Communicative Perspectives on Teaching of English In India

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I.   INTRODUCTION:

EXPECTATIONS, FACTS AND MISGIVINGS

'Communicative Language Teaching' has in recent years become a fashionable term to cover in Variety of developments in syllabus design and to a lesser extent in the methodology of teaching foreign languages. (Brumfit and Johnson : 10; Preface). The development of Communicative Competence (CC) has consequently been accepted as a major pedagogical objective in India as well as in Western countries. Explicit statements to this effect are nowadays frequently found in the preface to school textbooks meant for Indian students. However, so far as English as a Second Language (henceforth abbreviated as ESL) is concerned, no consequential efforts has yet been made either to define Communicative Competence in the specific Indian context or to develop methodological strategies that would ensure the development of such competence in spite of the unfavorable circumstances which characterize the majority of our classrooms.

The overwhelming influence of the Audio-Lingual Approach during the nineteen fifties and sixties left its unmistakable mark on later methods of second languages teaching. Those fascinated by the audio-lingual approach began to conceive of communicative ability in the rather narrow and utilitarian sense of conversational fluency, that is, the ability to converse (with good pronunciation, accent and intonation) in real or simulated situations and the ability to utter in the form of automatic, non-thoughtful responses) stereotyped sentences, phrases, greetings etc. largely as a part of situation-specific interaction. This goal was to be attained through systematic training in listening-speaking (often with the help of pre-recorded cassettes) pattern-drills, dialogues and some type of application activities. Grammatical explanations and the use of the first language was to be restricted to a minimum. (This description of the auto-lingual approach is based on Chastain: 12:101-113).

Such a scheme, once excessively popular and still holding ground to a considerable extent, obviously reflects a rather mechanistic view of language learning. This is not surprising, because the audio-lingual outlook was a product of behaviorist psychology and descriptive linguistics (Ibid, 126).

Although the initial zeal associated with the audio-lingual approach subsided during the later part of the sixties (Ibid, 132) and the trend since then has been towards eclecticism that combines behaviorist and cognitive outlooks, the tendency to equate communication with conversation seems to have survived as a misconceived notion in language pedagogy, The Structural-Situational Approach, which was recommended (explicity or implicity) for classroom teaching of English in India during the nineteen sixties and seventies, required oral practice of selected vocabulary and structures particularly the latter, as an essential device for successful second language learning.

The pattern-practice approach, which is basically the same as the structural approach (the advocates of the pattern-practice approach prefer to use the term patterns" rather than 'structures'), requires the patterns to be established as habits (25:25) through drilling. Both these approaches represent the typical behaviorist outlook which regards language learning as a matter of habit formation. It goes without saying that the habits so formed are intended to contribute mainly to oral proficiency of language in stereotyped situations. In other words, language learning thus becomes largely a matter of conversational fluency. Although this mechanistic outlook was initially popularized through the audio-lingual approach, it retained its ground even in those after years during which language for communication began to be talked about. In fact, there has been some tendency to reconcile the pattern-practice approach with the rising tide of communicative language teaching and today, when the principles and practices of language teaching seem to be overshadowed by conflicting viewpoints. There is a sizable section of people-linguists, teachers, pedagogists and educated citizens-who would like to equate communication with patterned (situation-specific) conversation. Perhaps this tendency is an inevitable product of the needs of the day. In an increasingly complex, fast, economic and industrialized society wherein the pressure of learning a language quickly within the limits of practical conversation is too much, there must be enough scope for such a narrow (but utilitarian) meaning of communication.

It is an irrefutable fact that language learning is at least partly a matter of habit formation and that conversational fluency is a highly desirable component of communicative competence. However, it is high time we realized that communication is a much broader term than conversation, and a language teaching strategy

which is geared to develop conversational fluency need not necessarily lead to communicative competence in its true sense. There are two important points which must be emphasized in this connection.

Objective of Study:
The overall objective of this study is to make some contribution, however modest, towards the development of ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching strategies which, whilst linguistically planned and pedagogically sound, would be particularly compatible with the unfavorable circumstances characterizing the majority of Indian schools and which would, as far as practicable, be in compliance with the tenets of communicative language teaching. Text books and other instructional materials prepared by CBSE and NCERT are to be compared from teachability point of view and important conclusions are to be drawn regarding the merits and limitations of these instructional materials, the ultimate purpose being to lay the foundation of an eclectic methodology suitable for Indian classrooms.

On the basis of the OVERALL OBJECTIVE as stated above, the following MAJOR OBJECTIVES have been set up for the present study:
1. To identify and validate the dimensions of communicative competence (CC) in English in the specific Indian context as conceived by language pedagogists (including textbook compilers) and teacher educators.
2. To analyze, evaluate and compare the textual and other supplementary materials prepared by CBSE and by NCERT. This objective is based mainly on content analysis.
3. To assess the comparative teachability of the curricular material prepared by CBSE and NCERT on the basis of observation schedule carried out by the investigator himself for a period of about three months.
4. To draw important conclusions regarding the need and possibility of arranging for remedial classes in English at the secondary level.
5. To arrive at significant conclusions regarding the need and possibility of carrying out linguistically planned teaching of spoken English at the secondary level
6. To arrive at significant conclusions regarding the applicability of low-cost visual aids in the teaching of English at the secondary stage.

