

## **Communicative Competency in English at Tertiary Level – Need for an Updated Approach**

**V. David Arputha Raj and Dr. R. Saravana Selvan**

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### **Indian Students Lack Communicative Skills in English**

Indian students are seen often complaining ‘I know what I mean but I do not know how to express it in English’. English is a second as well as a foreign language for them. To be a professional in any field, every learner must be well versed in both the form and the content. The form (grammar and vocabulary), the content (information and ideas) and their interdependence must be focused for the effective delivery. But the present learners are found giving importance to the content rather than the form. This lack of communicative competency results in losing job opportunities in homeland as well as in foreign countries, even though the candidates appear to be well qualified in their technical and professional part.

### **Importance of English as a Library Language**

English is a ‘library language’, and this plays a very significant role in the learning process. More than 80% of the study materials for all the courses are available in English language only. Without competent knowledge in English, students cannot understand the ideas given in the library sources. Even after completing twelve years of learning English in schools and getting a degree in their field, graduates are unable to speak fluently in English, whereas the boys selling goods in tourist places speak English boldly and fluently in order to sell their products. As the maxim goes ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’, the boys in tourist places have the necessity to speak in English. But the learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) lack that kind of practice to develop their communicative skills.

### **Reasons Offered for the Lack of Communicative Skills**

Over the years, many reasons have been adduced for the learners’ lack of communicative competence at tertiary institutions, even after they have undergone proficiency courses to develop their communicative ability. The institutions are sometimes accused of not designing a syllabus which meets the actual needs of the learners and also for not applying

appropriate teaching pedagogy, which result in a gap between communicative competence and actual performance. The learners must be taught how to use the language effectively to inform, engage and influence others to change policies and practices for the better. Communicative competency emphasizes communication as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. Learners must be taught the basic understanding of communicative competency that ‘it is not what you say that is important but the way you say it’.

### **Focus of This Study**

This study emphasizes purposeful and utilitarian learning of English. The communicative needs of the learners are more important in considering the course design. The teaching must be concerned with both oral and written discourse of English for academic or professional and occupational or vocational purposes. This study mainly deals with the learners at tertiary level for whom learning of English takes on a service role for their specific needs in study, work or research.

### **Four Categories of Communicative Competency**

Communicative competency can be divided into four categories:

1. Grammatical Competence
2. Discourse Competence
3. Sociolinguistic Competence
4. Strategic Competence

#### **1. Grammatical Competence**

Grammatical competence refers to the ability to recognize and produce the distinctive grammatical structures of a language and to use them effectively in communication. It teaches how to relate the form to the content. It is like the rules of any game. In grammatical competence, direct translations are not always possible, for example, Small pizza – personal pizza.

#### **2. Discourse Competence**

Discourse competence refers to the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances. It can be either oral or written, but the coherence should be maintained. Genre manifestations, gambits and pause between utterances should be taken care of.

### 3. Sociolinguistic Competence

This refers to the ability to interpret the social meaning of the choice of linguistic varieties and to use the language with the appropriate social meaning for the situation. The speaker must be aware of the social context in which the language is used or else it will land up in misunderstanding the context.

#### *Technical example*

Child : Mom, I need a new mouse, my other one died.  
Mother : I don't want a mouse in the house!  
Child : Mom ....., for the computer..!!

#### *Gender example*

Mailman – mail carrier  
Fireman – firefighter

### 4. Strategic Competence

Strategic competence deals with the manner of manipulating language in order to meet communicative goals. This is mostly used to compensate communication disruption caused by lack of communicative competence and to strengthen communicative effects. Strategic competence is of three types:

- i. Strategies for native language
- ii. Strategies for inter-language
- iii. Strategies for interaction

Of these three types, strategies on inter-language is the most suggested and successful type of strategic competence.

#### **Steps and Practice to Achieve – New Approach and Other Needs**

To achieve this desired communicative competence in the ESL learners, there is a strong need to create novel and creative ways of knowledge and information presentation. There is a need for a new and modified approach which suits the needs of the learners of the present era. The new approach should make the learners competent enough to outstand in the competitive world. It should consider mainly its dynamic aspect, as activity rather than knowledge.

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There is a vast need for competent instructors in handling the subject. In an activity based communicative classroom, the teacher takes up three important roles other than being a mere instructor. They are (i) facilitator, (ii) participant and (iii) an observer and learner. At first, the teacher should provide opportunities and facilities to the learners to improve their communicative skills. The teacher should have a clear idea of the objectives which are going to be dealt with. The teacher should present himself as one among them and not superior to them, which will offer the learners the freedom, courage and independence.

