Fluency Acquisition In English Oral Communication:: Influential Teaching Methods

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Abstract:

Efficient skill of communication has become a passport to success during these last decades. People are judged according to how well they master the skills of communication in various aspects of their lives: professional, social, and private. The tremendous advances in technology have undoubtedly influenced the nature of communication in this modern life, giving it new dimensions. In such a world, second language learning is often equated with oral communication of this language. Oral communication in today's world gained more importance and this is why the major mission of successful second language teaching institutions is to offer pedagogy centred on "supporting the students attain advanced communication skills". The ultimate objective of an efficient educational programme is to send back its learners with enough skills to manage oral communication fluently in the language they have chosen to learn: this is the central motivation and concern of the present paper.

Key words: Communication, Pedagogy, Motivation etc.,

1. Introduction

These are the times where people continuously move to different places over the world where contact and communication between individuals is increasingly being made possible; the need to find and learn new languages has become an imperative. Being bilingual or multilingual has become a need. In such context language professionals are becoming more eager to find efficient ways to make the endeavour of learning a new language both interesting and rewarding.

Second language pedagogy is a dynamic process that requires continuity in reassessing language teaching in different educational institutions. The evolution of second language pedagogy is a reflection of advances in understanding the basics like nature of language, knowledge and the process of language learning. This paper is on the teaching of English as a second language in the context of oral communicative competence. To a major extent, language development is an individual accomplishment. But this private process takes place in the public context i.e, of the classroom.

In any language classroom there seems to be a specific general pattern of teaching/learning – some activities and attitudes appear to be more common and customary than others and these affect the result of the classroom experience. Though many students leave the university with adequate linguistic competence, majority of them couldn't communicate naturally and fluently. This paper examines the inadequacies present behind developing oral fluency of second language (English) learners and influential practices to make the learning of English a more enjoyable and rewarding experience.

2. Over view of the English as Second Language Teaching - Methodologies:

Foreign language teaching methodology is concerned with finding out the most suitable and effective methods of teaching. This paper attempts to examine the influential communication classroom teaching approaches. This attempts to clear the confusion about the clear distinction of approach, method and technique which sometimes leads to misunderstanding and misuse.

An approach is a set of assumptions, ideas about the nature of language and language learning. It is questioning what language is and the process which people acquire or learn. These assumptions influence the

kind of approach to be taken. This approach gives birth to methods. A method is the stage where theory and practice meet. Decisions related to what skills are to be taught, content and the order of presentation are taken in this stage. But selection of teaching method is dependent on the age group of learners, previous learning, their regional/cultural/language background, time period, material etc.

The teaching techniques depend on the awareness and proficiency of the teachers. To accomplish different aims different techniques may be used at different levels of the session. Application of techniques change based on the learners' age, motivation, sex.

There are number of approaches in foreign language pedagogy that have similarities close to CLT. Two of the many approaches namely Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) and Task based Teaching (TBT) are discussed in detail along with additional oral class proposed. Yet it is interesting to refer to the other approaches to have a more general picture of the evolution approaches to English Language teaching and an attempt to understand the influential rational.

3. The Lexical Approach:

The lexical approach was first introduced by Willis, D. (1990) and developed by Lewis, M. (1993)49. Basically, it claims "language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multi-word prefabricated chunks" (Lewis, 1997:3)50. These chunks, archetypical or prefabricated utterances consist of readymade language that is used as such (without much thinking) when needed. Instead of teaching a grammatical structure in isolation, the lexical approach uses these new structures when they appear in conversational expressions. For example:

Are you sure?

Is it true?

Will you do it?

This approach is understood as a serious attempt at revaluation for the individual teacher as it develops many of the fundamental principles advanced by proponents of communicative approaches. The most important difference is the increased understanding of the nature of lexis in naturally occurring language, and its potential contribution to language pedagogy. The lexical approach does not offer a sound theory of learning to explain how students develop complex communicative skills via lexis. This is what Harmer, J., argues when he writes;

we need to ask in what way a lexical approach differs from other accounts of language teaching since thereare as yet no sets of procedures to exemplify an approach to language learning.

4. The Competency-based Approach:

CBE *refers to an educational movement that advocates defining educational goals in terms of precise measurable descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors students should possess at the end of a course study*. The analysis made before implementing CBA and allows language professionals to:

)   Set the tasks that need to be performed outside the classroom

)   Convert these tasks into components of functional competencies

)   Evaluate these competencies in terms of performance or behaviour

)   Identify performance and make it assessable

4.1 CBA and foreign language teaching:

When CBA is adapted to foreign language teaching/ learning it is commonly referred to as CBLT (competency based language teaching). This approach is based on the functional and interactional aspects of the target language.

