

The Efficacy of Communicative English Language Teaching: An Appraisal

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Abstract: English language teaching does not operate in isolation from other aspects of life and society. Various factors like social, economic, political, educational and pragmatic needs etc. determine the methodology and organization of a course. The objectives of an English language course include the reason for learning the language, and also determine the level of proficiency, knowledge, skill, and the kinds of ability that are seen as the end product of the course. This situation gave rise to the concept of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Social, pragmatic and economic factors combined to focus on the aim of learning and teaching English language for specific uses. The recent trend of teaching 'Communicative English', 'Business English', 'Entrepreneur's English' etc., are all consequences of the realization that language use for specific purposes and in specific contexts has characteristic features which need to be learnt for effective communication. The objectives of such courses are derived from a detached and systematic study of the actual needs of prospective learners and users. Since the advent of Communicative Language Teaching and the belief that language is best learnt when it is being used to communicate messages, the 'communicative task' has assumed prominence as a unit of organization in both syllabus and materials design as this is better equipped to promote successful second language training. This paper aims to analyze the issues discussed above in the context of the present day situation.

Keywords: Communicative English, Learner's needs, Communicative Tasks, Fluency, Coherence.

Applied linguistics has brought about a change in the way one looks at English language and English language teaching, and hence in the way language learning is conceived of. Learning English language now essentially means learning how to communicate through that language, both in the spoken and the written mode. Also, the recognition of the existence of language varieties has helped to determine the issue of which variety shall be taught or learnt. 'Awareness of the existence of functional varieties and choices within one language: style, register, domain, and formality for example, have helped focus on relevant aspects of a language course. English for specific purposes, (English for Science and Technology, Business English, English for Law, English for Academic purposes etc.), for instance, is a partial application of the principle of recognizing the importance of variation within a language' (Datta 9). Applied linguistics provides a principled procedure for making decisions at various levels of a language related task (e.g. teaching a language like English). Such principled procedures require a conceptual framework for their systematic operation, which can only be provided by theories and models; and so theory building is an essential part of "doing" applied

linguistics notes Datta (12). Applied linguistic theory thus contains all thinking about language teaching, teaching methods, and psychological, sociological and philosophical questions underlying these. Theories of linguistics, psychology and psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics have all played a role in the development of language teaching approaches, thus contributing to language teaching theory or theories of applied linguistics in the widest sense. Language teaching does not operate in isolation from other aspects of life and society. The starting point of a language course is its purpose or objectives, the reason why a language course comes into existence. Various factors like social, economic, political, educational, and pragmatic needs etc. determine the objectives. Objectives determine the content of the course, which refers to both the syllabus (the list of topics, concepts, items etc.) and the materials (text books, supplementary and audio-visual teaching materials). Together, objectives and content shape the 'methodology' to be adopted for the course. In order to measure whether the objectives have been achieved, evaluation of the learners has to be carried out. Just as the context of language teaching plays a significant role in determining both methodology and organization, similarly, learning processes, learner and teacher variables and the nature of language itself are factors which influence practices in the classroom, note Roy Chowdhury & Banerjee (23). To put it simply, applied linguistics applies its own theory/theories to a language related practical task, for a feasible solution. Insights and principles derived from other disciplines are organized in a systematic manner (according to the objectives, principles and methodology of applied linguistics), and are "variably" applied to a particular task. The applications are indirect, via models or theories of applied linguistics.

The objectives of an English language course include not only the reason for learning the language but also determine the level of proficiency, knowledge and skill and the kinds of ability that are seen as the end-product of the course, write Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee (28). Should the learners learn to speak and/or read and write a language? To what uses will they put their knowledge or skill? What level of proficiency should they attain? The answers to these questions will determine the objectives of a course. Also, the crucial question is: how are these various demands synthesized, organized and planned? Which methods and techniques should be used? What kind of classroom interaction is to be followed? The objectives for such courses are derived from a detached and systematic study of the actual 'needs' of prospective learners and users, note Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee (29). After the advent of structural linguistics, the aim of English language learners was seen to be the attainment of the spoken skill, especially for ordinary, everyday conversation. Hence the inculcation of a good pronunciation in English became the focus of the language courses. When the threshold level courses for the Council of Europe were being developed during the 1970s, the objective was seen to be the ability of a person to operate effectively in a job situation as well as within the social context, in a country not his own. As a result separate language courses for waiters, shop assistants, air traffic controllers etc. were drawn up. The reasons were pragmatic and economic. In addition, language needed for social interaction was also focused upon,

and the aim was to make a foreigner feel at ease in becoming a part of the social environment. This situation gave rise to the concept of English for specific purposes (ESP) write Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee (29). They go on to explain that here the mastery of the total range of language ability and language use was not the target. During the 1970s, the aim was the development of the ability to communicate through language, or interaction. 'Social, pragmatic and economic factors combined' to focus on 'the aim of learning and teaching English language for specific uses. The recent trend of teaching 'Communicative English', 'Business English', 'Entrepreneur's English' etc., are all consequences of the realization that language use for specific purposes and in specific contexts has characteristic features which need to be learnt for effective communication' (Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee 29). A systematic 'needs analysis' (29) throws up the features that need to be learnt and attained through the courses.

