



Interactive Approach to Achieve Communication in Language Classroom

Hemant Kumar Jha

Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University Gurgaon

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Abstract

This paper intends to explore the significance of the term communicative approach with reference to the teaching of English language to the speakers of other language. The focus of the article is to establish relationship between interaction and communication in the context of teaching English in a language classroom where the teachers are usually in the habit of using manipulative drills in the form of prescribed textbook based exercises. The article also attempts to explore different problems and possible solutions to practice interactive methods in the language classroom.

Keywords: communicative approach, interaction, speakers of other language, manipulative drills etc.

1. Introduction

The term ‘communication’ has a long tradition in linguistics and language teaching. In almost every book of *Introduction to Linguistics*, language has been defined “as a system of vocal symbols by means of which communication is achieved by the members of same culture, society or speech community.” (Bloomfield 1933). Hence, it is an accepted fact that language is a means of communication, and the goal of teaching English in the language classroom is to enable the learners to communicate in the target language. However, this approach goes completely against the audio-lingual approach to teaching foreign languages. The audio-lingual approach of teaching language assumes the fact that language learning is almost like that of habit formation. “The audio-lingual approach depends on mimicry, memorization, and over learning of set phrases and patterns.” The audio-lingual approach of language teaching and learning became popular during and after the Second World War. This approach was also supported by structural linguists and behavioural psychologists of the time. However, it was in 1959, when Chomsky (1959) denounced the behavioural structural model of language and

language acquisition coupled with the pioneering work of more cognitively oriented psycholinguists such as Miller (1967) who 'foreshadowed the decline in popularity of the audio lingual approach.'

One of the first American methodologists Prator (1965) pointed out that the audio-lingual approach had been a failure in getting language learners to communicate effectively in the target language. Prator suggested that language teachers must motivate their students to move from manipulation to communication by devising drills and exercises 'which are more demanding than the usual audio lingual procedures.' The manipulative form of language teaching, which was based on 'listening and repeating', or 'substitution' and 'transformation', was predominantly more manipulative. Prator pointed out that 'students are not able to communicate unless they themselves find their own words and structures they need to express their opinions or reactions.'

It was at about the same time, the anthropological linguist Hymes (1962) coined the phrase 'communicative competence.' Hymes carefully distinguished communicative competence from linguistic knowledge and competence by articulating the fact that 'social and psychological factors govern a speaker's ability to use a language appropriately in specific contexts.' The pioneering work of Hymes was followed by the empirical research of Savignon (1972) and others who demonstrated that "language classes doing communicative oriented activities achieve higher levels of performance than classes using audio lingual approach based on predominantly manipulative exercises."

Recently a large number of curriculum designers of English Language Teaching (ELT) courses and practising teachers have come out with some very interesting work on the 'communicative approach to language teaching.' These are the theoretical models constructed by applied linguistics. However, more practical and useful works are available by the practising teachers of English who have successfully developed and employed communicative activities in their language classrooms (Abott 1980; Joiner 1977; and Olsen 1977). Thus, it is evident that communication has been associated with linguistics and language teaching since 1930s.

However, the key component of communication is interaction. The term interaction has a strong association with language teaching. A related term of interaction is interaction analysis, a system of teacher observation, which was first developed by Flanders and his colleagues in 1960. Briefly, interaction analysis proposes that 'all the activities of a language teacher in a language classroom should be recorded by trained observers during regular class room sessions.' As per the information collected by trained observers from the different classrooms, following are the interaction categories which are subdivided into four broad groups:

A. Indirect Teacher Talk

1. Teacher accepts students feelings
2. Teacher praises or encourages students
3. Teacher accepts/ uses ideas of students
4. Teacher asks questions

B. Direct Teacher Talk

1. Teacher lectures or gives information
2. Teacher gives information
3. Teacher criticizes students or justifies his/ her own authority

C. Student talk

1. Student responds to the teacher
 2. Student initiates talk
- D. Other
1. Silence or confusion

This model of Flanders was further elaborated by Markowitz (1971) who expanded ten categories of the Flanders's system into twenty when he developed 'Foreign Language Interaction System popularly known as FLINT system.' Under 'Indirect Teacher Talk', Markowitz added the category 'joking' to 'the categories under Indirect Teacher Talk' and added "correcting without rejection" and "directing pattern drill" under the 'Direct Teacher Talk' category. However, the greatest expansion came under the other category, where Markowitz converted Flanders system, silence or confusion, into five:

- Silence (no verbal interaction)
- Silence (where teacher uses audio-visuals)
- Confusion (work oriented)
- Confusion (non-work oriented)
- Laughter

Markowitz further specified that use of the native language by the teacher or the student in the classroom must be combined with some other behaviour categories, like that of non-verbal communication, as per the requirement in the class.