…designers of CBLT competencies can accurately predict the vocabulary and structures likely to be encountered in those particular situations that are central to the life of the learner and can state these in ways that can be used to organize teaching / learning units.

In order to achieve this, CBLT assumes that language can be functionally analyzed and divided into functions made possible to be mastered as such and used in communication. Assessment in CBA takes different forms. These range from the oral interview to the written test, the group activity or the actual observation of the trainee or learner. Inspite of the fact that CBA has attracted many proponents all over the world mainly because of its accountability for performance and behaviour, it is criticized as lacking a sound theory of how to develop competencies in different socio educational contexts.

5. The Natural Approach:

English language teaching/learning which found an important echo in the profession is the natural approach (Terrell, T. 198254, Krashen 1983)55. This approach matches with successful second language acquisition. Basically, the Natural approach is set on the following hypotheses:

5.1 The acquisition vs learning hypothesis: The term language acquisition usually refers to the process where a language is acquired as a result of natural and largely random exposure to language. The term learning usually involves the conscious study of language. There are two types of language development:

a- language is picked-up during prolonged contact with people using it.

b- Language is learnt within a framework of deliberate and organized instruction.

5.2 The natural order hypothesis: Grammatical structures are not learned at random but rather follow a certain order which is predictable. However, the hypothesis does not specify whether the order relates to language production or comprehension.

5.2.1 The input hypothesis: Krashen explains that input consists of the language that the learner is exposed to, and that language acquisition takes place when this input is a little beyond the learners' present competence. Thus for successful acquisition to be possible, the new input (which Krashen refers to as i+1) should be beyond the learners' present input.

5.2.2 The affective filter hypothesis: The natural approach gives a predominant role to the language that learners are exposed to (input), and explains that such input is very likely to be beneficial for them when/if their affective state is positive. The affective filter is variable as it is subject to emotional factors and states related to motivation, self-esteem, anxiety, etc

6. Communicative language teaching

Communicative language teaching or the communicative approach to language Teaching or as some researchers refer to it, began in Britain in the 1960's as a replacement of the earlier situational language teaching. CLT is best seen as an approach rather than a method. Broadly speaking, the approach is based on the following theories:

A- Theory of language: language is communication, it is a tool to 'accomplish' social and communication functions.

B- Theory of learning: activities which involve communication promote learning, and embarking in meaningful tasks promotes /facilitates learning.

Although a lot has been written on the communicative dimension of language, little is known on the learning theory (ies) behind CLT. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the underlying basic learning principles at the basis of this approach are:

)   Activities that involve communication promote learning

)   Activities that involve the real language in communication promote learning

)   Activities which use meaningful language promote learning.

CLT 'welcomes' any activity which helps promote real communication in the classroom, e.g. conversation sessions, role plays, games. Deciding which activity students will enroll in is not simply a matter of teachers" preferences, but rather a careful step towards the organisation of classroom communication work. In fact, it is often the communication task that will dictate which activity the teacher ends up proposing.

6.1. Arguments supporting group work

One activity which is quite recommended by CLT proponents (such as Long, M. & Porter, P., 1985)[63] is group work. In doing so methodologists set a series of arguments in favor of this type of activity:

- Group work increases chances for communication
- Group work allows the use of natural language: Learners can adopt various roles which make them use the language appropriate to those new positions they will rarely take in teacher- fronted classes.
- Group work helps create a positive affective atmosphere: a positive psychological attitude is needed for successful achievement in the TL. Group work helps a great deal here.
- Group work may help individualize instruction: At a psychological level, extrovert who are self-confident for whom language learning is a positive challenging adventure group work is a better place
- Group work creates competition between groups
- Group work helps build a close learner/teacher relationship: In foreign language pedagogy the teacher does not play one single role in his classroom, keeps changing positions, and attitudes as work progresses. This physical proximity is most likely bound to break the distance and helps creating a psychological proximity.
- Group work helps break routine
- Group work increases motivation

1- Demanding on teachers, it requires a good deal of expertise and 'know how'.

2- Difficult to determine its teaching procedure because of the variety of activities used.

3- Difficult to evaluate.

7. Task-based language teaching

Task-based language teaching is an approach which uses the "task" as the central teaching unit of language planning and instruction. It is considered as a logical continuation of communicative language teaching since it is based on similar learning principles:

1- Activities that involve communication promote learning.

