

## FUNCTIONAL VIEWS OF HALLIDAY ON TEACHING AND LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**Dr. Karande S.B.**

Assistant Professor,  
B. P. Sulakhe Commerce College,  
Barshi (Maharashtra)

### Abstract

In recent times language teaching, especially teaching of English as a second language has become a big business. It is seen that, in this rapid growth of English language teaching, there has been no carefully thought out plan of operations. According to Halliday, the whole process is unsystematic in that the insights from the language teaching-learning theories and its practice are not properly incorporated. It results in the use of many co-existing and competing teaching methods, which have different merits and demerits. In this regard Halliday states that these methods are very difficult to classify in simple terms in regard to their classroom approaches that they illustrate. Halliday considers the classroom operations of these methods and points out two major subdivisions of these methods. The first is teaching a language by teaching in that language and the second is the teaching of a language by teaching about the language. Halliday claims that the basic task or aim of foreign language teaching is to impart some or all the language skills (understanding speech, speaking, reading, and writing) to students, which they do not have or have in limited form. The present research article aims at discussing the views of Halliday on various language teaching methods used in foreign language teaching especially, teaching English as second language.

**Key words:** First language, Second language, Language skills.

The basic aim of language learning is to communicate in that language; either it is mother tongue or a foreign language. So one must see teaching foreign language as obligatory task which must be strategically done to enable the students to communicate in the targeted language. In India, English has been taught as a foreign language, and it is seen that many students who are learning English as a foreign language lack in the ability to communicate in spoken and written mode through they have been taught for several years. This is found to be true in other countries and in case of other languages which are taught as foreign languages. In this case, the cause of the deficiency of students in communication is often traced to the non-performance of the teachers rather than in the approach to teaching. In this regard Widdoson writes, "It is seldom that the validity of the recommended approach is called into question." (Cited in Sukhdev Sing, 2003:60) It means that the approach to language teaching is as crucial as the role of teacher.

Various approaches like situational approach, structural approach and communicative or functional approach, based on different language acquisition and language learning theories came and applied worldwide in teaching foreign languages. Whereas during 1960s, British applied linguists emphasized another fundamental dimension of language that was inadequately

addressed in current approaches to language teaching- the functional and communicative potential of language (Richards and Rodgers: 64). Linguists thus bring into focus the need in language teaching to emphasize on communicative proficiency rather than linguistic proficiency. This approach is supported by the language theorists like Henry Widdowson, John Firth and Halliday. Halliday, in this regard puts forward that linguistics is concerned with the description of speech acts or texts, since only through the study of the language in use are all the functions of language and therefore all components of meaning brought into focus (1970: 145). Similarly, Widdowson proposes that grammatical rules do not lead to the effective interactions among the people and that ability can only be created by designing functional and communicative syllabus. He argues that functional categories provide only a very partial and imprecise description of certain semantic and pragmatic rules which are used for reference when people interact. They tell us nothing about the procedures people employ in the application of these rules when they are actually engaged in communicative activity. If we are to adopt a communicative approach to teaching which takes as its primary purpose the development of the ability to do things with language, then it is discourse which must be at the centre of our attention (Widdowson, 1979: 254). Thus, learning language is regarded by Halliday, Widdowson and other proponents of communicative language teaching as acquiring the linguistic skills to perform different kinds of communicative functions. The present research paper focuses the functional views of Halliday toward teaching and learning foreign languages.

According to Halliday, in this rapid growth of English language teaching, there has been no carefully thought out plan of operations. He thinks that the whole process is unsystematic in that the insights from the language teaching-learning theories and its practice are not properly incorporated. It results in the use of many co-existing and competing teaching methods, which have different merits and demerits. In this regard Halliday states that these methods are very difficult to classify in simple terms in regard to their classroom approaches that they illustrate. Halliday considers the classroom operations of these methods and points out two major subdivisions of these methods. The first is teaching a language by teaching in that language and the second is the teaching of a language by teaching about the language (1964:252). He assumes that through foreign language teaching, teachers should impart basic language skills- understanding language, speaking, reading and writing among the students. The foreign language skills which students do not possess or have in limited form can be attained through 'experiencing' them. He declares that language skills can be better acquired by encountering the real experiences in use in real situations and by associating certain activities, persons or topics with the foreign language. This is possible only when the foreign language becomes the medium of instruction. He cites an example of Nigeria, where English is used as a medium of instruction and they attempt and achieve language skills by making several experiments in foreign language teaching. He puts forward that this helps in bridging the unwelcome gap between teachers and pupils, which we notice during classroom operations in the foreign language class. Halliday thinks experiencing the situations in the classroom makes the classroom atmosphere lively. He considers so because for him, "Language comes to life only when functioning in some environment. We do not experience language in isolation,- if we did we would not recognize it as a language- but always in relation to scenario, some background of persons and actions and events from which the things which are said derive their meaning. This is referred to as the 'situation', so language is said to function in 'context of situation' and any account of language which fails to build in the situation as an essential ingredient is likely to be artificial and unrewarding" (1978:28). The situations and contexts must be created through the language

which is being taught in the classroom to make student understand various functions of language. To advocate this he writes, “Teaching in a language is partly the provision of interesting further practice material for the exercise of the skills being acquired, partly (but only partly) the introduction of new grammatical and new vocabulary items. At the same time it is a step in the direction of syllabus integration, which in primary schools especially is regarded as a desirable aim” (1964:253). In short Holiday emphasizes a way of teaching a foreign language in that language. It is effective way of teaching foreign language but it requires implications of integrated syllabus full of activities introducing grammar and vocabulary.