II. METHODOLOGY

The present study has been designed along the lines of a quasi-experimental study in which quantitative data gathered by the researcher on the basis of students pretest-posttest performance will be supplemented by qualitative data based on the opinions of practising school teachers, teacher educators and language pedagogists. Here "Communication can take the form of either spoken or written discourse, Spoken discourse, according to him, includes (apart from conversational exchanges) speeches and lecturers. The fact is that all the five language skills-listening, thinking. speaking, reading and writing need to be developed in a balanced manner in order to ensure communicative competence. Even the seemingly passive act of reading needs the application of communication skills (comprehension, interpretation, imagination, reading between the lines etc.) and indeed reading is communication between the author and the reader. A very similar point of view has been expressed by David Wilkins (quoted in K. Ram Chandran : Is CLT suitable to the Indian Situation? In the Journal of English Language Teaching (Madras, Vol. XX 1985, P-69) in the following words: "If linguistic communication is the transmission of messages from a producer to a receiver, then reading, writing and listening are equally forms of communication. There is nothing in the notion of communication as such that intrinsically favours conversation. All or any of the four or five, including thinking], may be presented by means of a communicative approach."

It must, however, be admitted that although all the fundamental skills mentioned above need balanced development for communicative ability, the content of the language material (i.e. what the learner actually listens to, thinks, speaks, reads and writes) may need some selection and gradation depending on what kind of communicative situations the learner is likely to face most often in his real life (van Ek: 10; 103-115) or what kind of 'notions' he may wish to express (Wilkins: 62; 82-90).

We overemphasize the spoken aspects of communication, it remains a fact that we hardly gain anything from the structural drills and pattern-practice exercises prescribed in the school textbooks because, as Widdowson (46: 1-21) suggests, such drills and practice contribute to the mastery of USAGE and not of USE** This simply means that the ability to recognize, speak and write grammatically correct sentences is one thing and the ability to produce contextually appropriate sentences during normal discourse is quite another. It is only the former which results from the structural - situational or the pattern practice approach, whereas it is the latter that one needs for communication. Whilst Widdowson (Ibid :19) admits that "Knowing a language means both what signification sentences have as instances of age and will all they take on as instances of use", he maintains that communicative language teaching should give priority to USE over USAGE. This view has recently been corroborated by many others and there has been a growing awareness of the importance of accepting communication as the goal of language teaching. As Allwright (55: 167) puts it. "It has been accepted for many

years that communication is the proper aim of language touching". More recently, increasing attention has been paid to what this might mean if taken seriously. However, it is unfortunate that want this might mean still remains a matter of doubts and misgivings, particularly to the non-specialist educated populace,

Relevance of Study:
Communication and Communicative Ability: A Simplified Operational Standpoint in the simplest and broadest possible way, we can say that the act of communication takes place when we have any one or all of the following four situations:

SITUATION 'A': A person makes his thoughts, feelings, ideas or opinions known to others through a spoken or written medium, for instance, when he is delivering a lecture or writing a letter.
SITUATION 'B': A person listens to or reads the thoughts, feelings, ideas or opinions of someone else in an interactive manner that is, with thinking, imagination, understanding and interpretation. According to this standpoint, listening and reading the so-called passive or receptive skills) are also examples of communication, provided the interactive element is present to a marked extent.
SITUATION 'C': Two or more persons are engaged either in conversational exchange or in written discourse (as in postal correspondence).

SITUATION 'D': There is dissemination of information from fixed sources as in the case of mass communication which in reality means communication between a fixed source (such as radio and TV) and the masses.
Chapter wise Scheme:
Chapter 1   PREREQUISITES TO THE DEVELOPMENT of COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE
Chapter 2   DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN INDIA
Chapter 3   Communication and Communicative Ability: A Simplified Operational Standpoint
Chapter 4   Fluency versus Accuracy in English Speaking
Chapter 5   BALANCED AND INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT OF THE BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS

III.   CONCLUSION:

Thus we can conclude "Language originated out of some need or desire. The second-language teacher then must be concerned not only with the learners' ability to communicate; she must also be concerned with their willingness and desire to communicate. The establishment of some reason to communicate and of an atmosphere in which communication is encouraged, expected, and rewarded is also necessary."

Unfortunately, this principle has generally been neglected in our language teaching schemes, and we have directed the major part of our effort towards the securing of language specific performance (not general or integrated competence). Whilst it is necessary to strengthen the performance of the pupils in particular languages (for which we carry out conventional exercises in word -meaning, spelling, grammar, pronunciation etc.). It is equally necessary to create among the pupils some basic sensitivity to language, some awareness of general language facts and a genuine desire to use language for real life communication. If we do this, we can virtually claim to be fostering communicative competence.