Language learning should be teacher-orchestrated and student-centered with technology tools stimulating and supporting creative thinking, discourse and language learning. By being a participant, the teacher should motivate and initiate the learners. He should also kindle the questioning attitude amidst the learners.

### **Intensive Effort – All are Participants**

Achievement in teaching is the result of an intensive struggle of each individual with himself. The teacher should be patient enough and skillful to pave platforms to create a sense of involvement from the learners. Teacher's role as an observer plays a vital role in the success of a communicative classroom. He or she should give attention to every learner present in the classroom. His or her concentration should be spread not only over the active participants, but also the passive participants. The learners are no longer learners; the teacher is no longer a teacher; but all are participants inside the communicative classroom. There must be increased learner participation and decreased predominant teacher talk.

### **Direct Method and Related Activities**

This is to suggest that direct method of language teaching will be fruitful in communicative classrooms. Vernacular language should be banished from the communicative classroom. The learners must be made aware that the language abilities can be achieved only through practice and careful training. Realistic tasks and activities based on real-world situations can be designed.

Task based activities can be made use of rather than exercises.

It can be even dramatization of a situation, like visiting a factory, conducting an interview, etc. While doing so, the learner happens to think through the mind of the characters. The learner views the situation from others' point of view. It gives the emotional ability to feel what others feel. The presentation is made as near as possible to the real

situation or event or object. Familiarity of the situations and the freedom to use grammar and vocabulary at their interest gain confidence and courage in the minds of the learners, and allow more meaningful conversations.

The learner must be conscious that cases or problems selected for study are simulations of actual situations in which he will find himself in a relatively short time. The teacher should show keen interest in making the learners participate in the activities. Showing high expectation of learners' potentiality and achievement will surely get rewarded. The teacher can even share interesting personal experiences in learning English in order to make the teaching more interesting.

The following activity is an example where the learning atmosphere can be transformed into an acquiring atmosphere where the learners feel that they are entertained rather than being educated:

### **Activity**

- ❖ On the chalkboard, the teacher writes a word which has many things to speak about. For example, 'school'.
- ❖ Then, the learners are asked to tell the words related to that particular word and one representative from the class writes those words on the board.
- ❖ As the topic is very relevant and familiar to the learners, they will shout to find their contribution on the board.
- ❖ When the board is filled with words, the teacher asks the learners to frame a sentence for each word which tells something interesting about their school life.
- ❖ Every learner is asked to read the framed sentences.
- ❖ With an example by the teacher, the learners are asked to give coherence to the framed sentences.
- ❖ When the sentences are arranged by the learners in a logical sequence, the learners are asked to read the same in front of the class.

### **Outcome of an Empirical Practice – A Case Study**

To make the language learning more successful, the learners must be provided familiar situations. These familiar situations enrich the learning with a comfort zone which results in shedding away their shyness and fear and in building up their confidence. This

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activity was implemented in the Year I BE Mechanical Engineering learners of Professional Group of Institutions, Palladam. On the top of the chalkboard, the term ‘School’ was written. When the learners were asked to tell words related to school, they took part actively and threw their words to the representative at the board, who really found it very difficult to pay attention to everyone. Out of their extreme joy, the boys started recollecting words such as bunking, compound wall, punishment, last bench, comments, and so on, whereas the girls concentrated on exam hall, laboratory, library and so on. The atmosphere was filled with joy and entertainment.

Then, the teacher made a statement that when the learners thought of every word, they would have been reminded of some event that happened in their life related to the word. All the learners agreed with that.

Taking this as an added advantage, the learners are asked to convert those memories into words and to frame sentences for each word. They came out with funny and interesting sentences and they made these as full sentences with the help of the teacher. The outcome was a beautiful essay on ‘My School Life’.

On the other hand, if the learners were asked straightaway to write an essay with the same topic, they would have felt lack of words and ideas. But, through this activity-based teaching method, the learners enjoyed and found an easier way to prepare any essay on any topic.

### **To Conclude – Need for Modified and Innovative Approaches**

It is evident that the current situation in this competitive world demands a modified approach in teaching English. The curriculum should be restructured and revised and be made relevant to meet the needs of the learners. Teachers should be competent enough to mould the learners skill-oriented rather than subject-oriented. Teachers should pave platforms for increased learner-participation. A change in the approach of teaching English is very essential at this crucial moment. To help the learners with better employment and career, an updated approach is needed to make English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching more effective and fruitful.

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