setting.

c) Research Statement

Teachers can bring about a lot of communicative changes in case of teaching speaking within the existing traditional classrooms.

d) Research focal questions

Some of the questions which have been addressed in the paper are:

- What should a teacher focus on in a primary level: accuracy or fluency?
- What can be some suggested activities related to teaching speaking communicatively? Therefore can our teachers follow them to promote fluent speaking?
- What role is being played by Bangladesh's "language based identity" in case of teaching English with much importance?

e) Research Significance

The significance of this study lies in creating awareness among all the ESL teachers about the fact that they actually have a very crucial role to play whether they acknowledge it or not. That is to say, our teachers can be proved to be some important personalities in case of undertaking a communicative way of teaching speaking if they want to. Instead of walking into a class and giving out a lecture, they can actually involve the students into some meaningful speaking practice. They can be real pioneers in case of altering the traditional way of practicing speaking. The fact is, they can with time, bring about a tremendous change in our entire teaching approach if they start taking attempts from now on.

f) Research Limitations

The most noticeable limitation of this paper is that the research has only been conducted over a few secondary sources; overlooking a practical investigation of conducting a survey on the discussed issue. That is to say no practical implementation of the theories has been carried out to gather quantitative/qualitative data from primary sources. Besides, the study has considered only the major number of schools whereas there are a few schools which are teaching speaking with primary importance now-a-days.

II. Literature Review

a) What should be a Language Teacher's Concentration: Accuracy or Fluency?

In 1995, Gower, Phillips and Walters explained that speaking can be learned by following two basic ways: accuracy or fluency. Accuracy would mean learning of the correct use of vocabulary and grammar items by means of controlled and guided activities while fluency would mean the ability to get the message across regardless any grammatical mistakes (p. 100). As Gower et al. (1995) advised, the students should not be corrected during their speaking since the natural use of incomplete sentences, common expressions, use of filters, hesitations etc. might be hampered (p. 100). Gower et al. (1995) also advised that a teacher should not interrupt and give correction to students during their speaking tasks (p. 100). They added that in any particular activity, the teacher can make it clear that in which areas, accuracy is expected and to what extent, so that the students' anxiety to 'get it right' does not interfere too much with their fluency and ability to communicate (p. 100).

Therefore the question arises, how our teachers can promote speaking with fluency? Is promotion of fluent speaking possible with the current traditional approach? Or it demands a shift in teaching approach? The following section will shed light on this matter.

b) Activities Promoting Fluent Speaking: Undertaking a Communicative Approach

Gower, Phillips & Walters (1995) said that teachers can promote fluent speaking by means of different free/creative activities; it mean spractice of fluency by using real life language in different real situations etc. (p.100-111). Another communicative activity is the 'Information gap activity' where students complete gaps in pairs by means of communications (p. 103). Besides, 'role plays' where students assumes a particular person's character to act out a conversation can also be very effective in most of the contexts (p. 105). Apart from these, 'simulation' where students being a particular person solves a task in a given situation is also helpful although it can be lengthy and time consuming (p. 107). The common most activity is 'group discussions' where classroom talking takes place among students and they share their ideas by using particular language structures and vocabulary without the teacher's interruption (p. 107). Other communicative activities which teachers can practice in the classroom are different "interactive games" or "picture descriptions tasks" along with "storytelling activities" where students

[1] Free activities refer to activities which promotes creative practice opportunities for general fluency practices (Gower, Phillips & Walters, 1995, p. 100-110)

[2] Communicative ways means teaching speaking in an interesting way by fun activities which promotes lots of interaction among the students. (Gower, Phillips & Walters, 1995, p.101)

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are required to tell imaginative stories in given contexts (Murphy, 1991, p. 55). Apart from Murphy, Scrivener also suggested some communicative activities like "picture difference tasks", "group planning tasks", "ranking tasks", "pyramid discussion", "board games", "puzzles and problems", "real play" etc. which can actually help student speak up with whatever resource they have (p. 218-220).

Now the problem lies somewhere else. That is to say, all the suggested activities should have been easily used as interesting prompts by our teachers and therefore also accepted with consent among our students if and only their mindset towards learning English could have been changed. To be more specific, learning English as a "functioning" language is not something very positively taken by many of our students and teachers since we have a language based identity as a nation; this issue has been briefly discussed in the subsequent section.

c) *Impact of Bangladesh's Language Based Identity on Its Teachers and Teaching Methods*

In 2005, Imam explained the issue of Bangladeshi's unique history of language movement and how it has brought about independence for the nation. He linked this crucial issue to Bangladeshi peoples' sentiments and emotions (p.471). In his words, "One problem is that, in the minds of most of the people, national identity and speaking English are positioned as antagonistic, not complementary" (p. 471). He added that since the declaration of independence of 1971, Bangla was confirmed as the medium of instruction by our teachers in the governmental schools (p. 474). He also added that "Bangladesh, being a new country and having its origin in the glorious 1952 language movement, is comparatively new in this English language speaking promotion race; moreover as a nation it has also been shaped by language and the politics of language, to an unusual degree" (p.472). He concluded his paper by saying that "The global English might function as a Trojan horse: as a displacer of national tradition and an instrument of continuing imperialist intervention which has actually kept away the teachers from promoting English speaking in a true sense" (p.472).

