Communicative Method of Teaching: An Integrated Approach to Holistic Learning – A Review

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ABSTRACT *This paper gives an overview of the communicative method of teaching and its varied aspects. The ultimate objective of any language learner is to learn the language it its totality and not in bits and pieces. The communicative syllabus is designed to incorporate the components needed for the leaner to use the language effectively. In communicative approach, the teacher has to find out the needs of the learner and act as a motivator lessening the problems faced by students in learning the language. The learners are trained for communicative competence and more emphasis is given for holistic learning. Yet, the learners face lot of difficulties communicating in different scenarios. The paper reinforces the fact that language learning is complicated since there is no definite method to learn a language. The communicative skill varies in degree from one person to another due to various reasons unknown or unexplored. In this respect, the paper puts forth an open ended question with regard to teaching methodologies used in classrooms.*

The tradition of language teaching started with the Grammar-Translation method which is still used in many school systems. The method is based on the assumptions that the language is primary graphic, that the main purpose of second language study is to build knowledge of the structure of the language as a tool for literary research and translation, and that the process of second language learning must be carried out with constant reference to learner's native language. The method ignores spoken communication. Too much emphasis on grammar led to learning about the language rather than learning to use the language.

In the early years of the twentieth century, direct method became popular. This method emphasized aural-oral skills and rejected the use of the learner's mother tongue. It provided an opportunity to use language effectively. Statements and questions were illustrated with actions and learners repeated both the language model and the action. However, all the statements were related to the classroom and hence learners encountered difficulties in using language beyond the classroom.

In 1940s, this method gave way to the structural method of language teaching as a result of the advent of the structural linguistics. The method viewed language as a matter of structures at different levels. Teaching a language was, therefore, the teaching of these structures. Knowledge of the vocabulary and knowledge of the structures were the two components of structural method. The patterns of the language were over-learned by learners so that they would be produced correctly as an unconscious habit.

Various contributions from disciplines such as linguistics to the teaching profession brought about further change and development. Pioneers like Harold Palmer and Michael West tried new ideas to teach language more effectively since by then the focus was moved away from rules and texts towards everyday spoken forms. Both the spoken and written mediums were given due importance.

Between 1950 and 1965, the audio-lingual approach became very popular. This was based on linguistic and psychological theory. It emphasized spoken rather than written language. Mimicry and memorization of dialogues were the predominant activities. Tape recorders, film strips and other pictorial devices were used to teach structures in specific linguistic contexts and situations. The objective of this method was to master sentence patterns rather than the creative use of language.

Since these methods were inadequate, researches were undertaken regarding specific issues in language teaching and in producing useful classroom materials. The project funded by the Nuffield foundation had the resources to explore new ideas in the production and presentation of teaching materials. Later, the ideals for language practice and development became more varied. Teachers were also aware that the goal of teaching was to make students communicate effectively in different situations. But the problem was that the learners, even after receiving formal education of several years, frequently faced difficulties in using language and understanding its use in normal communication.

To rectify such problems, communicative teaching is adopted. The communicative approach is based on the functions of language. Language is used both for interactional and transactional purposes. Language plays a major role in communication and it should not be used consciously. Language needs to get into the communication process. The focus moved away from language towards the user. The user gains the skills needed for effective communication. In order to gain such skills, the classroom lesson has to be primarily based on communicative activity. A communicative syllabus consists of series of organized activities built by analyzing the notion of communication.

This method claims that the speaker will have both communicative competence and linguistic competence. It includes both the knowledge of the structure and formal properties of language and the knowledge necessary for using language effectively in real situations. The speaker should be able to produce appropriate messages suitable to different situations. Of course, the rules of appropriacy pose particular problems for language teachers. Down the years, teachers have been teaching how to use language but the popularization of communicative competence has encouraged them to teach how to use it effectively.

The communicative approach has a 'weak' and 'strong' version. In other words, they are termed as communicative method and communicational method respectively. According to the communicative method, knowledge of the target language is acquired through communicative activity. Learners learn the new language by their communicative capacities and they develop their communicative competence. In the communicational method, the learners not only learn the language but also learn how to use it. They already have a little knowledge of the language and the teacher creates

opportunities to use this knowledge for communicational purposes. The ultimate aim is to promote communicative competence.

The communicative approach has changed the attitude to error. The early methods stressed the importance of accuracy rather than fluency. But the communicative approach encourages the students to talk or write without maintaining accuracy. Errors are seen as useful evidence of the learner's response to his situation as a language learner. Practising fluency will help to develop strategies necessary for the full exploitation of language which they already know. Learners need proper guidance to overcome the errors. This does not mean direct correction by the teachers. Instead by analyzing the mistakes the teacher can change the teaching strategy. The methodology and materials can be changed according to the needs of the learners.

As a result, language teachers have taken the responsibility to present the linguistic system to students in a way that makes it as easy as possible for them to learn it. But the classroom procedures of presentation, drilling, activities, and practice alone will not help students to learn it. These procedures may help students to store parts of language in their memories, but until language is used practically, it cannot be considered fully learnt. Certain items may be used soon after teaching but for most of the items, they will have to wait for weeks before using them naturally. Therefore, the teacher has to create opportunities for students to use the language they have learnt. The approach places its emphasis on the role of the learner as well as on the knowledge which is the characteristic of communicative competence rather than the role of the teacher. A model of this kind requires a great deal of flexibility and imagination on the part of the teacher. The teacher finds out the needs of the students and acts as a motivator, lessening the difficulties experienced by the students

in communication. The teacher is expected to use the available materials as resources in a wide variety of ways.

The system of communicative functions is not yet understood clearly. A particular utterance can be differentiated between warning and threatening only if the situation of its occurrence is known. The interaction between motivation, assumed meaning and language used is extremely problematic. Yet, communicative functions demand a consideration of all probable motives for speaking. Language is not merely a system of symbols used by the learner. It can be defined also as messages conveyed in relation to situations. Language is not something that can be transferred from one person to another. It involves interaction, self-definition, aesthetic creation, thought clarification and other such processes. Although students are taught to do all these things, it is not done systematically. Hence a systematic syllabus was thought about.

As far as a language is concerned, the syllabus is a device for specifying meaning as confined within linguistic units and the methodology realizes this meaning by mediating activities. Communicative syllabuses were designed for creating environment of real language use in the classroom. The two separate components of form and communicative function are maintained in this model. Exercises and activities dominate to realize communicative function and then the emphasis slowly moves to situation or subject matter. Any communicative syllabus prepared for a language teaching programme is expected to include general notions, specific topics, communicative functions, discourse and rhetorical skills, variety of language, role-sets and communicate events as well as grammar and lexis. But it is not possible to include all these components in a single programme. Moreover communicative syllabus requires teachers with native standard performance abilities and their socio-linguistic competence should be high.

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