

FOSTERING THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ESL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to make our students literate in international discourse, to make them compete successfully on a national and international level, the demand to teach communicative English is increasing more and more in Bangladesh. Recognizing the fact that English communication abilities can only be formed when students are taught English by applying the Communicative Language Teaching method in English, most of our educational institutions are following the trend, but with little or no success, since students are failing to develop an acceptable level of English proficiency for communication.

This paper begins by exploring a number of theories of communicative competence. It investigates the condition of communicative language teaching in the universities of Bangladesh and discusses the need for teachers' training. It further reviews a survey conducted with participants currently enrolled in the different departments of Brac University, to find some of the major problems encountered by them in ESL classes which affect their speaking abilities. Based on the findings, different ways of promoting oral communication in language classes have been recommended.

Key words: Communicative language teaching (CLT), communicative competence, interaction, fluency, accuracy, anxiety.

I. INTRODUCTION

Due to the growing effect of globalization, the international communication in English is becoming widespread. To meet the challenges of this modern trend, most of the non-English speaking countries around the world are becoming more receptive to English language. Same scenario prevails in most of the Asian countries and certainly in Bangladesh. To cater to this requirement of making our students literate in national and international communication, the demand for communicative competence in English is increasing at a fast pace.

In Bangladesh, English is taught as a subject in primary and secondary schools. However, a high percentage of students fail to achieve a satisfactory level of competence in English despite learning the target language for 12 years. This situation further exacerbates when students to come attend private universities where the medium of teaching is English, unlike some Bangladeshi educational institutions where teachers attempt to teach English with the help of their mother tongue "Bangla". The

main objective of English language instruction at these private universities is to enable the students to communicate competently in English in academic, social and professional situations. Any other method would compromise the nuances and subtleties of the language that are key in the comprehension process. Our students need to understand teaching instructions, read and comprehend textbooks and engage in writing essays, reports, research papers and various assignments. However, it is sad to perceive that most of the students are far from achieving these objectives. The foremost problem we come across is making them converse in the target language. We need to deal with issues like: Why is it so difficult for our students to acquire an acceptable level of English speaking proficiency? What types of classroom teaching and practices can be employed to promote the development of their communication skills? How can we promote the practice of communicative competence in our classrooms? This paper attempts to identify the pitfalls and recommend solutions. I have explored some of the predicaments surrounding the practice of communicative English at the university level in

Bangladesh and suggested different approaches that can be undertaken to overcome this impediment.

II. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN OUR CLASSROOMS WITH A FOCUS ON "COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE"

In coining the word "communicative competence" Hymes (1972) meant the knowledge of language rules, and of how these rules are used to understand and produce appropriate language in a variety of sociocultural settings. Hymes as a sociolinguist, was concerned with the social and cultural knowledge which speakers need in order to understand and use linguistic forms. His view, therefore, encompassed not only knowledge but also ability to put that knowledge into use in communication (Hedge 2000).

Communicative competence can therefore be defined as the ability to express, interpret and negotiate meanings. For natural communicative situation, students must be given opportunities in the classroom to interact with the teacher and peers by discussion, asking questions, and conversing without restraint.

Following the definition of communicative competence in the Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards et al. 1985), we can focus on the following components to make our students acquire communicative skills in the target language:

- knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the language
- knowledge of the rules of speaking (knowing how to begin and end conversations, what topics may be talked about in different types of speech events, which address forms should be used with different persons in different situations, etc.)
- knowing how to use and respond to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations
- knowing how to use language appropriately

As the need for communicative competence increased worldwide, a major departure from other methods took place and the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) established its priority.

Following the trend, for the past few years, educational institutions in Bangladesh have adopted CLT to avoid the constrictions presented by the Grammar-Translation method - the method which failed in making our students competent in acquiring the second language.

The movement toward CLT brought a change in English pedagogy with a focus on interactive teaching, to foster students' communicative skills. Although the term "communicative competence", applies to both oral and written communications, my focus is more on the oral communicative skills of our university students. The reason is, over the semesters, through rigorous hard work, most of our students survive the reading and writing coursework/assignments, but they fail to achieve a considerable level of speaking proficiency in the target language. As language teachers we are persistently striving to make our students communicate effectively in English but without any significant outcome.

III. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN ESL CLASSES

One of the requirements to develop communicative language ability of students is to provide them with an interactive learning environment in which they can associate and interact with each other in the target language, and practice communicative activities. Students have to be able to exhibit that they can use language to communicate effectively in a variety of situations, using a range of skills. The teacher's role is therefore to encourage communicative language use in classrooms and to do that they themselves need to understand it.

