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The Teaching of English as Communication: Principles and Practices

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Introduction- This paper focuses on commun ication as the central feature in teaching and learning within English language classrooms. It examines the English classroom as a unique communication contract with highly regulated patterns of communicative behaviour that are actively negotiated between teachers and learners. It explores how and why these patterns of communication are established and maintained so that teachers of English can come to understand the ways in which the nature of classroom communication ultimately determines how and what second language students learn. The conceptual framework presented in this chapter views the dynamics of classroom communication as being shaped by the moment-to-moment actions and interactions that occur during face-to-face communication between teachers and students. The framework is designed to enable teachers to recognize how the patterns of communication are established and maintained in English classrooms, the effects these patterns have on how the language students participate in classroom activities, and how their participation shapes both the ways in which they use the English language for learning and their opportunities for second language acquisition. This paper provides an account of the dynamics of classroom communication and also illustrates ways of promoting effective patterns of classroom communicative competence.

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THETEACHINGOFENGLISHASCOMMUNICATIONPRINCIPLESANDPRACTICES

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The Teaching of English as Communication: Principles and Practices

Anooja John

I. Introduction

This paper focuses on communication as the central feature in teaching and learning within English language classrooms. It examines the English classroom as a unique communication contract with highly regulated patterns of communicative behaviour that are actively negotiated between teachers and learners. It explores how and why these patterns of communication are established and maintained so that teachers of English can come to understand the ways in which the nature of classroom communication ultimately determines how and what second language students learn. The conceptual framework presented in this chapter views the dynamics of classroom communication as being shaped by the moment-to-moment actions and interactions that occur during face-to-face communication between teachers and students. The framework is designed to enable teachers to recognize how the patterns of communication are established and maintained in English classrooms, the effects these patterns have on how the language students participate in classroom activities, and how their participation shapes both the ways in which they use the English language for learning and their opportunities for second language acquisition. This paper provides an account of the dynamics of classroom communication and also illustrates ways of promoting effective patterns of classroom communicative competence. The framework for understanding communication in the language classroom presented in this chapter represents a lens through which teachers of English can begin to recognize this interrelationship and how it shapes the dynamics of communication in English language classrooms.

a) *Language Acquisition (L1) and Language Learning (L2)*

The terms, 'Language Acquisition' and 'Language Learning' shall be used here to refer to two distinct psycho-linguistic situations. Both these differ remarkably in the degree of variation in the level of skills attained by the child on the one hand and the adult learner on the other. All normal beings have more or less a working control of their mother tongue, but in the case of second or foreign language, there is difference in skills varying between the limits of no knowledge at all to a native speaker like fluency. A second or foreign language cannot be learnt without a teacher, lessons and purposeful study – it can be learnt only by design and under conditions of special instruction. Language acquisition, on the contrary, is instinctive rather than learnt behavior. It refers to, "the process where a language is acquired as a result of natural and random exposure to it" (Wilkins 46). It is the gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations. Learning, on the other hand, refers to the process "where the exposure is structured through language teaching" (Verma 15). It is a conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of a language. "The term acquisition" says Peter Strevens, "should be used only to refer to untutored first language acquisition by the young child or to equivalent process such as picking up a language at a later age without the involvement of a teacher, and that *learning* and *teaching* should be used for institutionalised process" (New Orientation in the Teaching of English 98). These terms, therefore, are used to distinguish between the natural, informal way in which children acquire their mother tongue, and the conscious, formal way in which a person learns a second/ foreign language. The term *acquisition* is used for L1 and the term *learning* is associated with L2. It is often claimed that L2 teaching methods recapitulate L1 acquisition; and that learning L2 reactivates the process by which L1 was learnt.

b) *Knowledge vs Skill*

A close examination of the language of the child as well as of the adult reveals that language can be viewed, on the one hand, as a *set of skills,* (a functional view) which any learner of the language is expected to master and which can be acquired through practice. On the other hand, it is also possible to view language as a *system of knowledge.* These two views are not contradictory but complementary. If, on the one hand, language is a system of knowledge, on the other, it is a set of skills. The basic language skills are:

Listening (identification of sounds; decoding sounds as meaning), Speaking (selection of appropriate sounds and their organization), Reading (identification of symbols; decoding symbols as meaning), Writing (selection of appropriate graphological symbols and their organisation). The teaching of a language must revolve around these four skills. In every language

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teaching and language planning situation certain objectives are set up in terms of which it is decided which of the skills are to be given higher priority.

