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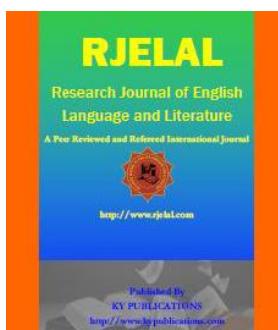
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ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCE OF INDIAN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The process of globalization and the flow of free trade across the physical boundaries have opened up enormous opportunities for the educated youth, especially in the technical streams to work in any part of the world and work in large multinational corporations with handsome pay packages. However, the essential pre-requisite to avail such opportunities is to have extremely good communication skills, especially in English, coupled with technical skill. This is where the role of English teacher attains paramount importance. Communicative language teaching is the latest and proven approach to improve the communicative competence of students. An attempt has been made in this paper to examine the importance of English language proficiency, and the effectiveness of communicative approach in fulfilling the pedagogic needs of English language teaching.

Key words: communicative competence, English language teaching, communicative language teaching, language teaching approaches

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of proficiency in English Language communication, in the Indian context, can be gauged by a few unmistakable indicators. Firstly, the educated and the elite in our society would like to send their children invariably to Schools of repute in English medium teaching. They want their children to be fluent in English Language communication, and also to grow up and graduate from Institutions of Higher Education, where admissions are difficult for students who pursue their studies in regional medium. In fact, the ultimate aim of such parents is to see that their children pursue higher education in Foreign Universities and probably work abroad or get into the coveted All India Services or giant Multinational Corporations.

Secondly, all the Government communication particularly central government,

judiciary and all business houses transact their business communication mainly through English language. Unless the student who graduates or completes University education is proficient in English language communication, getting good career opening is that much more difficult, in spite of being good in his or her own technical or professional knowledge. It is a common knowledge that the Premier Educational Institutions in India are all elite and the language competency of the students graduating out of such Universities is very high. It has become all the more imperative ever since India has opened up its economy and became part of the globalization process; the opportunities for Indians have opened up enormously. And if a student has to get international marketability, there is no choice but to be extremely good in English language communication.

Thirdly, there are certain professions that are practiced only in English language. For example, software and IT related profession. Unless one is good in his communicative ability, there is no way that one can aspire for good openings in software and IT related professions. If we take the example of Andhra Pradesh, every year more than 2.8 lakh students graduate out of various disciplines in engineering stream. And it is also an acknowledged fact that not more than 5% of them are actually employable by good Corporate Companies. One of the reasons frequently cited by big Corporate Companies is that the communication skills of majority of the students are way below their expectation level.

The fourth reason is the esteem-value attached to those who are fluent in English. The fact that the British ruled India for such a long time and their language being English is ingrained into the Indian psyche that those who speak English are the high and mighty, and all respect and adoration is reserved for those who speak English. The aspiration of the common man to speak English is so strong that its manifestation is seen in myriad ways in everyday life. If I may take a very common example, we all must have encountered a scene where even an uneducated person, after a couple of intoxicating drinks would reel off a few English words which he knows and tries to communicate in broken English rather than his mother tongue. This is an evidence of the latent aspiration of people to communicate in English and thereby make a social statement.

Finally, one of the essential ingredients required to be tagged as a 'smart' person is to have good communicative skills, which naturally includes the body language. Communication and expressiveness is the basis of most of the fine arts, and of course creative endeavours.

Communicative Language Teaching: It is an accepted fact that language ability is a skill. It needs to be acquired. And acquisition of this skill is dependent on exposure and practice. Just as any extent of studying the lessons on swimming would not make one a good swimmer unless one actually jumps into the pool and practices hard, acquiring language skill is also similar. Any amount of hard

work on vocabulary, structures and grammar would not make one fluent in English language, unless one starts using the language in dynamic situations. This is the reason why English medium schools insist on their students interacting within the school premises only in English language. This gives the students a habit of interacting in English from early stages and helps them in overcoming inhibitions.

If we ask the teachers of English in our country as to which method of teaching they employ in the class room, the answer of the overwhelming majority would be "communicative" method. And if we ask such teachers to explain what they mean by communicative method, there would be widely varying explanations. However, it is commonly accepted that communicative competence means the ability to use language for a range of different purposes and functions. It also means the ability to vary the use of language for different settings and situations. It also perhaps includes the ability to maintain conversation in spite of limitations in one's language knowledge. Traditional lesson formats used to focus on mastery of items of grammar, and practice through memorization of dialogue and drills. The communicative methods include pair work, role plays, group activities and project work.

With the communicative approach, roles of teachers and students have acquired new dimensions. Students have to participate in the classroom activities on a more co-operative approach. Teachers assume the role of facilitators and monitors. It is known as a move from the teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction. Greater attention is focused on the learning process rather than the products that learners produce. Communicative approach is to view learning as a continual process rather than preparing the students for the year-end examination.

Communicative competence generally includes the ability to use language for a range of different purposes and functions. It is also the ability to vary the use of language according to the setting and the participants, and also the ability to understand and participate in conversations, interviews, discussions, negotiations, preparation of reports and participate in narratives.

In recent years, language learning has been viewed from a very different perspective. Language learning is possible through interaction between the learner and teacher or between the learner and the users of the language or among the learners themselves. It is also possible through purposeful interaction whereby the learner can negotiate meaning through collaboration. As the learner grapples with the language; he arrives at an understanding of the meaning. The learner would also experiment with different ways of expressing what he would like to convey. The learner would develop his communicative competence by paying attention to the language he hears. Feedback is also a very important aspect of learning a language.