As private universities are burgeoning in our country, we are in great need of trained language teachers. Most universities employ literature teachers to teach language. Problems arise when teachers from literature background, neither equipped with sufficient knowledge of linguistic theories and theories of second language acquisition, nor having undergone any sort of practical teachers training are teaching language classes. Although in theory teachers are trying to keep up with developments in CLT, when it comes to practice, most classroom teachers do not fully understand what is involved in teaching a language communicatively. Therefore, they fail to understand real issues involving communicative activities in language classrooms. Instead of following the

curriculum which has been designed in universities for the development of communicative competence, many teachers continue to lecture on the usage of words, phrases and grammar. Materials are not used in the class appropriately to facilitate communication between students and texts so they can internalize the language system. The fact remains that teachers could not get out of the system of teaching deductively even when provided with appropriate materials.

A. Problems perceived by teachers:

Richards (1997) claims that the teaching process is fixed within a set of culturally bound beliefs about teachers, methods of teaching and students. Accordingly, the teachers and students undertake their responsibilities. In Bangladesh, like some of the other Asian countries, teaching is viewed as a teacher-controlled and directed process where the teacher is assumed to know everything. Students are required to absorb all the knowledge delivered by the teacher anticipating that in due time they will be able to reproduce everything they had learned from their teachers. As the teacher is viewed to be the authority figure who directs the class and does most of the talking, students do not feel the need to speak.

It is difficult to deal with our students who tend to be reserved and hesitate to articulate their opinions in class discussions. They do not speak in class and prefer not to ask any questions. For clarification they prefer to ask their peers rather than the teacher. To be able to communicate, our students need to interact. Making students interact in the language classroom is a problem faced by all teachers as students are unable to bring themselves to participate actively in class.

B. Problems perceived by students:

I conducted a small survey with 100 participants who are currently enrolled in the different departments of Brac University, e.g. (Business Management, Computer Science, Economics, English and Humanities). Students were asked to complete a questionnaire identifying 8 problem areas encountered in ESL classes. Also, they had to write about their problems in a sequential order. The revelation was not any different from what most of the language teachers experience in their second language classes, but the scheme was undertaken to prioritize the 2 most vital problems

of our students which affected their speaking abilities. According to the data acquired, following are the main impediments:

1. 91% students - fluency/accuracy
2. 87% students - feeling of anxiety

1. Accuracy vs. Fluency:

S1: "I tried but it didn't work. I spend a lot of time thinking what to speak because I'm afraid of making mistakes."

S2: "I don't have confidence because I don't want to speak wrong English".

S3: "Sometimes we avoid it as we can't reach accuracy level."

S4: "I hesitate if I have to talk in front of the whole class, because I might be wrong."

These are few of the answers I received when I asked some of the students the reason for not speaking English fluently. One of the major concerns of our students is the focus on accuracy more than on fluency, and since they cannot speak fluently, they do not speak at all.

As majority of our students who reach the university level in Bangladesh have been taught in Grammar-Translation method, they are only conscious about getting the linguistic details correctly. They apply the grammatical rules in constructing sentences before producing them and become frustrated for not being able to speak fluently. Which one should be given priority – fluency or accuracy?

According to Bailey (2003), "*accuracy* is the extent to which students' speeches matches what people actually say when they use the target language. *Fluency* is the extent to which speakers use the language quickly and confidently, with few hesitations or unnatural pauses, false starts, word searches, etc." She further conveys that in language lessons – at the beginning and intermediate levels - learners must be given opportunities to develop both their fluency and their accuracy. Since it has been established that both accuracy and fluency are essential in language learning and as they are interdependent, they should be taught concurrently.

In encouraging students to speak, we need to create a safe learning environment where students can practice their English. If we want to our students to be fluent, we must minimize error correction. We should reassure them that mistakes are inevitable in

a learning process. Attempting to speak fluently is more important than producing grammatically accurate sentences at the basic level and bringing the conversation to an end. At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact of accuracy and condemn grammar, because communication cannot be acquired eliminating grammatical rules and structures. Once our students understand the linguistic forms, they can be given fluency practice. The concept of teaching grammar can be seen as one aspect of communication and we need to emphasize the acquisition of structures and accuracy in our classrooms, alongside a communicative approach. Again, the debate over which language aspect should be taught first also depends on the type of lesson/activity we want our students to accomplish.