Halliday’s approach to foreign language teaching is an outcome of his conceptions about language. He perceives language as a socio-semiotic phenomenon. He sees language as it is operated within the social context of culture. He states that this culture is learnt and transmitted through language and further produced by language itself. That is to say language is interpreted within the context of culture and vice versa. Consequently, language takes place in particular culture and the culture is shaped and understood through particular language. In view that culture and language are bound together and cannot be separated. So, for Halliday when a child learns a language, he also learns a culture through language and for him semantic system, he is constructing becomes the primary mode of transmission of the culture (1975: ix-x). In case of learning mother tongue, child constructs the system of meaning to represent the social contexts. The whole process is cognitive and takes place inside his head. Though the process is cognitive, Halliday thinks, “it takes place in contexts of social interaction, and there is no way it can take place except in these contexts” (1975:139-140). Halliday calls this process “meaning potential” that is the capacity to mean what you want to say. It is the potential of the semantic system that can be formed by understanding the contexts and situations which is possible only through giving them experiences through the language which you intend to teach them.

Halliday also focuses on the role of literature in language teaching. He marks that it is both impossible and undesirable to divorce language from literature in foreign language teaching is rather like saying that it is both impossible and undesirable to divorce arithmetic from algebra in mathematics teaching, or physics from chemistry in the teaching of science (1964:256). He asserts that study of literature can help student understand cultural and literary achievements represented in the literary work. He further states that teaching of literature must be better formulated and should retain identity of language and literature. It must imply the difference between acquisition of language skills and the appreciation of literary text. He argues that teaching of practical ability in a language and teaching the understanding and appreciating literature are two different things and practical ability must inevitably precede literary appreciation of a literary text (1964:256). Halliday thus claims that bringing cultural aspects forward, language can be taught in a better way.

The second subdivision of language teaching methods to which Halliday points out is teaching about a language. It is comparatively easy to carry out in the classroom. In these methods Halliday points out, “The use of grammar book turns a ‘skill’ subject into ‘content’ subject, one in which the teacher can teach facts instead of teaching skills. But an hour spent in teaching the facts of grammar, of phonology or of lexis, is not an hour of teaching the language” (1964:254). Actually, there is confusion among the teachers about the mode of acquiring language skills. Hence, some teachers believe that mastering the foreign language requires the mastery of grammar. They take it as intellectual exercise and employ this way of teaching language by teaching about that language. But for Halliday, it is not true and for him ‘teaching language involves conjoining two essential features: first the learner must ‘experience’ the

language being used in meaningful ways, either in its spoken or in its written form; and secondly, the learner must himself have the opportunity of performing, of trying out his own skills, of making mistakes and being corrected. These are the essence of language learning; and teaching about a language does not contribute directly to either of them' (1964:254). Halliday's main focus is on attaining the skill of practical performance in the foreign language which he says cannot be gained through focusing on the excess grammar and on language structure. For him grammar-and-dictionary approach is outdated and it must be replaced by an approach that link utterance to the experience of seeing and hearing the situation to which the utterance is associated. Halliday, in this regard writes about language that 'language is not a well-defined system, and cannot be equated with the 'set of all grammatical sentences', whether the set is conceived of as finite or infinite. Hence, a language cannot be interpreted by rules such as set.' (Cited in Bebson, 1985:7) Chomsky also has similar views regarding language learning. He states, "Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogenous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatical irrelevant conditions as memory limitation, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance" (1965:3). Thus, Chomsky claims that excess attention to grammatical rules affect the actual performance of the learner of a language.

Halliday, points out a fact that old grammar-translation method is still used in most of the countries while teaching foreign languages, though it is denied in modern time. He claims that method can be effective if linguistically valid and relevant grammar is used in the classroom. Instead the grammar taught in the classroom is archaic and pedantic. The spoken variety of grammar is rarely taught and hence the method cannot be a substitute for the teaching practical skills and merely remains the method of teaching about the language and not the actual language. About translation, Halliday says learners are merely presented with sentences in their mother tongue and expected to translate them into foreign language. Halliday writes about this, "The task of translation requires a degree of literary and historical sensibility, to say nothing of stylistic feelings for English that few school children possess" (1964:267). Thus, according to him translation is complicated and difficult task. In short, he thinks that the methods which teach language by teaching about the language lack the effectiveness of teaching foreign language.

Halliday's approach towards language teaching seems more practical and functional. He seems to be following the approach of Firth who states that language needed to be studied in the broader subcultural context of its use. He denies the excessive focus that is always given on grammar. His approach seems to be antistructural like Montaigne who claims, "Without methods, without a book, without grammar or rules, without a whip and without tears, I had learned a Latin as proper as that of my schoolmaster" (Savignon, 1983:47). This signals towards the ineffectiveness of grammar compared to learning language through experiencing it and performing it. This experience approach is effective according to Halliday and all the proponents who propose communicative language teaching. The experience of language can be made effective by using electro-mechanical devices, language laboratories, audio-visual techniques, computer simulations and by using innovative teaching aids. Halliday is aware of the fact that these new techniques have challenges for teachers but by employing them they can make their class lively and effective.

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