The Need of Introducing Communicative Syllabuses for Teaching English in Pakistan

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Abstract

English is taught as a compulsory subject at different levels (mostly from class I to BA/BSc level) mainly using grammar translation syllabuses in Pakistan. The teacher plays a dominating role in the classroom and the students are rarely involved in the teaching – learning process. The syllabuses put emphasis on the usage rather than the use of language. The students are given intensive practices in reading and writing. The purpose is, however, not to develop their skills but to prepare them for their exams (Hafeez 1997c). As a result, they learn the grammar rules and acquire limited reading and writing skills but are hardly able to use English for different communicative purposes (Hafeez 1997c, 1998b). This paper, keeping the importance of English and the objectives of teaching this language in the country in view, makes an attempt to explain how the situation can be improved by introducing communicative syllabuses.

1. Importance of English

English is a very important language in Pakistan. It is the medium of instruction in the institutions of higher education and is widely used on radio and television in the country. Several newspapers, periodicals and books on different subjects are published in English. It is the official language of all the government departments and private organizations in Pakistan. The knowledge of English is considered to be essential for getting good jobs as exams and interviews for civil services, armed forces and other attractive posts are conducted in this language. In fact, it enjoys the position in Pakistan which no other language does (for details see Abbas 1992, Gilani, 1996, Gilani & Gilani 1998, Hafeez, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998a, 1998b, Malik 1996).

2. Objectives of English Language Teaching

Keeping the importance and the need of the learners to learn this language in Pakistan in view, the objectives of teaching English, broadly, are as follows:

i   The students need to learn the language to use it for communicative purposes.
ii   They need to develop their listening skills so to understand instructions from their superiors if they are doing job, and they are able to understand lectures, etc if

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they are studying in a situation where medium of instruction is English and so on.

iii   They need to develop their speaking skills so that they are able to speak English with some confidence while being interviewed for jobs, and If they are studying in English medium institutions, they can speak to their teachers and discuss different things with them in English and may have to speak English in other situations.

iv   They need to develop their reading skills to comprehend different types of texts.

v   They need to develop their writing skills so that they can write different things such as writing reports, etc if they are in job, and taking notes, attempting question papers for which they will need to describe and narrate things, and so on, if they study in English medium institutions after doing their Intermediate and may fulfill other different needs in terms of writing. (for details Hafeez 1996, 1997b, 1998b).

3. Communicative Syllabuses

3.1 Background

Before the communicative syllabuses were introduced, it was felt that the other syllabus types, which put emphasis mainly on teaching of grammatical points, were not able to prepare the learners to use the target language in real life situations. According to Wilkins (1976), this problem had become specially urgent in Europe where the European Community had expanded and grown in importance bringing countries closer together and yet each member country had its own language(s). A study was commissioned by the Council of Europe to examine the situation and then make recommendations for improving the situation so that the people from the member countries could communicate for survival as visitors to a foreign country or with foreign visitors to their own country. For this purpose, different language learning theories and language teaching models were discussed and examined and it was agreed that 'Language Acquisition' is the model for learning a second language, ie to design syllabuses on the principles based on the Mentalist Language Learning Theory (see Aitchison 1983, Littlewood 1996, Wilkins 1985). Efforts were also made to offer solutions to the problems of classroom organization and the relationship between teachers and students. It was felt that not only the knowledge of rules but also the ability to use these rules for determining appropriate use of language in living situations had to be taken into account. So, attempts were made to specify in practical terms the foreign language learning skills which were needed for communication, and the things which the learners would be doing in the target language were taken into consideration before designing a syllabus (see Cunningsworth 1995). The point that it might be very difficult to provide similar situations for teaching a second language as we have in acquiring in our first language, certain ways can be adopted for mastering the target language was also taken into consideration(see Wilkins 1985).