Knowing a language or being proficient in a language means the mastery of the language skills. The four skills are activities of language in which one is involved or by which an agent exploits his *linguistic competence.* Linguistic competence, or the internalised linguistic systems, which is a theory in the possession of the speaker, gets functionally channeled in the four skills and perform a language activity in a particular skill. It is mainly due to this that the teaching of second language has been considered to consist more in the imparting of skills than in the provision of information about the forms of the language. Full mastery of a language means having receptive ability to understand what one hears and what one reads, and the productive ability to make oneself understood orally and in writing. To quote Abercrombie, "knowing a language means being able to read it, write it, speak it, underst and it when spoken. These are four distinct and separable activities. though they are so closely interwoven for the normal individual that he finds it difficult to think or talk about any one of them without invoking the rest. Two of these manifestations of language are concerned with a *spoken* form, and two with a *written* form, furthermore, two are *active*, and two are *passive*" (85). There cannot be any controversy in that language should be taught as a set of skills rather than as a system of abstract knowledge. Just as the L1 leaner at home learned his language as sets of habits - skills - the L2 learner in the classroom should be exposed to the learning of L2 not as a system of knowledge but skill.

c) *Mother Tongue, Second Language and Foreign Language – Terms Explained.*

In language pedagogy the use of terms as 'mother tongue', 'second language', 'foreign language' is very common and confusing. The language that comes naturally to the speaker without any instruction is referred as L1. This first language is *not taught*; a child picks up this primary language from the speakers in the immediate environment. *Listening* and *Speaking* in the first language are natural processes but not *Reading* and *Writing;* only when the child goes to school or is taught by someone, he learns how to read and write. There exists an obvious conceptual distinction between the terms 'second language' and 'foreign language'. Of these, the latter was in greater use in the past, whereas the former term has gained currency in the last few decades. Making a distinction between a 'second language' and a 'foreign language' A.K Gupta says:

> It is common to use foreign language to refer to the status of language which is not used for any normal day-to-day social interaction in the country where it is being learnt and, by contrast, to use the second language where, without being the native language of any social group in the country, it is none–the–less used for such purpose as the conduct of commerce, industry, law, administration, politics and education (75).

A second language is one that is used internally in the society and therefore affects many people. Foreign languages, on the other hand, need to be learnt and taught only on a limited scale. It has no legal status within the national boundaries. Further, the people who do make use of a foreign language are rarely required or expected to use it as well as they can use the first language. In a foreign language one seldom requires all the four skills. Therefore, in teaching a foreign language, some scale of priorities has to be determined for teaching the communication skills, and this may be varied according to the requirements of the learner. The strategy for learning second language is different from that adopted for learning foreign language. In the first place, second languages have to be taught on a more extensive scale since they are likely to be used by many people. The learner of a second language should ideally be able to use it as effectively for communication as he uses his first language. It has been said that the aim of second language teaching is to produce bilinguals who are almost ambilinguals – people who command two languages equally well. Of course, it is seldom possible to attain this goal, but clearly, the learning and teaching of second language needs to be thorough, much more so than of foreign language. As all the four skills are likely to be required in the second language, a multi – skill approach has to be adopted in teaching it.

II. Learning the Elements of a Second Language

In learning a new language, the chief problem is not at first that of learning the vocabulary. It is, first, learning the sound system to understand the stream of speech, to hear the contrasting sound elements and to produce them correctly. It is, secondly, learning the grammar of the language. These are the matters that the native speaker as a child has early acquired in the way of habit, they must become automatic habits of the learners of a new language. Of course, these things cannot be learned by themselves. There must be enough vocabulary to build grammatical structures and represent the sound system in actual use. A person has 'learned' a foreign language when he has, *within a limited vocabulary*, mastered the system - when he can understand the stream of speech and can make himself understood; and has made the grammatical structures matters of automatic habit. This degree of mastery of a language can be reached by the learner in a scientific way within about three months. In this brief time the learner will not become an excellent speaker for all occasions.

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But he will have a good accurate foundation upon which to build. And the growth of his control of the vocabulary will then come fast and with increasing ease.

One's mastery of any language (even of one's own native language) is always in two major levels: producing and receiving. These two levels are practically never equal. The 'words' that one can recognize and understand are more than the 'words' one actually uses in speech. In the use of a foreign language the difference between the ability to recognize or understand and the ability to produce or speak is even greater. But the two influence one another and sometimes they cannot be separated also.

Foreign languages are learnt and taught in various ways. Some of these ways are more successful than others. It is hardly possible to discuss them in simple terms. But the operation which may be called 'teaching a foreign language' can be divided into two parts. The first is the teaching *in* that language; the second is the teaching of a language by teaching *about* that language.