Another explanation of interaction analysis has been offered by Bailey (1975, 1977) in which she has criticised the models of Interaction analysis by Flanders and FLINT. She has pointed out that "these systems are unreliable when scored properly, and they take too long for observers to master. She proposes a rather simpler system, called the "Timely interval Recording System". In this system no more than five or six objective categories may be used. For example,

1. Teacher asks questions
2. Teacher lectures
3. Student responds
4. Teacher praises
5. Teacher uses students' native language

Broadly, interaction with learners has been useful in describing classroom situation; however, the amount of interaction must be maintained at the optimum level. Following are the categories based on the teacher student interaction in the classroom:

- If the teacher talks most of the time and student participation is minimal then the classroom is *teacher-dominated*.
- If the teacher gives students opportunity to participate but usually initiates and controls classroom activities, then the classroom is *teacher-centred*.
- If the teacher organized activities in such a manner that students can initiate and control much of the interaction, then the classroom is student centred and the teacher is only a *facilitator*.

Since, in a language classroom where the objective of language teaching is to improve learner's communication, the teacher must attempt to increase 'student-centred activities' and

should 'reduce teacher-centred activities' in the classroom. The teacher domination activity must be brought to the minimum level. The role of a teacher in a language classroom is like that of a 'facilitator', only then the goal of improving and achieving communication is possible.

1.1 How to improve classroom interaction to enhance communication

It is quite evident that to enhance interaction in the classroom, the amount of student interaction has to be encouraged. But the more difficult question which remains to be answered is, 'what method should he apply to achieve communicative competence in the classroom?'

If the main objective of language classroom is to achieve communication among students, then the following four areas need to be taken into consideration. These four areas which affect the classroom interaction have been pointed out by Bailey and Celce- Murcia (1979), and the language teacher needs to focus on.

- Social Climate
- Variety in learning activities
- Opportunity for Student Participation
- Feedback and correction

1.2 Social Climate

In the context of language teaching, social class holds an important significance. Social context is the most basic and fundamental of all the areas. Without a good social climate, everything else that we discuss becomes meaningless. In order to improve communication in the language class, the most important thing is that teacher along with students must feel very comfortable and relaxed in the class room. If students and teachers are not at ease and don't feel good about their language class, there will be no marked improvement in the level of communication. It is the responsibility of the English Teacher to establish proper atmosphere so that students can relate to the teacher and also among one another in a positive and constructive manner. The teacher in the Language Teaching Class must get along with his students, and should enjoy his teaching in the classroom. A teacher must have the right temperament to maintain the required level of atmosphere in the classroom. He should develop the right techniques to promote a good social climate.

There are a few tips to improve social climate in the classroom. First of all, the language teacher must try to remember name of each and every student in the classroom as soon as possible. A student appreciates if the teacher calls him by his correct name. He wants to be called by his own name preferably by his first name. Talking to a student by taking his first name creates a difference in the classroom. In order to create good social climate in the classroom, the teacher must allow students to become acquainted with one another as soon as possible. It is a sad situation to see that even at the end of the year; students do not know the names of one another. Along with names, the students and teacher both should try to have some background information about one another. Information like where does each student come from? What language does he speak at home? What are his interest areas? etc should be known to the teacher. Such information can later be utilized while preparing exercises to be done in the class room. This is rather more useful than the information based on some

unknown social climate and unknown characters mentioned in the prescribed textbooks. If the situation demands, native language of the students can be utilized to explain language exercises for the purpose of achieving optimum level of comprehension.

Other things which help an effective teacher create a good social climate is to try to be fair and making the class relaxed and enjoyable. Being fair means paying equal attention to all the students and not showing any favouritism or bias towards anybody else. Some teachers have an instinct to do this, and others have to build this talent and will have to work on systematically. They must see that shy students in the class should be included in the interactive activities, and aggressive students should not dominate other students in the class. Second thing to take care is that the atmosphere in the language classroom must be relaxed and enjoyable. The teacher must develop an intelligent sense of humour. Telling jokes, playing word games or some other kinds of entertainment activities can be used as a part of regular activities to motivate learners. The teacher should frequently encourage such activities among students in the classroom. However, care should be taken that nobody's feeling should be hurt. 'Humour, smiles and laughter' are some of the essential elements which help enhance a good social climate in the language class.

1.3 Variety in Learning Activities

By improving social dynamics, a language teacher helps in creating a good social climate in the classroom. This is a form of internal motivation, since the teacher motivates students by providing a positive feeling among students in the classroom. However, introducing variety into learning activities also helps in the language classroom. If the teacher is able to use 'variety in each lesson to make the class more enjoyable and less routine,' he will be able to make the class more enjoyable, and this will also motivate students to work hard and learn the language.

Variety can be introduced on many levels. There is no doubt that there should be an effective use of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW), however, the teacher should move from manipulative drilling activities to communicative activities. This can include a number of activities like role play, Just A Minute (JAM), Skills Competition, Speech Contest etc. In developing communicative atmosphere in the classroom, the teacher should use a variety of stimuli like using multi-media, playing tape recorder, showing a set of pictures, cards, screening a movie clip, showing documentary etc. Clocks, calendars, mirrors etc can also be integrated into the classroom activities in a meaningful manner. Sometimes even using a song or a game to reinforce language learning in the classroom may be even more effective.