2. Inhibition and feeling of incompetence leading to anxiety:

“One of the major obstacles learners have to overcome in learning to speak is the anxiety generated over the risk of blurting things out that are wrong, stupid, or incomprehensible (Brown 1994).”

A student from the Brac university English department claims,

“In the class if all the students are from Bangla medium, they have the same level of speaking ability. I find it more comfortable and easy to communicate in English. But if the class is a blend of English and Bangla medium students, then I feel shy as I do not want to speak wrong English in front of them and make a fool of myself.”

This predicament is voiced by most of our students. Mixed ability classes contribute toward their inhibitions, which is a major cause of anxiety. At our university, we face this problem quite often. In a class where some of the students (having studied in English medium schools) have clear native like speaking ability, the remaining students feel disadvantaged. They are reluctant to be judged by other students. So instead of speaking the wrong thing and being laughed at, they find it easy not to speak.

Their inhibition and reticence leads them to be anxious in class. This apprehension is attributed to low proficiency in the target language because of which they cannot express their ideas clearly. Other

major factors influencing their willingness to respond are their level of self-confidence and their readiness to take risks. Because of lack of confidence in addition to fear of making mistakes, they feel uncomfortable to raise their hands to answer questions in class. Sometimes even when they know the answer they keep quiet or they repeat the answer to themselves first before offering it to the whole class. A number of students affirmed that it would be easier for them to answer if the teacher nominated them to answer. Some of the students reported,

S1: “I translate and then edit it in my mind, and sometimes I get so confused that I decide not to speak.”

S2: “Most of the time I don’t get a chance to answer a question, because other proficient students are quicker in responding than I am.”

A group of students once approached their teacher outside the class regarding a lesson they had just completed in class. Instead of being receptive to their concern, she seemed annoyed and said,

“Don’t be intimidated by the good students. They understand everything and yet they ask questions for further clarification. How come you people never ask questions in class when you don’t understand a thing?”

An off-putting remark like that was extremely unjustified. It made them feel incompetent and certainly they would never again approach this teacher with their concerns in future. How can these students ever have the confidence and speak in class?

Students’ fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated is induced by teachers themselves. With unrealistic expectations, teachers tend to inhibit student participation because students remain silent rather than not measuring up to teachers’ expectations. Most of the teachers do not encourage students to speak in class; allow them to ask questions or to give their opinions and to question teacher’s authority - a notion culturally ingrained in them.

In our universities, language classes are supposed to follow the trend of communicative teaching methods but unfortunately most of the teachers are not prepared to do so. Teachers prefer to conduct language classes in lecture mode. Students sit in classes to absorb while the teacher articulates. In

the pretext of being efficient teachers, some of them continue their lectures most of the class time in order to establish themselves to be dynamic teachers. So there is hardly any student talk and the entire class falls in a silent mode if the teacher is quiet. Even question-answer sessions are characterized by silence if the teacher does not allocate a proficient student to answer, because of which the main lot remain unfocused in the classroom.

Another contributing factor affecting student's ability to speak in class is not fully understanding the teachers' questions. This issue can be addressed by rephrasing and reinstating the questions to bring it to the level of the students. Sometimes, in spite of having good questioning techniques, teachers still fail to ease students' anxiety in answering questions. A successful strategy that teachers can use is to get students to write down their answers before answering verbally in front of the entire class. In this way the students get time to think about the question to formulate their answers and feel less pressurized to produce a spontaneous answer. Students could be also allowed to check their answers with their peers before answering. Again, teachers should be flexible in accepting variations in students' answers. We should not impose on them that every time they have to come up with perfect answers. The major challenge for language teachers lies in getting students to interact orally in the target language, to create environment where every one can speak in English without inhibitions.

IV. PROMOTING ORAL COMMUNICATION IN CLASS

A. Interaction in classrooms:

The deficiency of communicative competence in English appears to result from the lack of interaction in classrooms where English is not used as means of communication. One of the fundamental ways of making our students speak the target language is providing them with interactive language instruction. It involves the teacher and learners engaging in activities that create conditions which in turn fosters language use. Research shows that in a regular classroom, a teacher does approximately 50 to 80 percent of the talking. We as language teachers should be aware of how much we talk in class so our students get more chance to talk in whatever class time we have.

