

ENHANCING COMMUNICATION IN A MIXED ABILITY CLASS

Dr. Rizwana Banu

Assistant Professor of English,
J.B.A.S. College for Women,
Chennai – 600018

Abstract

Communication is the key to success- This is true of both the worlds of academia and business. In an age of globalization and knowledge economy the efficacy of enhancing communication becomes vital. Knowledge acquisition and management is inextricably connected to Language acquisition and enhanced communication. In order to improve communication skills a conscious and equally unconscious effort has to be made. Hence the role of teachers as facilitators and students' active involvement assumes importance in achieving the goal.

The paper would suggest methods to enhance communication in a mixed class which consists of undergraduate students who come from varied mediums of instruction, including English. The students from the other medium of instruction however are not totally ignorant of English as a language or subject of study. Their proficiency in English is either below average or average. They are learners with substantial knowledge of English, though with varying levels of proficiency. The paper would deal with one particular approach ie, cooperative learning that could be adopted in order to improve communication in a mixed group. Appropriate designing of language games and task differentiation is part of the communication process.

A Mixed ability class is a reality in today's global educational scene where students from diverse backgrounds and abilities come together on a common platform. Every learner has his own learning style, linguistic background knowledge or individual pace of learning and developing. Hence, the majority of foreign language classes involve students of varying abilities (Richards, 1998). Contrary to the mindset that heterogeneity, very often poses challenges to achieving a uniform and consistent result, it is a boon to the learners and a new experience for teachers to design methodologies to achieve success in such classrooms. Psychologists have pointed out that streaming in a heterogeneous group at times adversely affects the students's self esteem and confidence level. A mixed group is a congenial set up for achieving good communication skills and improving the confidence levels as well. However, one barrier that could impede the goal of communication could be disinterestedness on the part of the fast learners. This however could be managed through strategies to involve such learners effectively. A heterogeneous atmosphere is thus congenial for achieving communication as it presents a microcosm of the reality which is outside the classroom.

Cooperative learning is one such method that can be used in a mixed classroom. It is based on the thesis that interacting with others becomes an important aid to learning. Cooperative learning emphasizes the positive outcomes of working in cooperation, where members of the class value a learning environment in which they learn to improve their skills together. Students learn something as a team (Slavin 3). Since a lot of work gets done in groups and pairs this method helps break down the barrier of concrete silence and non-participation in discussion activities. It helps draw the reticent student out of his complacency as a result of positive interdependence.

A heterogeneous or a mixed ability class is the preferred group for Cooperative learning. This is because such a group opens up opportunities for different types of interaction by both the high achievers and the relatively low achievers; the proficient speaker of English and the not-so proficient speaker. A heterogeneous class thus becomes a forum to promote the learners' past achievement or performance alongside individual accountability and teacher's roles during different stages of cooperative learning. Learner autonomy could also be achieved through encouragement as it is possible to assign specific responsibilities on the way to the students completing the task. For example, in a reading-for-meaning task, communication skills are enhanced in the different roles such as note maker, a checker, an elaborator and a group presenter that may be taken up. Simple tasks such as learning to use a dictionary, reading a set of instructions and interpreting them, create opportunities to communicate spontaneously without hesitation. These skills would help extend their knowledge domain while pursuing their subject contents. It is also possible to improve written communication such as writing a composition jointly where in the individual resourcefulness and confidence is enhanced.

This method highlights the importance of face-to-face interaction, an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual helpfulness within each group leading to individual responsibility in a heterogeneous grouping (Davidson 8-9). The role of the teacher in such an exercise would be that of a facilitator cum instructor. The teacher helps create a relaxed but purpose-driven atmosphere for working on the task together. The teacher could encourage each of the students of the group to read a section of the same passage to grasp its meaning and communicate effectively. The members of the group can be assigned alternate tasks of recalling and summarizing the main points with inputs from the teacher without much intrusion. Detection of errors or omissions in the summary, elaboration of the points learned by relating them to knowledge outside the text to their individual lives and experiences and views provide ample scope for communication.

A case study was conducted in a class which consists of students from other medium of instruction but who have had English as one of the subjects and students from English medium of instruction. An attempt was made to study the communication skills of the students in the mixed class. An exercise was given to them wherein the students were put in groups with at least two students from English medium of instruction. They were asked to interact in their groups by reading a passage from a prose lesson and express their views in English. It was observed that one group of students used their mother tongue to discuss and explain the passage for reasons of clarity while another group of students interacted in mother tongue and English, while yet another group interacted only in English however with errors in construction. The group which interacted in English were able to communicate and respond in English better than the group which interacted only in mother tongue. Though the cognition level of students who interacted in the mother tongue was high it did not translate into similar levels of communication in English. Those who made use of the bilingual responded and communicated in a similar manner.

The direct method which is based on the belief that learning happens best when the foreign word and the idea or concept that it conveys get linked together via a direct bond produced the desired effect. The students who thought in English without the intermediary of words of one's known language were able to establish direct bonds between thought and expression, experience and language. The understanding that underpins this basic belief is that a proficient user of one's mother tongue possesses an unerring language sense which both incorporates and surpasses the grammars and dictionaries of the language and that this sense rests on direct associations between experience and expression. Speech practice thus proved productive and helped develop the strongest direct bonds. Minimising the use of the mother tongue in the target language classroom provided the initiation for better communication. Through repeated practice and the teacher's supervision there was found to be considerable improvement in communication in English. Sentences and not words were used as units of speech in building a usable stock of language utterances and expressions. What began as a passage reading and interpretation exercise ended up with enhancement of pronunciation, ideas, self-realization which is a realization of one's own deepest qualities and growth in self-awareness, the understanding of others and active student involvement in learning and the way learning and communication takes place. The mixed ability class therefore provides scope for enhancement of communication and incorporate at the undergraduate level participatory lectures and group discussions that would make interaction an integral part of teaching- learning and communication process.

Works cited

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