Since the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the belief that language is best learned when it is being used to communicate messages, there has been a change in approach and a shift in emphasis in language studies. Being structurally correct is now considered to be only a part of what is involved in language ability. The communicative approach is more broad-based. It has for its goal not just communication but communicative competence (involving the integration of different language skills). 'It is the 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 ... *appropriately*' (Nagaraj 42). Communication is a highly complex skill, involving far more than the sub-skill of 'being grammatical'. If one considers what is involved in producing a conversational utterance, one notes that apart from being grammatical, the utterance must also be appropriate on many levels at the same time; it must conform to the speaker's aim, to the role relationships between the interactants, to the setting, topic, linguistic contexts, etc. Also, the rapid formulation of utterances which are simultaneously 'right' on several levels is central to the communicative skill (Johnson and Morrow 9-11). Good communication skills are the skills possessed by a user of a language for sending and receiving messages. In language teaching this refers to verbal skills. Fluent speech is that which has the quality of being natural and normal, not forced and artificial. When English is taught/ learnt using the 'communicative approach', the objective usually is to acquire fluency along with accuracy in the target language. It needs to be mentioned that this curriculum is based on a semantically organized syllabus (i.e. it is based on meaning rather than on grammar or structure). What is taught is the language needed in different situations, to express and understand different *functions*. The emphasis is on *appropriacy* of language use. The curriculum teaches language required to perform different *tasks* like getting information, etc. "The prime focus is on the *learner*. The teacher is just a facilitator – a person who 'manages' the environment and the materials which will help the students become autonomous learners" (Nagaraj 44). Also, communicative syllabuses rely on '*authentic*' materials (i.e. materials which have not been produced specifically for teaching the language, as in the *S-O-S* approach), and they

emphasize the *functions* of language rather than the rules, notes Nagaraj (44). In addition, communicative tasks which are set for learners are purposeful and meaningful (i.e. a task can be judged immediately for its success by a learner), and these tasks aim to make learners fluent and accurate in their use of the target language (English). The focus is on building '*inner criteria*' (Nagaraj 46). Nagaraj notes that the realization has come about that the learner is responsible for his/her own learning, and the teacher's job is to help him/her find his/her own way to do it best (46).

What is noteworthy is that this development of communicative language learning or teaching is a move towards an eclectic method and a meaning-based approach from a rigid method and a form-based approach. Also, the shift is from teacher-fronted to learner-centered classes. The syllabus is learner generated and learner centered, and the focus here is to make language learning as independent of teachers as possible. "*Acquisition of language, rather than language 'learning' takes place in this autonomous language learning situation*" (Nagaraj 44). The independent status of the learner is accepted. The importance of group supportiveness as offering a security system for learning is recognized, as also the importance of a relaxed atmosphere which facilitates better learning. Also, the stress is on the importance of peripheral and subconscious *learning* (Nagaraj 46). The role of *play* in learning is highlighted. Errors are recognized as a necessary and systematic part of the learning process, and the resources for correction and self-correction have been greatly expanded. It is recognized that learners need time to work over the input internally and a period of incubation between input and output is considered necessary (46).

The content of an English language course refers to *what* is to be taught. Objectives of English language teaching are achieved through content. Syllabuses are basically organization of content. Objectives and lists of content need to be translated into teaching materials before they can be meaningfully utilized by the teacher and the learner. Since the advent of Communicative Language Teaching and the belief that language is best learnt when it is being used to communicate messages, the 'communicative task' has assumed prominence as a unit of organization in both syllabus and materials design as the task syllabus is better equipped to promote successful second language training, note Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee (32). This is also referred to as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Here 'tasks' are recognized as the '*central component in a language programme*' (32), and a syllabus is organized 'around communicative tasks that learners need to engage in *outside the classroom*' (32). Also, the curricula are *learner-centered*, rather than *language centered*, and so, materials for CLT are usually authentic and task based (33). The tasks should relate to the student's own life as much as possible, as proposed by theories of CLT. According to Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee, some advantages of using 'task-based' materials for language teaching are:

1. Student needs are identified after a needs analysis; and course content and materials are matched to identified student needs.
2. Decisions regarding materials design and methodology are based on

the research findings of classroom-centered language learning. This distinguishes it from other syllabus types and methods, which have little empirical support.

