

English Teachers

LANGUAGE AS COMMUNICATION: ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE.

FACTORS THAT DEFINE A COMMUNICATIVE SITUATION (ADDRESSER, ADDRESSEE, FUNCTIONALITY AND CONTEXT).

Topic 1

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0. Introduction

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We spend an immense amount of time speaking, listening, reading and writing; fact that shows that Language is an essential and characteristic part of human behaviour. Communication between humans is an extremely complex phenomenon, with many variables making difficult its definition.

We have to make it a human event not just a set of information. We do this by using it for real communication, for genuine giving and receiving of messages.

Learning a second language is complicated, too. Second language learning takes in account the communicative approach principles to develop their oral and written skills following the development of student's communicative competence. This view focuses on communicative proficiency rather than on the mastery of structures and vocabulary; and it is included in our national curriculum.

In this unit we are going to study language from a communicative point of view. We will also analyse the differences between oral and written language that let us study some important Communicative Theories.

To conclude we will show how important it is to create Real Communication Situations in our Classrooms in order to improve language teaching by the explanation of the Communicative Approach.

1. Language as communication

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1.1. Definition of language

We find many possibilities to define language according to the author, who can focus the topic in a specific area, due to the importance of language have been changing along the history. From the big set of language definitions we can point out some of them

“ language is a purely human and non instinctive method of commutating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols” (E.Sapir,).

“Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols” (R.A. Hall).

“Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts.” (Henry Sweet)

“A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates.” (G. L. Trager).

“A set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements” (N. Chomsky)

Language is the main means by which people can communicate; now we can easily define language as a system of signs that are combined by conventional rules to transmit or receive information.

One of the most important contributions to this topic was Charles F.Hockett development of approach to comparative linguistics where he attempted to distinguish the similarities and differences among animal communication systems and human language.

Hockett initially developed seven features which were published in the 1959 paper “Animal ‘Languages’ and Human Language.” However, after many revisions, he settled on 13 design-features.

Hockett argued that while every communication system has some of the 13 design features, only human, spoken language has all 13 features. In turn, this differentiates human spoken language from animal communication and other human communication systems such as written language. Charles F. Hocket’s 13 Design Features of Language are:

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Vocal-Auditory Channel

Much of human language is performed using the vocal tract and auditory channel. Hockett viewed this as an advantage for human primates because it allowed for the ability to participate in other activities while simultaneously communicating through spoken language.

Broadcast transmission and directional reception

All human language can be heard if it is within range of another person's auditory channel. Additionally, a listener has the ability to determine the source of a sound by binaural direction finding.

Rapid Fading (transitoriness)

Wave forms of human language dissipate over time and do not persist. A hearer can only receive specific auditory information at the time it is spoken.

Interchangeability

A person has the ability to both speak and hear the same signal. Anything that a person is able to hear, they have the ability to reproduce through spoken language.

Total Feedback

A speaker has the ability to hear himself speaking. Through this, they are able to monitor their speech production and internalize what they are producing through language.

Specialization

Human language sounds are specialized for communication. When dogs pant it is to cool them off, when humans speak it is to transmit information.

Semanticity

This refers to the idea that specific signals can be matched with a specific meaning.

Arbitrariness

There is no limitation to what can be communicated about and there is no specific or necessary connection between the sounds used and the message being sent.

Discreteness

Phonemes can be placed in distinct categories which differentiate them from one another, such as the distinct sound of /p/ versus /b/.

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Displacement

The ability to refer to things in space and time and communicate about things that are currently not present.

Productivity

The ability to create new and unique meanings of utterances from previously existing utterances and sounds.

Traditional Transmission

The idea that human language is not completely innate and acquisition depends in part on the learning of a language.

Duality of patterning

Meaningless phonic segments (phonemes) are combined to make meaningful words, which in turn are combined again to make sentences.

1.2. Communication theories:

We can talk about three influential approaches in the communication theories

1.2.1. Cooperative principle

In social science generally and linguistics specifically, the cooperative principle describes how people interact with one another. As phrased by Paul Grice, who introduced it, it states, "Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." Though phrased as a prescriptive command, the principle is intended as a description of how people normally behave in conversation. The cooperative principle can be divided into four maxims, called the Gricean maxims, describing specific rational principles observed by people who obey the cooperative principle; these principles enable effective communication.