Teaching a language by teaching in the language enables the pupils to experience the language in new situations and combinations. And it also introduces new grammatical patterns and new words. As the aim of the second language teaching is to teach the student some or all of the basic language skills, an effective way of acquiring these skills is by using them in real situations and by relating certain activities, persons or subjects with the language.

There is another way of teaching a second language - it is teaching the language. To talk about English nouns and how many kinds there are; to describe the position of English pronouns; to discuss English pronunciations; all these are observations *about* the languages concerned. They have an essential place in the *total* scheme of teaching the language. But frequently these and similar statements about languages are offered as if they represent the best ways of teaching the language skills.

Teaching about a language is not a very difficult task to carry out. The use of a grammar book turns a 'skill' subject. Here the teacher can teach facts instead of skills. But an hour spent in teaching of grammar of sounds or of words is not an hour of teaching the language. Teaching a language means joining two essentials: first the learner must 'experience' the language in meaningful ways, and secondly, the learner must himself have the opportunity of performing, of trying out his own skills, of making mistakes and being corrected. These are the essentials of language learning. And teaching about a language does not contribute directly to either of them.

This does not mean that a learner need not know anything about the language he is learning. But in too many instances, teaching about the language is allowed to take the place of teaching the language. This seems to be a sign of a double confusion which often affects the teaching of second languages. In the first place, there is confusion about whether the particular pupil should be learning about the language at all, and if so to what extent and for what purposes, knowledge about a language may be useful in itself. Some teachers give knowledge about the language they are teaching because such knowledge is necessary for passing examinations. Others teach about a language because the book prescribed in the curriculum teaches about the language. All these might be considered non–linguistic reasons for teaching about a language. They go beyond the language–teaching task.

In the second place, there is more fundamental confusion about how language skills are actually acquired. Some teachers think that anyone learning to perform in a second language must know about that language. They say that some degree of grammar teaching is essential if the job of teaching is to be done properly. Of course, there is a role in the total educational process for learning about a language but it is not true that practical performance depends upon it. Knowledge about a language is valuable for advanced learners who already have a wide and firm command of the language concerned. But in the beginning stages, and especially in large classes, it rarely helps; and it often stands in the way of learning practical language skills.

III. Teaching Language Skills

Language teaching is not a simple process of pouring 'language' into empty vessels. All effective language teaching is a process of helping students move on from the level of context–governed performance. It is not enough to have the pupils perform well in doing simple, context–bound exercises. They must be helped to use the language in non–classroom situations, communicating with a variety of speakers in a variety of contexts. Language teaching is, thus, a cooperative enterprise in which teachers help their students internalise the system of language they are learning. In the acquisition of the basic skills of the language, the learner begins with the comprehension skills rather that their communication counterparts.

The L1 learner for the initial two years is more of a listener than speaker. It is a gradual and time consuming process of being exposed fully to the language. It takes time before the first set of grammatical well structured utterances come out from the learner. The built–in–language learning mechanism of the child helps him to abstract the basic rules of language and formulate a mini grammar which he goes on refining and expanding in course of his interaction with the native language. This acquisition is not an intellectual activity but the development of some innate skill that every human being is endowed with. The initial

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phase thus magnificently contributes to the construction of competence. "A child who has learned a language has developed an internal representation of a system of rules that determines how the sentences are to be formed, used and understood. He has done this on the basis of what we may call primary linguistic data" (Chomsky 110).

As an L2 learner, the learner is required to be fully exposed, in whatever ways possible, to the language. It is, in fact, a great mistake to initiate a learner at first to the letters of the alphabet and to reading much before he is initiated rather satisfactorily to speech. Ages may witness the same mistake over and again because for the less resourceful teacher writing is a safe resort. The maintenance of the psychological sequence of the four skills in second language teaching - as a child masters the L1 in a sequence of listening, speaking, and later reading and writing - is a basic requirement.

The correct usage of a language depends upon the mastery of the interlinked group of skills, of which listening is the basic one. The sequence of the skills of the language is usually referred to a *psychological sequence* because of the manner in which the first language learner acquires the language. But in present day second language teaching, the psychological sequence of the four skills is seldom followed. With the result of that, practically speaking, no language learning takes place. As a result of confusing the skills, first of all, the process of internalisation doesn't take place the way it should. A continuous *audio –lingual acquaintance* with the language in concrete situations alone enables the learner to master the art of recognition of the language systems. When the learner is expected to read and write without the audio–lingual recognition ability, he is left with a base for language activity. It doesn't cope with learning laws and requirements of the mind. Such a construction without the necessary base is bound to be fictitious. The longer the audio – lingual training - the training of the ears provided - the better the language acquisition going to be. There is no sequential option for a second language teaching programme other than the psychological sequence of listening, speaking, reading and writing which is necessary for the proper internalization of language.

