International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Communication Skills and its Role in Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Good communication skills can help teachers to better understand their students and to build positive relationships with them. In addition, good communication skills can help teachers resolve conflicts and manage their classrooms effectively. Teachers need to be able to communicate with students and parents.

Key Words: - Competence, Communicative Knowledge, Pedagogy

Introduction

The basic assumption of this thesis, that the development of communication skills is, and should be, the prime aim of teaching learning a language (here specifically English), is one that is by now fairly well established in modern pedagogy. However, linguistics which, as a modern science, informs much of the methodology of language teaching has not spoken with one voice as to what exactly communication implies and involves and what similarly, skill in communication means. It can indeed be said that in the literature on linguistics and language teaching, there have been very few attempts to define communication skills as such compared with the attempts to restate terms such as language skills, communicative competence, communicative ability, communicative knowledge and performance. Moreover, these terms have been used with varying shades of meaning. They have also, it may be said, appeared more as refinements of earlier propositions which had shortcomings or failed to include perspectives on the language teaching procedures in vogue, than by impulsions to an exercise in clear orientation of the terms involved in their significance. Even so, it will be useful, indeed it becomes necessary, to take a view of them so as not only to get a perspective on the problem involved, but to get at the insights to help formulate a precise, and at the same time comprehensive definition with a sound basis in the perceptions of linguistics, psychology, sociology and pedagogy.

Terms in Second Language Pedagogy: Background

Language teaching has always been drawn by two opposing points of view--whether to lay emphasis on language use or language structure. In recent times language structure underwent a revolution with the publication of the book, Syntactic Structures, by Chomsky. His use of the terms 'competence' and 'performance' has been taken over by linguists and language teachers in their analysis both of language use and structure

The Role of Communication in Language Teaching

Language is probably the most important, if not the only, medium of communication; and the aim of all language teaching is, obviously, to develop in the learner, the ability to communicate in a language. Talking of pedagogic programmes which view language as communication, M.Finocchiaro offers the following remarks: It is "a goal, which--if pursued, realistically and with a broader spectrum of learners in mind--can be the most intrinsically motivating language learning objective tha~ our profession has ever conceived". On a closer look, however, such an outlook on language teaching, as communication would be seen, after all, is not M,revolutionary as it might appear, at first sight. For all languages serve, primarily, as means of communication; and teaching a language should therefore aim naturally at developing the ability to communicate in that language. This is especially true of a second language. It is, indeed, not possible to conceive, in general, of any purpose other than communication in the learning of a second language; and it has properly been, accordingly, the aim of all good language teachers. It would not be surprising, therefore, if good teachers of a second language regard the expression, 'Teaching English for Communication,' with something approaching contempt. They might well ask, 'What else could teaching English be for?' Indeed, as early as 1904, Otto Jespersen remarked, we ought to learn a language through sensible communications". What, then, makes the pedagogic programmes which view language as communication different from earlier ones? One answer is this: even if the chief goal of language teaching is universally accepted to be 'Communication,' approaches to language teaching differ with regard to the means adopted for the purpose. The choice of means, however, is determined by the answers to the two questions: What is language? and What does knowing a language involve? It may at once be stated that there has been no all-time finality about the answers. For they are largely influenced by the psychological, linguistic, sociological and pedagogic theories in vogue at a particular time. The definition of communication skills as stated in the first chapter could be broken down to answer these questions above. Firstly, language is the use of discourse and secondly, knowing a language involves optimal deployment of the ability to express, negotiate and interpret that discourse. Language teaching programmes in the past, however, did not view the answer to both the questions in the same

way as it has been done in this study. Hence, it would be appropriate to review the pedogogic programmes of the past and examine how they differ from the definition of communication skills as' outlined in this study

Grammar Translation Method

 To traditional grammarians like Nesfield, who were philosophers of language, learning a language was co-terminus with learning a set of rules. The advocates of the grammar translation method believed that one could attain the ability to communicate in a langauge by learning the rules of grammar and by doing exercises in translation. As its name implies, its cornerstones are the teaching of rules of grammar and translation of sentences and passages into the target language, which prompt the use of the rules taught. Though not originally part of the method, its practitioners usually also advocate translation from the target language into the mother tongue. As written language was considered superior to spoken language, communicating effectively was equated with writing effectively, and this necessitated a strict adherence to classical models which were considered perfect and worthy of emulation. Texts for translation can in fact offer quite a rich semantic framework for language learning and upto a point the method ensures that learners are clear about the meaning of the language they are learning. However, as the method focusses on the written word, it tends to ignore oral fluency and spontaneity. Moreover, translation itself is a specialised skill and not everyone wants to be a translator. Neither is it necessarily true that the best way of acquiring communication skill in a foreign language is through translation. The emphasis on creating a framework in which rules can be applied can also lead to stilted and unnatural use of language both by teachers and learners.

Making Structures Communicative

 Communicative teaching is often regarded as a new component to existing pedagogic procedures and perhaps also a redistribution of emphasis in those procedures. The practice stage of a lesson or teaching unit based on a pre-selected linguistic input (e.g. a structural item) should, it is thought, not rely any more on drill-like exercise or sets of parallel but should employ, instead, communicative exercises. A communicative exercise is defined, for this purpose, either loosely in terms of larger contexts, texts instead of sentences, games, simulations and role-play, or more precisely, as in Johnson, in terms of an information-gap, information-transfer, task-dependency etc. (163-75). What is considered important is that the learner is engaged in a meaning-focused activity and handles the language form he has been taught a little earlier. The learner, that is to say, is now using the form, not merely practicing it.

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