Maxim of Quantity: states that speakers should give the right amount of information. A speaker should say neither too little nor too much.

Maxim of Quality: states that a speaker's contribution to a conversation ought to be true. They should not say what they believe to be false, nor should they say something about which they lack evidence.

Maxim of Relevance: states that contributions should clearly relate to the purpose of exchange. Speakers should be relevant.

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Maxim of Manner: states that the contributions should be clear, perspicuous; speakers should avoid obscurity and ambiguity

1.2.2. - Speech act theory

The British philosopher J.L. Austin was the first to draw attention to the fact that many utterances do not communicate information but are equivalent to actions. According to his studies there are three performative acts:

Locutionary act: The performance of an utterance: the actual utterance and its ostensible meaning.

Illocutionary act: This refers to the act which is performed as a result of the speaker making an utterance, such as requesting, promising, warning, welcoming...

Perlocutionary act: it refers to the speaker's actual effect that the utterance has on the listener, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring, or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something, whether intended or not.

J.R Searle proposed one of the most important taxonomies of the speech act:

- Representative. Description of states and events with an assertion.
- Directive. Suggestions, commands, requesting, etc.
- Expressive: Expressions of feelings and attitudes.
- Declarative: Marrying, christening, declaring in institutional frameworks.

1.2.3. - Discourse analysis

Discourse is quite a complex term in linguistics. We can use it to mean any sequence of language in written or spoken form larger than a sentence; therefore we can define discourse analysis as the study of all those features which are part of the communication process.

Discourse analysis is the branch of linguistics that deals with the study and application of approaches to analyze written, spoken, signed language or any significant semiotic event.

The objects of discourse analysis are variously defined in terms of coherent sequences of sentences, propositions, speech acts or turns-at-talk. Contrary to many of traditional linguists, discourse analysts not only study language use 'beyond the sentence boundary', but also prefer to analyze 'naturally occurring' language use, and not invented examples.

Once we have concluded the study of these approaches, we can say that they have a common idea about the language; they see language as a dynamic, social and interactive phenomenon.

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Related to meaning, as a big term in language, we can state that is not related to single sentences, it concerns complex exchanges amongst participants in which the purpose and the situation play a crucial role.

2. Oral and written language

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Up to this point we have studied the concept of language as means of communication, amongst other functions.

2.1. Characteristics of oral and written language

Now, let us move onto another important aspect of this unit, which deals with the main differences between oral and written language, therefore differences between writing and speech but before summarizing the main differences between spoken and written language we will outline their main features independently.

2.1.1. - Oral language

It is the most obvious aspect of language; speech is the universal material of language. Man has almost certainly been a speaking animal. The earliest known systems of writing go back perhaps some 5000 years. This means that for many hundreds of thousands of years human languages have been transmitted and developed entirely as a spoken means of communication.

The description and classification of speech sounds is the main aim of phonetics. Sounds may be identified with reference to their production, their transmission and their reception. These three activities occur at the physiological level, which implies the action of muscles and nerves. The motor nerves that link the speaker's brain with his speech mechanism activate the corresponding muscles. The movements of the tongue, lips, vocal chords, etc, constitute the articulatory stage of the speech chain, and the area of phonetics that deals with it is articulatory phonetics.

The movement of the articulation produces disturbances in the air pressure called sound waves which are physical manifestations. This is the acoustic stage of the chain, during which the sound waves travel towards the listener's ear. These sound waves activate the listener's ear drum.

2.1.2. - Written language

On the other hand we have written language which evolved independently at different times in several parts of the world. We can classify writing systems into two types:

Non-Phonological Systems: These do not show a clear relationship between the symbols and the sounds of the language. They include the pictographic, ideographic, uniform and Egyptian hieroglyphics and logographic.

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Phonological Systems: These do show a clear relationship between the symbols and the sounds of language. We can distinguish between syllabic and alphabetic systems.

In a syllabic system each grapheme corresponds to a spoken syllable. Alphabetic writing establishes a direct correspondence between graphemes and phonemes. In a perfect regular system there is one grapheme for each morpheme. However, most alphabets in present day use fail to meet these criteria. At one extreme we find such languages as Spanish, which has a very regular system; at the other we find such cases as English and Gaelic where there is a marked tendency to irregularity.