In language learning / teaching, differentiating between the four main skills would be a useful analysis, and would mark a step forward in understanding the complex process of language learning. It brings to the fore the difference between *responding* to language and *using* language. The difference is that in responding the learner puts meanings to symbols, spoken or written, but in using language the speaker or writer has to produce both meanings and symbols to express them. It is better that the easier tasks of listening and reading predominate at first over the more complex tasks of speaking and writing. An important point in language learning, what has to be 'expressed' should be 'given' first, so that both meanings and symbols need not be produced by the learner. Consequently, stories, information, the content of a passage in a text-book may be the best materials for the early stage of speaking and writing and may be given and then discussed and explained before the learner attempts to 'express' it in the new symbols.

The skill of producing ideas in the new language is a specialized one because the ideas have to be produced immediately clothed in the new language, they must not be 'translated'. So the pupils have to be trained to think in the new language. Here, the learner has to carry out two processes, two different mental activities, to think the thoughts and to clothe the thoughts in symbols that will cause the listener to think approximately the same thoughts. But the learner may not have those thoughts clearly enough in his mind for expression at all much less in a new language. He, therefore, stumbles in speaking, or hesitates. It has to be remembered that ideas and other forms of thought are very often less completely and less clearly formulated than is normally believed. The deduction to be drawn from this is that before demanding 'free' expression in speech from language–learning pupils, they should be prepared for this free expression by questioning them, by getting them to discuss their ideas, to explain them and 'work over' them in such a way that when they come to make their statements of speech these will have been 'developed', classified and completed by the oral preparation.

IV. Communication -The Term Explained

Encyclopedia Britanicca defines communication as "the process of making common or sharing of something between two or among several persons or groups of people" (132). "Someone who is communicating is able to talk to people easily" (Collins 148). In Widdowson's opinion communicative abilities are "those skills which are defined with reference to the manner and mode in which the system is realized in use….Communicative abilities embrace linguistic skills but not the reverse" (67). The purpose of teaching the language is to enable the students to interact freely with others, to understand what others wish to communicate, and to be able to convey to others what they wish to communicate. Unless one comprehend what is said by the other person, he cannot communicate through speech. This is one of the problems of an Indian speaker of English when he comes in the midst of native speakers. This could happen when he makes a visit to a foreign country or when he has to attend a conference, or when he has to go abroad for purposes of higher studies. His difficulty may be that he cannot make himself understood, or that he cannot understand what is being said to him. Teaching the comprehension of the spoken language is also, therefore, important.

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The three key points of natural acquisition of communication skill are; exposure to the language, interaction with other people, and the need to communicate. One often finds that learners from the regional medium often feel insecure when it comes to interaction and here only a network of supportive personal relationships can help them to engage their whole selves in the learning experience. The learners' attitude towards English, and those who speak English, either facilitates or hinders the natural process. These factors determine the amount of input that reaches the internal learning mechanism. The main input in the 'conscious' process comes through organized instruction in the classroom, where the teacher plans and pre-selects the items which she asks the learners to internalize. Depending on the problems that have been identified in the students, the teacher can start at any point. Littlewood calls this the 'pre – communicative stage', where "the main focus is on the forms of the language and the potential meanings they can convey in future communication, rather than actual messages being exchanged with another person" (71).

At the next stage, which is called 'communicative language practice', the learners can convey new information to each other for a communicative purpose. Since they are still protected from the full demands of communication outside the class room, this can be considered as structured information. Then the learners can be taken to the 'authentic communication' stage where they have the opportunity for spontaneous communication by conversing.

a) *Linguistic Competence and Communicative Competence (Competence vs Performance)*

Language is a means of communication and when it is used for the same, one should have a knowledge of the linguistic forms of the language he uses and also a knowledge of when, how, and to whom it is appropriate to use them. In other words, the users of a language, to make communication effective, require a knowledge of the social meaning of the linguistic forms and their functions. If the user of a language has only the knowledge of language rules and forms, then he is said to have 'linguistic competence', and if he also has the knowledge that enables him to communicate functionally and interactively then he is said to have 'communicative competence'. Communicative competence is that aspect of one's competence that enables him to convey and interpret massages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts. "Communicative competence is relative, not absolute, and depends on the cooperation of all the participants involved" (Savignon 65). It is an interpersonal construct that can only be examined by means of the overt performance of two or more individuals in the process of negotiating meaning. It is an ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use these sentences and to whom. Communicative competence includes (a) knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language (b) knowledge of the 'rules of speaking' (c) knowing how to use and respond to different types of speech acts as requests, apologies, thanks etc. and (d) knowing how to use the language appropriately.

