

Pedagogic Strategies for Improving the Speaking Skills of Learners of English from a CLT Perspective

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Acquiring adequate proficiency in the spoken language is perceived as a significant achievement by most learners of English as a second language while it also remains the most formidable challenge for the learners. Hence teaching speaking demands special attention in the ELT curriculum and pedagogy. As a productive skill, speaking entails complex processes of instantaneous language generation and processing skills, in contrast to writing, that normally affords a longer time and a greater degree of flexibility and freedom in terms of correction, revision, and restructuring. Spoken discourse, as Sari Luoma observes in *Assessing Speaking*, is marked by vague or very common words; fixed phrases, fillers, and hesitation markers; slips and errors reflecting real time processing; joint construction of interactions; and different registers depending on speaker roles, speaking purpose, and the context (16-20).

In academic contexts where English is employed as the medium of instruction, it is commonly observed that the learners generally perform well in the other three language skills. However, whether they attain desirable or expected levels of competence in speaking is a question to be seriously considered. This under-achievement is explained by many factors within the academic ambience which include low motivation, constraints of the syllabus, inadequate pedagogy and training, institutional limitations, lack of sufficient opportunity to speak, and crowded classrooms. Their lack of proficiency becomes evident when they fail to communicate effectively in interviews and group discussions as well as in social interactions. This underscores the need to focus on developing the communicative competence of the learners rather than their linguistic or grammatical competence.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), built on the premise that language learning is learning to communicate, aims at optimizing the use of the target language in a natural context by all

the learners. As defined by Jack C. Richards, “Communicative language teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom” (*CLT Today* 2). It has evolved a set of effective pedagogic strategies to enhance the creative and meaningful interaction of the learners. One way to achieve this objective is to minimise, within the transactional framework, both ‘teacher-talk’ and ‘teacher-fronted teaching’ so as to provide maximum opportunity to the learners to gain oral proficiency.

The Communicative approach to language promotes the integration of all the four skills in the language acquisition process though greater emphasis is placed on the productive skills, particularly speaking. As the communicative potential of the transactional content is of paramount importance in generating meaningful interaction, each session has to incorporate ‘authentic’ content and appropriate activities that address the linguistic needs of the learners. Along with diverse socio-cultural factors, speaking involves three major linguistic components viz. vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar each of which is important for effective communication. Serious flaws or deviations in any of these aspects can affect the meaning and intelligibility of the utterance.

While it is essential for the learner to possess a sufficient store of vocabulary to choose from, in order to express their ideas effectively, a mere knowledge of the words and their meaning will not often serve the purpose. The effectiveness of the language used depends heavily on various semantic features of the word: whether it is slang, a colloquial expression, a dialectical variant, an offensive word, a literary expression, or a highly formal utterance etc. Owing to the highly idiomatic nature of the English language, the learners confront further complexity with regard to the natural and conventional combinations of words, referred to as collocation. The co-existence of related words occurs between different parts of speech such as nouns and adjectives (brilliant idea, heavy traffic), nouns and verbs (break a promise, convene a meeting), verbs and adverbs (speak eloquently, manage efficiently) etc. A fairly good knowledge of such combinations of natural utterances occurring in native speech is essential for making spoken communication effective and fluent. Hence specially designed activities must be part of the ELT class for enhancing the learners’ collocational competence. *The Oxford Collocations Dictionary* and other books on collocation can be profitably employed for the purpose.

Mastering the correct pronunciation and accent is another major challenge for every learner of English as an L2, chiefly because of its unphonetic nature. As discussed earlier, the learner encounters difficulty due to many reasons: the accent system; speech sounds different from those of the mother

tongue; incongruity between spelling and pronunciation; stress pattern and weak forms of words etc. It is only through adequate practice that the learners can tide over these difficulties. To attain proficiency in English, the learners should also gain necessary knowledge of the basic structures and certain rules of grammar. Though grammatical correctness is not so important in speech as in writing, frequent and glaring errors in significant areas of grammar and inaccurate constructions can seriously affect the meaning. This is most evident in the beginner's use of verbs and different tenses, concord, prepositions, framing of questions, syntax, passive constructions etc.