Communicative activities mean getting students to actually do things with language, and it is the doing that should form the main focus of each session (Harmer 1998). The teacher is the initiator of interaction. That does not mean that the teacher is always in control of the discourse, but she or he is responsible for providing opportunities for interaction in which learners control the topics and discourse (Brown 1994). Learners speaking ability increases, when they themselves have control of the discourse topics and the discourse. Rivers (1997) suggests, "real interaction in the classroom requires the teacher to step out of the limelight, to cede a full role to the student in developing and carrying through activities, to accept all kinds of opinions, and be tolerant of errors the student makes while attempting to communicate." To create effective interactions, teachers ideally also know when it is appropriate to talk about language and when it is appropriate to let learners use language.

B. Classroom setup:

Focusing on the way for making learners use language in the classroom, we need to focus on the classroom setup which is crucial to an interactive classroom. If desks are in neat, orderly rows with everyone facing the board and the teacher, interactions are more difficult to initiate. As Brown (1994) claims, "Students are members of a team and should be able to see one another, to talk to one another (in English!), and should not made to feel like they just walked into a military formation." An ideal setup of a class which promotes interaction, involves arranging the desks in a semicircle. Desks arranged in small groups or chairs arranged around a large table (which accommodates all students) are equally practical. This type of arrangement is most feasible in getting students involved in group and pair work.

C. Integration of skills:

As listening and speaking are interconnected we cannot dispel its significance from our classrooms. Rivers (1997) states, in an interactive classroom there should be "much listening to authentic materials" without any discouragement to students' spoken response. The listening will be purposeful as students prepare to use what they have heard in some way. "Authentic materials" include teacher talk, audio, videotapes, and for reading - newspapers, magazines etc. If possible, native speakers could be brought into the classroom to

interact with the students. News from media can be also taped and played to the students to develop their listening followed by speaking skills.

Pair work and group work should be encouraged. It helps student to interact with one another. Not only through speaking activities but also through reading and writing activities we can initiate oral communication in class. While doing writing assignments, students can be put into groups to brainstorm for ideas and discuss with their group members before producing the work either in group or individually. It is particularly helpful for reticent students in exchanging their views with their peers as they get considerable amount of speaking practice without coming in the limelight.

In addition to writing assignments, reading text can also generate a lot of discussion in class. While conducting a reading workshop with a group of students, I tried out different techniques to incorporate all the language skills. Though the main objective of the workshop was to enable students to read successfully by following reading strategies, they had enough opportunities to practice their writing and speaking skills as well. By sitting in groups of four, they were required to read a novel and after reading for 8 to 10 minutes (2/3 pages) they were instructed to stop and describe in their own words the events and ideas they had read to their group members. They could also voice their personal opinions if desired. Each member in the group took turn in explaining. In addition, they chose scenes from chapters as they read along and acted them out. This not only helped the readers concentrate and absorb what they read, but gave them an opportunity to speak and discuss with interest and enjoyment.

In real life the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are generally integrated rather than occurring in isolation. When taking part in a conversation, for example, we both listen and speak; when we fill in a form we read and write, and taking notes from a lecture involves listening and writing. Often the use of one skill leads on naturally from another. In language classrooms, as in real life, skills in a lesson should be integrated — with one activity leading on to another. We need to build the communicative competence of our students around the four skills.

D. Learners' autonomy:

As teachers we need to be conscientious in teaching our students to communicate, but at the same time students need to take responsibility for their own learning, developing autonomy. They need to be aware of themselves as learners. They should consciously reflect on language structures and progression. We cannot teach students to become autonomous, but we can certainly create the atmosphere and conditions in which they will feel encouraged to develop the autonomy. Students can learn language actively by performing tasks in class, by interacting with fellow learners and the teacher, asking questions, listening regularly to the language and by speaking. A successful language class is a collaborative effort between a learner and a teacher.

V. CONCLUSION

In an age of information technology ushered by the Internet, more than ever our students need to become familiar with English language in order to compete successfully on a national and international level. Oral communicative abilities can only be formed when students learn English in English, and this can be adopted to a great extent by Communicative Language Teaching with an emphasis on grammar. Teaching grammar can be considered to be one of the aspects of communication and teachers need to focus on the acquisition of structures and accuracy in classrooms to some extent, alongside a communicative approach. At the same time students should be provided with opportunities to develop both their fluency and accuracy. They cannot develop fluency if we are constantly interrupting students to correct their oral errors. We must provide students with fluency building practice and make them realize that making mistakes is a natural part of learning the target language. We need to focus on the fact that doing error correction recurrently amplify the anxiety level of students and discourage them from communication.

Since classrooms have been considered to be the main arenas for the students which provide them with the opportunity to use the target language, we need to make our classrooms open to communication where they can practice productive and receptive skills without inhibition and fear of rejection.

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