3.2 Why Use Communicative Syllabuses?

i   Communicative syllabuses stress the importance of providing learners with

opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempt to integrate such activities into a wider programme of language learning. It is believed that we learn language most effectively by using it in realistic situations, so communicative syllabuses aim at developing students' ability to use the target language through activities which actually simulate target performance (Nunan 1989).

ii As has already been mentioned, students know the rules of language but are not able to use them for communicative purposes. They need to have both the knowledge of usage as well as use as it is not sufficient for learners to simply have knowledge of target language forms, meanings and functions, they must also be able to apply this knowledge in negotiating meaning while communicating (see Larsen - Freeman 1986, Widdowson 1978). Widdowson (1979:118) also supports this view:' One kind of meaning is that which language items have as elements of language systems and the other is that which they have when they are actually put to use in acts of communication'. The communicative syllabuses pay due attention to these points.

iii According to Brumfit (1981) while using language, we negotiate our meaning by interacting and adjusting to the shared knowledge, the assumptions and also the linguistic ability of the person we are talking to. Even in reading and writing, we are constantly trying to interpret the intentions or the interpretations of the writer or reader and adjusting ourselves accordingly and so communicative syllabuses not only arrange to provide ' the repertoire' of linguistic items but also the 'repertoire of strategies' for using them in concrete situations (Littlewood (1981:1).

iv Communicative syllabuses are arranged keeping the needs of learners in view and so are specified not only in terms of language items learners are likely to need but also in terms of the kinds of meaning they may want to express and the things they may want to do with the language. So, the language to be taught is chosen according to the social and cultural relationship involved, ie the most socially appropriate form of the language learners are speaking or would speak is selected in order to 'fit in' with the society in which they are or would be participating (Littlewood 1981). And, according to Widdowson (1979:118), 'communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of essentially social nature and so the teachers arrange group work and pair work which enable the students to use the language practising all the language skills. The situation becomes student centred rather than teacher centred.

v Taking into consideration grammatical and lexical items that will be needed by the learners, materials taking into account the different ways in which people use language are developed. They may be organized around topics, or functions of language-and they will be so organized that students are forced to try to express themselves through the language, often without much help of the teachers, ie the teaching techniques suit the learning situations. Communicative syllabuses see language teaching as an effort to involve 'the whole person' that is it can not be treated as a purely technical exercise but it should relate to students' genuine feelings, interests and needs (See Brumfit 1987).

4. Advantages

i   Communicative syllabuses, according to Richards and Rodgers (1986), aim at developing procedures for the teaching of four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. Thus no skill is ignored as is the case in grammar translation syllabuses as mentioned before and so students can achieve all kinds of competence required for effective communication and the objectives mentioned above can be achieved.

ii   Communicative syllabuses offer a classroom where learners use the foreign language and which provides them a point of accountability for assigned work in the form of tasks given to the students which they perform by using the foreign language. They do the activities using the target language which they will need outside the classroom. The activities are communicative and task oriented. Task is an activity which is carried out as a result of processing or understanding language (Breen 1987, Nunan 1989). The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative because it provides a purpose for classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake.

iii   The communicative syllabuses make the classroom a small world of social relations in which needs are found or contrived and the second language is put to use and it is shown how things happen as a result of using language and for which the learners have to have the knowledge of linguistic forms, meanings and functions. They have to learn that different forms can be used to perform a function and that a single form can serve a variety of functions. They learn the usage as well as the use of language. The classroom encourages student to student interaction and also co-operation because they can remove the inhibitions of those who feel intimidated by formal classroom activities and so the amount of students' talking time is increased which provides them an opportunity to express themselves in the target language. Not only that but also **t**he students are offered a great deal of practice in making appropriate choices in terms of register, grammatical points, appropriate vocabulary and so on.

iv   The communicative syllabuses offer student centred activities in which the focus is placed on the students who become the protagonists of their own learning. The activities are designed keeping in view the level of understanding, the interests and the feelings of the students which are supposed to give them hidden practice of language points without making them conscious of it. The role of the teacher in the classroom is that of a manager, an initiator, a facilitator, and an advisor, etc, who is always there to help and guide the students (Harmer 1991).

v   Above all, the materials written or selected for the students reflect the uses (present and future) which learners will make of the language ie the materials correspond to learners need and match the aims and objectives of the language learning programme. It helps students to equip themselves for using language effectively for their own purposes.

5. Conclusion

If we look at the situation with reference to the use of English as a second language and the objectives outlined above, we can very confidently remark that communicative syllabuses can cater for the needs of the learners and so it is strongly recommended that communicative syllabuses should be introduced for teaching English in the country as these syllabuses pay due attention to all the language skills and can prepare students to use the language for communicative purposes. They do not offer a situation where teachers play a dominating role; students are equally involved in the teaching-learning process by offering them interesting and motivating activities and teaching materials.

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