One very effective method to improve communication among students is to expose them to a variety of native speakers. This can be done with the help of video recordings; movie screening or even by inviting native speakers to the real classroom situation. This will give the learners a feel of the real language, and then they will realize what is the ideal form of their target language. Even during holidays, students can be given assignment to meet and record interviews of native speakers which can later be integrated into the classroom activities. One more method of having exposure with the native speakers is to talk on phone, or now-a-days talking on SKYPE where there is a face to face interaction. Watching TV programmes on the different TV English Channels can also be one very effective method to improve listening and comprehension.

Including variety in the language learning classroom holds a key to maintain interactive atmosphere in the classroom. Communication and interaction depends upon teacher's initiative and effectiveness to introduce variety as an instrument of learning.

1.4 Opportunity for Student Participation

Social climate and variety encourages communication in the classroom. But these are the indirect motivation techniques which set the tone and provide information. There are other direct methods to facilitate ample opportunity for student participation. The teacher in the classroom should try to minimise his own talking time, and at the same time he should have very little domination in the classroom. On the other hand, the teacher should allow students to talk as much as possible on the different related topics viz syllabus, assignment, grading, examination etc. The teacher can also encourage students to work in pairs or groups whenever and wherever he finds it useful. The teacher is a 'resource person' rather than 'a dominant figure' in the classroom.

Communicative activities take place when the teacher lets students work in the pairs and groups whenever useful. In pairs students can conduct interviews, panel discussions, role plays or some other kind of activities. In groups they can do the work of 'problem solving, value clarification, group discussions' etc. However, such activities can work only when they are carefully planned. To see that these things are enacted successfully, there should be an adequate time period given to complete the task.

While these things are being enacted in the classroom, the teacher should try to keep himself in the back ground. He should avoid taking centre stage. Let the students play the role of the teacher, they can raise questions, and some other students can give answers to those questions etc. However, the teacher should play the role of a judge, time keeper, score writer etc. He should try to control himself from taking the dominant position, or the role of a traditional teacher. An effective teacher should ask himself a question about how much time he should give to students and how much time he should keep for himself. Long (1977) has suggested a number of methods to 'minimize teacher's talking time and to maximize students' talking time in the classroom.'

1.5 Feedback and Correction

'Feedback and correction' is an important tool in the language teaching classroom. Without feedback and correction, the learner will never come to know about the 'areas where they need improvement'. However, correction is a little tricky issue which need to be dealt with carefully.

The best correction comes from 'peer-correction and self-correction', and they are much more effective than the correction done by the teachers to the students. Hence a good teacher will not directly point out mistakes done by students rather he will always be in search of some methods through which students will develop a habit to detect their own errors, and will make their own corrections. In fact, self correction is the best method of improving language, and thus communication. The teacher in the class should minimise his role in pointing out errors and doing corrections of his students.

An intelligent teacher can devise his own methods to encourage students to go for self-correction. However, there are direct and indirect methods to do that. In the indirect method,

the teacher can ask a student, “Would you please repeat this sentence?” For some students this may be ‘a vague statement’, but for some others, this may be a ‘clear cut indication.’ A direct method would be only to repeat that part of error. In addition, there are verbal as well as non-verbal signals which the teacher can utilize in the class room. Schechter (1981) is one among those teachers who says that “non-verbal correction via visual hand signals is more productive and less confusing than verbal signals.”

‘How to do correction in the language classroom’ is a highly subjective matter, however, there are certain guidelines which are applied by the experienced teachers, for example, ‘correcting selectively’. The meaning is to correct only what has been taught and what has not been comprehensible. It is a widely acceptable fact that ‘it is impossible to correct each and everything.’ Besides, feedback is also very important. It is also to be noted that both positive and negative feedback should be given. However, care should be taken so that while giving feedback, nobody should feel ridiculed, and no aggressive student should dominate the class.

1.6 Problems and Solutions

In spite of all this theoretical discussion, the problem is that the teacher most of the time goes to the ‘manipulative drill’ exercises in the classroom. They prefer to use textbooks containing ‘predominantly manipulative drills.’ The question still remains to be answered, and needs further discussion to understand and solve the question, “Is it advisable to use text book based exercises in the classroom to improve communication? Can the textbook based structure and vocabulary exercises be used to develop real life communication?” However, there are no definite answers for these questions, but the experienced and professional language teachers have been continuously experimenting in this area to find out ways and means to improve communication among students in the language class room. But one thing that language teachers all over the world have agreed with that of Savignon’s findings (1972) that “language classes doing communicative activities achieve higher levels of performance than classes using audio lingual materials.”

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