2- Activities that involve real language in communicative tasks promote learning.

3- Activities which use meaningful language promote learning.

Adepts of TBLT (e.g. Prabhu 1987[64]) basically claim that *engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of learning process than form focus activities, and hence ultimately provides better opportunities for language learning to take place.*

Approaches to language syllabuses have generally been concerned with the provision of content to be taught, be it structural or notional-functional. They thus include functions, lexis, and grammar and so on. In doing so, they fail to present language as a living instrument, and language learning as a creative, dynamic process which entails unpredictability.

Basically, a task-based syllabus is built around the argument that language develops when students are given something to do through the target language, i.e. a task to perform.

…once the tasks are actually worked upon during learning … a communicative task may well facilitate the learning of something new or uncover a problem which has to be worked on in a subsequent learning task. Conversely, a learning task can generate genuine communication between learners or between learners and the teacher.

One major assumption of task-based syllabus is that both learning tasks and communication tasks trigger communication processes. Taking the above argument into account what follows will concentrate on "communication tasks" as the present work is concerned with the development of fluency in oral communication.

7.1 The communication task

A task is a cooperative, purposeful, goal oriented endeavour which may be communicatively and cognitively graded and selected. It is hoped at this stage that the concepts of task and activity have been made "distinguishable", without having been divorced from each other.

Communication tasks derive from an analysis of the actual tasks which a person may undertake when communicating through the target language, indeed, communicating through any language.

Building classroom communication around communication tasks in fact means no more than reflecting what takes place in natural, spontaneous exchanges in the outside world. Communication tasks, is the means through which oral fluency in communication may develop. They should be regarded as ways to trigger communication and as learning channels, and this is because:

) Communication tasks give students a purpose to communicate with each other and with the teacher through the target language

) They give them something to achieve through communication

) They encourage them to use all their communicative capacities and it may be worth looking closer at the nature of communication tasks that are likely to promote communication in the classroom and students' levels of oral fluency; attempting to discuss the following issues:

1. What are the criteria for designing or selecting communication tasks that help develop oral fluency?
2. What are the characteristics of effective communication tasks?

7.2 The task and its position in communication methodology

Research in methodology related to target language communication has often been centred on classroom activities and grouping techniques as means of developing learners' communication skills. Adding to this, grouping techniques such as pairs and small groups have been strongly encouraged as more interaction and negotiation of input have been found to take place in reduced groups than in lockstep classes.

In fact, tasks are central to classroom interaction and, to a greater extent than activities or grouping techniques, determine its evolution or breakdown. The organization of communication activities needs to be regarded as a setting or framework in which a task will be achieved through the target language. The following framework may help illustrate the place of the three components of classroom communicative interaction-grouping technique, activity and task- and the relationship between them.

7.3 Designing and selecting effective communication tasks

Many researches such as Candlin addressed the above questions and consequently suggested various design criteria.

1- Communication tasks should enable students to experience the foreign language as a tool of communication

2- They should match both the communicative and cognitive capacities of individual students

3- They should be based on students' communicative needs in the target language

4- They should put communicative and cognitive demands on students

5- They should promote negotiation of interaction among participants, thus producing comprehensible input

6- They should develop interdependence among classroom members

It may be worth observing that not all tasks have a communicative value for students; tasks that are believed to enhance students' fluency in oral communication are:

) Motivating in the sense that they develop interest in the students and make them enjoy what they are undertaking.

⟩ Meaning-focused: to make students use language as a means to reach an end and be concerned by both meaning, expression and interpretation

⟩ Flexible, in that they allow freedom of expression and do not inhibit learners' own pace and preferred styles of working.

⟩ Goal –oriented, i.e. require students to solve a problem, cope with new information and so on.

⟩ Self-confidence building in the sense that they allow students to become aware of their increasing communicative capacities.

⟩ Multi-leveled so as to enable students develop communication skills and strategies needed for the undertaking of tasks as well as genuine communication processes required for everyday use.

⟩ Socio-culturally oriented so as to expose the learners to different models of target language use.

CONCLUSION

It need not be expressed that the task design criteria listed above are not meant to be exhaustive. These can be extended and developed further to suit different educational situations. The features set above are the basic ones meant for the development of oral fluency through a task-based approach. Based on the ideology put forward in this paper, suggestions of the way communication tasks may be designed and used in the context this work proposed under additional oral communication class.

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