V. Remedial Measures Suggested for the Teachers of English

The purpose of this paper was to establish the need for an effort that would bring about a qualitative improvement in the teaching and learning processes of English language. As most of the learners of English encounter difficulties in these areas of conversational and spoken English, it is the responsibility of the teachers to contribute towards the patterns of communication in English classroom and make an impact on the students' use of language for learning and also second language acquisition. The paper has put forward a few recommendations which might produce constructive results in an ESL classroom situation. Instead of basing themselves on preconceived notions and set theories, the English teachers should be prepared to make feasible modifications to build up learner confidence which will enable them to communicate fluently and effectively in English. Apart from an innate desire to do things in a better way, what should guide them in the teaching of English is their constant responsiveness to student needs and pedagogic practice. Communicative teaching of English that relies on classroom interaction can be better brought about if the teachers are ever alive and sensitive to what is happening inside and outside the classrooms. Such responsiveness to the needs and aspirations of the students will make them more flexible in their approach to change the methodology of teaching English with a view to developing communicative competence among their learners. New ideas and perceptions of what is desirable and how it might be made practical in an English classroom should be sought regularly. This input will serve as stimulus to effect changes in the competency level of their learners and also help to discard many myths, enabling the teachers to become more attuned to reality.

'Streaming' can be adopted as a way of teaching-learning in English classrooms. The communicative teaching of English can be brought about effectively by putting together students of same language ability. In this way, the slow learners will be freed of any inhibitions that might otherwise be brought about by the presence of bright learners in their midst who would hog all the limelight. At the same time, bright learners, through challenging tasks, can be motivated to

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excel themselves. The grouping of learners according to the ability levels will help them to learn at their own pace and also result in more effective classroom management. Also, target levels can be determined for different ability groups depending on their skills and abilities. This will require the teacher to go in search of materials, methodology and testing procedures suited to learners of varied ability levels.

The desire to attune themselves to reality should enable the teachers to discard the myth of discrete-skills-approach in favour of a more integrated and task based approach to language teaching. An ideal English language learning curriculum should consist of a series of tasks – problem solving activities – to be performed by students whereby they will get an opportunity to use and enhance their skills in listening, speaking, reading comprehension and writing. Such a task based approach will enable the teachers to view classroom materials as procedural activities which call for various kinds of language deployment by the learners. The flexibility of approach with regard to materials will also be reflected in the preparation of teaching-learning materials. Apart from using the textbooks readily available in the market, teachers should also supplement them with their own exercises and go on to prepare their materials and bring out textbooks more suitable to classroom teaching.

Non-dependence on pedagogic practice will, thus, empower the teacher to change gears not only with regard to methodology and materials but also with regard to the testing of their learners. In order to bring about greater connectivity between pedagogic practice and testing, the whole process of evaluation can be internalised and the teachers themselves can be given freedom to test their students.

A 'team approach' to teaching can also be adopted; the staff members of the department should work together in a collaborative and participatory manner. A system can be evolved whereby the department members meet once a week for what can be considered as 'project discussion' and that can also form a slot in the time-table of the department. This will help the teachers to come together and influence the process of change on the strength of their classroom experience, observation of pedagogic outcomes and also through their mutual sharing. Teachers can, thus, be not just recipients of change but also contributors to it.

It is heartening to note that there has been a growing awareness, during the last few years, that the teaching of English in its traditional form which is based on the notion that 'you first learn a language, and having learnt it, then use it', is no longer relevant. The notion that is gaining prominence now is that 'you can only learn a language by actually using it'. Recent curricular revisions of many universities and schools have included a Spoken English component in the syllabus. However, even though Spoken English forms a part of the syllabus now, learners are not able to acquire speaking skills as there is no test of Spoken English. Or if at all it is assessed, the test is through the written mode - which is as good as not testing at all. And what is not tested won't be taken seriously, either by the teacher or the learners. Once tests in Spoken English that meet the needs of learners are designed and offered, automatically the washback effect could be seen on teaching Spoken English. As N.S. Prabhu would call it, this would be "ELT Engineering" (35). The paper concludes with the hope that; some day schools will begin to teach English at a suitable early standard; the teachers in schools will have good knowledge of English as spoken by educated elites, they will know what they want to teach and how to teach; the school and university entrance examinations will not test the learners' knowledge of prescribed texts, but their ability to speak and write correctly and to listen and read with accurate understanding and all these will help in infusing and practising communication effectively in the English classrooms.

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