3. Evaluation is based primarily through items that are task-based. Students can now be evaluated on their ability to perform a task according to a certain criterion rather than on their ability to successfully complete a discrete-point test.
4. The use of grammar is not discouraged. Form-focused instruction is allowed, as it can be beneficial within a communicative context (43-44).

The concept of a task or an activity emerges as a convenient tool for practical application of these assumptions. A task is an *activity* in which "the target language is used by the learner for a communicative *purpose* in order to achieve an *outcome*" (44) and evidence of learning is seen in the struggle to learn and not in the actual performance, state Row Chowdhury and Banerjee (44). To put it simply, tasks are in the form of problem-solving activities, whose aim is to bring about in the learner a preoccupation with meaning, saying or doing. Also, a task is a self-reliant activity by the learner, without the teacher intervening. The right kind of task requires a reasonable challenge in it, neither too high nor too low. The ideal task is one where the learner aspires for success and knows s/he can achieve it, notes Nagaraj (91). However, she adds, each task requires an independent effort of the mind, and learners cannot transfer the outcome or the procedures of one mechanically to the other (91). 'The pattern is roughly analogous to that of a lesson in mathematics, where a problem is worked out ... and a similar problem is then set for the learners to work out on their own' (Prabhu). Coming up with appropriate tasks is critical to the CLT process because everything the students do is derived from the task and it is the task that 'generates the language' to be used (Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee 42). The following activities are cited by Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee as examples of typical Communicative tasks or activities:-

1. a) **Dialogues and Role-Play:** These techniques deal with the interactional aspect of speaking, explains Nagaraj (117). Some of the techniques commonly used are cited by Nagaraj (117-121). She states that 'Dialogue Chains' can be used to practice functions of language like greeting, agreeing, disagreeing, asking for information, suggestions. Later, clues can be given to learners and dialogues improvised, with learners trying their own innovations too. For example, places *like a restaurant, or a school library, a karate school, a friend's house, a cinema hall* may be chosen. The situations should be real and plausible, as aspects of appropriacy (i.e. the utterance produced by a speaker which is suitable for the particular situation and audience) and accuracy are taken care of in such activities, notes Nagaraj (117).
1. b) **Role-Play:** is a popular technique used in classes to teach speaking skills, notes Nagaraj (117). She adds that one kind of 'Role-Play' is 'Clued', where linguistic and content clues are provided (118); for instance specific details like *place, people* and the kind of *role play*. Shopping and Shop Lists have great potential

as authentic material. Students willingly get involved in a role-play where one is a shopkeeper and 2-3 students are the customers, provided they have been supplied with the necessary functions and structures to carry out such a task, i.e. sentences like “What would you like?”, “I’ll have ...”, “Anything else?”, and so on. In yet another example, students act out the parts of doctor and patient. Nagaraj also mentions the use of 'Free' 'Role Play' where only the roles or characters are given and learners have to develop the exchange in a suitable situation: or, alternatively, characters are given in a particular situation and learners have to develop the exchange appropriate to it (118). For example: *A manager and a worker in a factory*; or *an emergency operation in the theatre (Three People)*. Since the ability to manipulate language in a social context is an important aspect of communicative competence, 'role play' is included as a part of the activities in communicative materials, notes Nagaraj (45).

- 2) **Questions and answers:** These activities help learners to both answer and ask questions and are known as *information gap activities* (Nagaraj 114). In communicative language teaching the teaching of 'Question forms' would be focused in partner interviews (e.g. partners ask each other questions such as: 'What is your name?' 'Where are you from?' 'Are you married?' 'What are your hobbies and interests?' etc., and then report their findings to a group or the whole class). *Surveys and interviews* are techniques or communicative exercises in which an interviewer or surveyor tries to gather information about a person. Another example is a mingle activity: e.g. Find a student who ... has a birthday in the summer ... is named after a famous person, etc. (Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee 45). This would allow for a task such as the “get to know your classmates” task, which is based on information gathered informally through questions.
- 3) **Mind Engaging Tasks (Problems):** Communicative activities are based on the implicit recognition that a learner learns best when his/her mind is on tasks to be done *in* the language rather than on the language itself, and thus many problem solving activities are a part of the communicative approach notes Nagaraj (45). For example, travel brochures of interesting places are given to groups of 4-5 students. They are to design another brochure of a different place, taking ideas from those provided to them. These 'Problems' are good 'tasks' for making learners speak, for they are engaged in grappling with the problem and they need to use language to solve it.
- 4) **Retrieving Text Order:** This is done through scrambled sentences and scrambled picture techniques; and by doing these activities, learners become aware of discourse features which are distinct from grammatical features. The learner becomes familiar with the use of cohesive devices (*and, or, nevertheless*, etc.), anaphoric pronouns (the boy- he: the dog-it) and semantic clues (use of lexical items, topics, etc) through these activities (Nagaraj 45).