Still with all these problems related to our national history and language based identity, it is a teacher, who can bring upon necessary changes. This is actually the most important sort of remedy in case of solving our problem.

d) *Teachers: Can they make it?*

Imam (2005) stated that a teacher can bring about a lot of significant changes within the classroom if he/she wishes. In fact, the way a student will learn to speak depends on how he/she is being taught (p. 475). This also depends on a teacher's perspective and personal variables like motivation, interest, experience, attitude towards job etc. Regarding the role of the teacher, Scrivener also (1994) mentioned about some of the communicative techniques that a teacher can use in case of teaching speaking fluently; scaffolding is one of them by which teachers can provide spontaneous correction without interfering much and by helping the speaker to construct his/her conversation (p. 227). Scrivener also suggested that scaffolding can be of great help if it is done by showing interests by nodding, making eye contacts, asking for clarifications of unclear information, by encouraging echo, asking conversation-oiling questions etc. (p. 227). Besides there are some other aspects which can be accelerated by teachers like lessening teacher talk time, eliciting ideas rather than lecturing, involving the students into argumentative topics of discussions, providing enough scope for student-student interactions and creating non-threatening situations where students can communicate comfortably etc. (Ferris & Tagg, 1996, p. 301).

III. Overall Discussions

From the above study, it is evident that teaching speaking with a communicative approach seems quite difficult in real classrooms since speaking as a skill has always received less importance in our context where students never have to take oral tests. The fact is, since the students do not have to deal with speaking exams, the teachers and therefore the whole educational system did never emphasize teaching speaking with importance.

Besides other researchers, Haider and Chowdhury (2012), showed how teaching speaking needs more emphasis in our country. They said, "Despite the introduction of a communicative syllabus, NCTB had the realization that a syllabus alone could not ensure the implementation of communicative language teaching and learning in the classroom; it could only provide a set of criteria for a change. Therefore, in order to get the best out of the new syllabus a number of reform initiatives such as preparing suitable teaching materials, arranging teacher training and bringing about changes in the examination system were recommended." (p. 12).

Moreover, Ara (2009) said, "little improvement has taken place in the overall English proficiency among the students" (p. 167). This is only because of inaccurate teaching techniques of English towards the young learners. Therefore in case of bringing changes, the first sort of alterations should be brought upon by teachers who teach the young ones (p.167). In other words, the teacher must try to initiate necessary changes among the existing teaching method, approach, procedure, activities, classroom arrangement and management system. This however, will not be accepted easily by the students or the school authorities. Even if the school authority takes this into consideration yet there is a long way to go. This is

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because sudden changes can be easily made in theories but practical implications take time. Nevertheless, changes in real sense can be made possible over a long time. This is because bringing some changes (in teaching process) little by little is neither impossible nor unacceptable.

IV. Conclusion

a) A Few Recommendations

A teacher should be more than a teacher; he/she should be a facilitator. The truth is, language learning is a process that depends a lot on how a teacher teaches. As Harmer (2007) said, a teacher can act in many ways: as a controller, prompter, participator, resource or as a tutor (p. 108). Unfortunately, in our context, the teacher is the controller of a classroom. Incase of his suggestions of facilitate learning, he said that the teacher should be democratic and should let his/her students participate in decision makings rather than controlling the class (p.107). That is to say, teachers must allow learners' autonomy in classrooms. Besides, Ur (1996) also emphasized a teacher's role in case of teaching speaking. He said that teachers can do a lot within the class to solve speaking problems (p. 121). They can promote activities like (1) use of group/pair works, (2) make a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interests and (3) keep students speaking the target language no matter what (p.121).

Scrivener (1994) also said the same thing. He also stated that a teacher has a lot to do to promote learning in a classroom (p. 228) He also mentioned a few suggestions which can help a teacher prepare speaking lessons better like the use of "structuring talk" (making sure that learners get maximum chance to talk in the class by reducing teacher's participation level), avoiding "talk-talk loop" (to avoid asking several questions to which learners cannot response instead of asking one single question and shutting up), using "open questions" (asking questions whose answers requires more than just 'yes' or 'no' from the students' part) etc. (p. 228).

To sum up the above discussion, it can be said that the role of a teacher is very much important in case of teaching speaking communicatively. This is because it is the teacher who can actually make his/her students speak fluently by incorporating a few changes with his/her innovative use of methods, techniques and activities within the classroom.

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