However, explicit and decontextualised teaching of formal grammar rules is not adopted in communicative classes as it does not contribute to improving the learners' speaking skills. Grammatical terminology and rules will only result in intimidating the learner further and making them overconscious of possible grammatical errors. This can naturally affect their confidence and deter them from attempting to express themselves without inhibition. Hence, error-tolerance is a major principle in CLT. The learners have to gradually attain grammatical accuracy through practice, internalisation of structures, and feedback. Though it is not undesirable to explain a grammar point when necessary, in a CLT class the learners generally infer and imbibe the underlying linguistic patterns through creative and meaningful use of the language. Additional input and practice can be provided through accuracy activities that focus on frequent grammatical errors and difficult constructions.

As it is obvious, the nature of the language used is determined by the context as well as the purpose for which it is used. In other words, there are generally accepted and appropriate ways of using language with specific sets of suitable expressions depending on the social context, the role and status of the speakers, and the function for which language is used. The learners need to understand that these variations are significant as language is not used merely for communication of thoughts and ideas; it is also a means for maintaining interpersonal relations and hence reflects interpersonal skills. Based on Gillian Brown and George Yule's broad classification, Jack C. Richards, in *Teaching Listening and Speaking: From Theory to Practice*, has identified three major functions of the spoken language: interaction, transaction, and performance (21).

Talk as interaction, as Richards elucidates, relates to how language is used for social functions (*Teaching Listening and Speaking* 22-24). This implies the use of language in specific forms for creating and maintaining social relations. These interactions which can be casual or formal, include exchange of greetings, small talk, and other friendly conversations. The speakers and their identity as well as role relationships are prominent in social interactions. Such exchanges are also characterised by

the use of conversational register and conventions as well as generic words. To be successful in social interactions, learners must have sufficient practice to know how to open and close a conversation, choose or change a topic, describe personal experiences, do turn-taking, respond to others' utterances, give feedback through echoing and other verbal and nonverbal means, interrupt politely, take leave etc. At the same time, the learners should also know that one should not dominate but encourage others to involve in the conversation.

As it may be difficult for the beginners to engage in social chat, suitable activities must be conducted so that they become familiar with these conventions. For example, common expressions used for giving feedback such as "Quite right," "Really," "That's interesting," "Of course" etc may be incorporated. The use of each language item can be reinforced through activities in which learners have to discuss in pairs and groups and fill up missing expressions in dialogues related to any of the above functions. Conversational practice can be provided through other group activities where each learner speaks on a recent experience or personal views on their favourite topic(s) and other members ask them a few questions, to develop the conversation further. As T. Higgs and R. Clifford remark, ". . . the premature immersion of a student into an unstructured or "free" conversational setting before certain linguistic structures are more or less in place is not done without cost"(78). A distinguishing trait of conversation is the appropriate use of fixed expressions which makes the talk sound natural. As Richards points out, such 'routines' are employed for specific functions. Participants employ many communication strategies to ensure that others understand them correctly. These include frequent questions and clarifications, echoing and repetitions, comprehension checks etc.

Another major function of spoken language, according to Richards, is talk as transaction. The focus here is on the message or meaning rather than the participants. Dialogue building in pairs or groups, role play, and information-gap activities can be effectively employed for practice in talk as transaction. A wide range of topics from planning a tour and asking for directions to ordering food and making a paper toy can be chosen for these activities. Learners have to be encouraged to successfully communicate the message or information without being too conscious about linguistic accuracy. It is important to ensure that before conducting any activity, preparatory discussions must be held in the class so that the learners receive sufficient input relating to linguistic items such as words and phrases, their meaning, different forms, usage, and pronunciation; adequate knowledge about the topic; and the stages and procedure involved in the activity conducted.

Talk as performance, as conceptualised by Jack C. Richards, refers to public talk aimed at transmitting information before an audience such as ceremonial speeches, lectures, presentations, reports, and announcements. Such talk is marked by its monologic form, recognizable format, accuracy of content and language, and affinity to written language. Since the impact of the talk on the listeners is important, the focus is laid both on message and audience engagement. Moreover, the structure, organisation, and sequence of the information are predictable in talk as performance. To teach talk as performance, learners can be provided with models as well as a good degree of language support through pictures, handouts, and audio/video recordings from which they may discern the form of language used for this purpose.