- 5) **Opinions, Experiences, Dreams, Ideas and suggestions:** When opinions are asked for on various topics or situations, a lot of discussion can be generated, and learners will use language to communicate, states Nagaraj (119). Also, learners can be encouraged to relate their experiences as this is a step towards mastering communication skills. An example of this is a query like 'What did you do on Sunday?' or 'How did you fare in your final exams?' Further, encouraging learners to talk about their dreams and ambitions is an 'open ended' activity that can lead to a lot of speaking (Nagaraj 120). Learners may also be given ideas and topics for discussion, like 'How I would make things better', or 'How can I contribute towards improving the lot of street children' etc. What is noteworthy is that 'Group Work/ Pair Work' forms an important part of any communicative activity; for peer interaction is an effective means of acquiring some language features which are not available in a formal teacher-fronted class (Nagaraj 45).

Thus, in the Communicative approach, techniques associated with language teaching have undergone a radical change. Also, in this approach, learning a language is looked upon as a process of "creative" construction involving trial and error (Roy Chowdhury & Banerjee 36). In keeping with these changes, the following features come to be associated with the communicative approach: 1) teaching of language *use* (rather than linguistic rules), 2) use of authentic materials, 3) focus on 'situation' and its various aspects, 4) use of 'task' or activity based materials, 5) focus on "meaningful" language use, getting something 'done' through language, 6) use of role play and dialogues, 7) creating conditions for learning, 8) learners' response not controlled but open-ended, 9) errors considered a part of language learning, 10) focus on fluency and communication rather than on strict grammatical accuracy (Roy Chowdhury & Banerjee 36).

As Read notes 'The integrating of skills in the language classroom can be defined ... as a series of activities or tasks which use any combination of four skills- Listening (L), Speaking(S), Reading(R), Writing (W) - in a continuous and related sequence' (72). To improve reading skills of learners Dorothy Watson developed the '*ERRQ*' technique (Estimate, Read, Respond, Question) in 1985. First, the learners estimate what the text will be like by skimming or scanning. Then they read the text and respond to it through questions and tasks. Finally, they question things about the text itself or their response to the text. Also, the technique of '*Literary Sociograms*' developed by Johnson and Louis (1985), depicts the characters in the story and their inter-relationship, and helps readers to get a better insight into the text.

The most demanding skill of all is writing, which has to be deliberately cultivated. All writing aims at clear and efficient communication (Nagaraj 134). Anne Raimes states that the following sub-skills are necessary to produce a coherent, effective and communicative piece of writing: syntax; grammar; mechanics (handwriting, spelling, punctuation, etc.); organization (paragraphs, cohesion & unity); word

choice; contents (relevance, clarity, originality, logic); purpose; the writing process; audience (readers) (6). As Nagaraj states, for learners, the writing process can begin with brainstorming sessions for getting ideas (146). She adds that it is necessary to find out, through discussions and criticism sessions, if the ideas are relevant, original, clear, logical, interesting (146). Finally, practice and revision through the writing and correction of rough drafts is essential for perfecting one's writing skills.

In the present day context, emphasis needs to be given to develop good communication skills in English to enable individuals to deliver their ideas clearly, effectively and confidently in a fluent manner. 'By making it possible for students to use language in real situations, by creating a high level of interest in the language, by diversifying the input, by activating their thinking and feeling through English, we can initiate a self-teaching or autonomous learning process. When this process has got going, our students should be able to tackle general *and* specific problems without any great difficulty' (Bagchi 1985). This is the quintessential aim of Communicative Language Teaching. If an individual is technically efficient and knowledgeable but lacking in communicative skills, it is a drawback. The absence of good communication skills leads to poor presentation and communication of views. In the present times, good communication skills in English must be greatly emphasized for sustainable development. This paper has attempted to analyze how CLT has addressed this issue and contributed significantly to the evolution of an English Language Teaching curriculum for the modern times.

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