The type of classroom activities in communicative approach also implies new roles in the classroom for teachers and learners. Learners are expected to participate in classroom activities that are based on a cooperative rather than individualistic approach to learning. Students have to become comfortable with listening to their peers in group work or pair work tasks, rather than relying on the teacher for a model. They are expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning. And teachers have to assume the role of a facilitator and monitor. Rather than being a model for correct speech and writing and one with the primary responsibility of making students produce plenty of error-free sentences, the teacher has to develop a different view of learners' errors and of her/his own role in facilitating language learning.

In planning language courses within a communicative approach, grammar is no longer the starting point. Rather than simply specifying the grammar and vocabulary, learners need to master a syllabus that is designed to identify the aspects of language use in order to be able to develop the learner's communicative competence. Such a syllabus should consider the purposes for which the learner wishes to acquire the language, such as usage of English for business purposes or in the hotel industry etc. Such syllabus should also take into consideration the setting in which the learners would like to use the language, like in an office, or in a super market etc. It should also consider the

communicative events that the learner is likely to take part, for example academic situations, professional situation etc. It should take care of the skills of discourse, like rhetorical skills where the learner may have to be involved in storytelling or to give an effective business presentation. And finally, the grammatical content and the vocabulary needed by the learner.

The communicative approach to teaching also requires a rethinking of classroom teaching methodology. The learners learn a language through the process of communicating in it. Communication that is meaningful to the learner provides a better opportunity for learning than through the conventional grammar-based approach. Thus, the basic principles of communicative approach can be said to include (a) actual communication should be the focus of language learning (b) the learners should continually experiment with what they learn (c) errors committed in the process of experimentation are to be tolerated (d) the learners should have adequate opportunities to develop fluency and accuracy (e) learners should be encouraged to integrate the skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing.

In order to apply these principles in the classroom, new classroom techniques and activities are needed and new roles for teachers and learners in the classroom. Instead of making use of activities that demanded accurate repetition and memorisation of sentences and grammatical patterns, activities that require learners to negotiate meaning and to interact meaningfully.

The most important goal of communicative approach is to develop fluency and accuracy in language use. Fluency means natural usage of language when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence. Fluency is developed by creating classroom activities in which students must negotiate meaning, use communication strategies, correct misunderstandings, and work to avoid communication breakdowns.

Teachers should be encouraged to use the class room activities in such a way that the learner

develops fluency and accuracy simultaneously. Accuracy work could either come before or after fluency work. For example, based on students' performance on a fluency task, the teacher could assign accuracy work to deal with grammatical or pronunciation problems the teacher observes. In doing fluency tasks, the focus is on getting meanings across using any available communicative resources. This often involves dependence on vocabulary and communication strategies, and there is little motivation to use accurate grammar or pronunciation. Fluency work thus requires extra attention on the part of the teacher in terms of preparing students for a fluency task, or follow-up activities that provide feedback on language use.

The dynamics of classrooms also need change. Instead of a predominance of teacher-centric teaching, teachers are encouraged to make greater use of small-group work. Pair and group activities give learners greater opportunities to use the language and to develop fluency. This way they can learn from hearing the language used by other members of the group. They will produce a greater amount of language than they would use in teacher-fronted activities. Their motivational level is likely to increase. They will have the chance to develop fluency.

Real communication should be the most important characteristic of communicative approach. To the extent possible, there should be authentic relationship between class room activities and the real world experiences. In other words, classroom activities should mirror the real world as authentically as possible. Since language is a tool of communication, methods and materials should concentrate on the content of the message.

The textbooks and other teaching materials have to reflect the authenticity; reading passages should look more like magazine articles and textbooks to be designed to a similar standard of production as real world sources such as popular magazines.

There is no single or agreed upon set of practices that are associated with the communicative approach. The important practices in communicative language teaching can be said to contain:

1. Students should be engaged in interactive and meaningful communication.
2. There should be effective learning tasks and exercises that would provide opportunities for the students to understand the meaning, expand their language base, learn how language is put to use, and take part in meaningful interpersonal exchange.
3. Students are to be encouraged to participate in meaningful communication so that they negotiate content that is relevant, purposeful, interesting, and engaging.
4. Language learning should be facilitated by activities that involve inductive learning i.e. the students understand the underlying rules of language use and organization.
5. Language learning is a slow and gradual process that involves creative use of language by trial and error. Although errors are a normal product of learning, the ultimate goal of learning is to be able to use the new language fluently and accurately.
6. It should be appreciated that individual learners develop their own routes to language learning, progress at different rates, and have different needs and motivations for language learning.
7. The role of the teacher in the language classroom should be that of a facilitator, who creates a classroom climate conducive to language learning and provides opportunities for students to use and practice the language and to reflect on language use and language learning.
8. The classroom should be like a community where learners learn through collaboration and sharing.

Conclusion

The problem with this kind of language teaching is that it is an approach and not a method. The difference between an approach and a method is that methods are held to be fixed teaching systems with prescribed techniques and practices, whereas approaches represent language teaching philosophies that can be interpreted and applied in

a variety of different ways in the classroom. Methods are fixed teaching systems whereas approaches form the theory and leave the teaching system to the creativity and innovation of the teacher. This fact, although may be regarded as advantageous by imaginative teachers, creates a problem in the hands of incompetent teachers. However, it appears that communicative approach is best suited, at the current moment and under the circumstances obtaining in our country, to improve the communicative competence of the students.

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