In a natural context, the learners also listen to others' language as well as their feedback and incorporate new forms into their developing communicative competence. Learning, in fact, takes place through collaboration and sharing. When they experiment with new and different ways of expressing their thoughts, they are likely to make erroneous utterances. This must not be viewed very seriously in the beginning. In the process they actually internalise the functions and use of various forms of language. A major challenge of the teacher is to ensure that all learners in a big class get sufficient opportunity to practice speaking. This is achieved through a variety of planned activities in pairs and groups. The learners feel more confident to speak in English in pairs or small groups than in a big group or to the whole class. Hence while choosing or designing activities, special care has to be taken to select topics of relevance and interest to the learners. The tasks provided must also challenge the learner's linguistic and cognitive resources.

The selection and organisation of the activities in the class for developing speaking skills is guided by the key tenets on which the CLT approach is based. Following are some of these underlying principles: language learning is learning to communicate; as individuals, learners adopt different methods and learn at different paces; teachers can facilitate learning in multiple ways; language learning takes place in meaningful contexts and through collaboration and sharing; and language activities organised should ensure real communication. In *Communicative Language Teaching Today*, Jack C. Richards enumerates the major types of communicative activities that can be effectively conducted in a CLT class (19-21). One of the most engaging types of collaborative learning comes under Information-Gap Activities. Here, learners are divided into pairs, A and B. Both A and B will have a separate set of information which their partner does not know. They will have to share their information with the other in order to complete a task. This exchange of information, as in the case of a pair of identical pictures with a few differences, can be carried out only by asking questions, describing,

explaining etc. Information-Gap activity can also be conducted in the form of a role play, where only one learner in each pair is provided with some information, and the other has to gather it through interaction.

Another kind of activity is Jig-Saw Activity where each group works on one specific aspect of a topic and notes their conclusions. Thereafter, the groups are rearranged so that each new group has one member each from all the earlier groups, thus creating information-gap. Now each learner will have to share the information they had gathered from the earlier group, for completing a defined task. Task Completion Activities include games, puzzles, map-reading etc which involve the use language. Surveys, interviews etc comprise Information Gathering Activities. Opinion Sharing Activity is another category in which learners, in groups or pairs, have to compare reasons, values, opinions, qualities etc and rank them in the order of importance. In Information Transfer Activities, the learners have to gather the information presented in one form and represent it in a different form. Charts, graphs, maps, pictures, tables etc can be used for this type of activity. Reasoning Gap Activity requires the learners to derive some new information through reasoning and inference, from a given set of information or situation. Finally, in Role Plays, learners are assigned specific roles and based on the given information and instructions, they act out a scene with appropriate dialogues. All these activities foster collaborative learning whereby the learners correct themselves as well as add new language items to their expanding linguistic abilities. Lisa M. Barker stresses the role of ‘elaboration’ in classroom discussions where a speaker picks up on and extends another speaker’s contribution. As Barker points out, “Elaboration is an important aspect of discussion as students work to make sense of others’ ideas, interpretations, and experiences in the light of their own” (97).

Though L1 can be used judiciously in CLT classes, learners must be encouraged to communicate in the target language from the beginning, through necessary support and positive feedback. Every learner is transformed into an active and responsible participant in the learning process. While there are no rigid rules regarding the classroom procedure, a CLT class often begins with a short lead-in activity which serves as a ‘warmer’ and introduces the topic. It is aimed at developing the learners’ interest and preparing them for the main activity. It may be a brainstorming session which would generate the necessary vocabulary for the main activity, or even the first stage of the main activity itself. This is followed by the main activity or task in which the learners often work in groups or pairs. Though the focus is on speaking, they may also get opportunities for practising writing, listening, and reading at some points. Having thus set the stage for the learners to engage in meaningful interaction, the teacher monitors their activities and offers necessary support without hindering their

progress and comfortable involvement. During the post-task activity, general discussions are held in the class on the difficult aspects of the topic. The learners raise their questions and doubts. The teacher can also draw their attention to the common errors noted during the activities, or make general observations.

Thus CLT marked a paradigm shift in the approach to teaching and learning the language, particularly speaking skills. It requires a teacher to be highly attentive, supportive, and responsive to the needs of the learner. The basic responsibility of the teacher is to set the stage for the learner to interact meaningfully in the target language. This necessitates a good amount of preparation and planning from the part of the teacher before engaging a class. The teacher has to take cognizance of the diverse needs, styles, and predilection of the individual learners. The task involves promoting learner autonomy and making the learning process as learner-centric and personalised as possible. The whole teaching-learning process must be thus oriented towards enhancing the learners' confidence in speaking, expanding their language resources, and optimising their actual use of the language, which are essential for gaining greater communicative competence.

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