2.2. Differences between oral and written language

Now let's study the main differences between writing and speech. The most obvious is the contrast in physical form. Speech uses phonic substance typically in the form of air-pressure movements, whereas writing uses graphic substance, typically in the form of marks on a surface. As writing can only occasionally be thought of as an interaction, we can establish the following points of contrast:

- The permanence of writing allows repeated reading and close analysis. The spontaneity and rapidity of speech minimises the chance of complex pre-planning, and promotes features that assist speakers to think standing up.
- The participants in written interaction cannot usually see each other, so they cannot make clear what they mean. However, in speech interactions feedback is possible.
- The majority of graphic features present a system of contrasts that has no speech equivalent. Many genres of written language, such as tables, graphs and complex formulae, cannot be conveyed by reading aloud.
- Some constructions may only be found in writing; others only occur in speech, such as in slang and swear words.
- Finally we can say that writing tends to be more formal and so it is more likely to provide the standard that society values. Its performance provides it with a special status.

Despite these differences, the written and spoken language has mutually interacted in many respects. We normally use the written language in order to improve our command of vocabulary, active or passive, spoken or written. It is true that writing has derived from speech in an historical sense, but nowadays their independence is mutual.

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2.3. Implications

The knowledge of the characteristics of oral and written language allows the teacher to design activities which will develop both of them; we can point out some implications in the class:

- Oral language is easier to acquire than written language, so it should be introduced earlier. It is more natural for a person to start listening and speaking first and later to read and write.
- Written language is characterized by a bigger demand in the correction of its structure than oral language. Sentences should be complete and grammatically correct, and words should be spelt correctly.
- Errors in oral language should be considered as more normal within the learning process, due to time constraints when uttering a message.
- Spelling exercises are important: students find the writing of words in English difficult, because of the difference between the oral and written forms.
- The understanding of oral expressions should be encouraged.
- The graphic features of writing make the learning of this skill the slowest to acquire. The preparation of texts should be very simple and guided in primary education.

3. Factors than define a communicative situation

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According to Ivor Armstrong Richards, “communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its environment that another mind is influenced, and in that other mind an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind, and is caused in part by that experience.”

From this definition we can conclude that any communicative act necessarily happens among persons or between a person who acts as a speaker and a listener or between various people who act as receivers but besides these people there are other elements in a communicative act that we must not forget.

Addresser and addressee: They are the participants in the communicative act. The addresser is the author of the message and the addressee is the person or people to whom it is directed, or not, as in the case of a telephone conversation in daily life, we are continuously changing roles as addressers and addressees. In an English classroom we should also try to vary the interactions, so that the communicative act is as genuine as possible.

The Message: The content of information that the speaker sends to the listener.

Medium and channel: The medium is the means by which a message is transmitted; there are two types of media: speech (phonic medium) and writing (graphic medium). **The Channel:** The place through which the message flows.

The Code: A limited and moderately wide group of signs which combine according to certain rules known by the speaker and by the listener. This system is shared by addresser and addressee. Language is the most frequent code used. But there are also other extra-linguistic codes. Non-verbal communication is very important in the first year of learning the spoken language, because students still have very little communicative competence

The Context: The situation in which the speaker and the listener are in, which sometimes helps to interpret the message. The linguistic context and situational context refers to the context provided by the linguistic system itself. The situational context will influence the language type that is used in a communicative act.

The purpose: is the intention of a message. Addressers in a communicative act want something to happen as a result of what they say or write. They may want to give some information; they may want to express pleasure or they may want to apologize. The purpose will vary the election of the words of the addresser. If the intention is to apologize, the addresser can choose among a variety of apologizing forms.

The topic: is the matter about which the interaction is developed. Topics can be varied: health, transport, clothes, sports, etc. in order to have successful communicative activities in the English class it is essential for the topics to be based on the students' interests.

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Register: in linguistics, register refers to a defined style of language and has to do with the formality in the use of language. The register relates all the factors entering into a communication act: the topic, the channel, the medium, the tenor and the context. We can differentiate the following registers: formal, Consultative, Casual, Intimate and frozen.

4. Functionality

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Jakobson 's model

Jakobson extended Bühler's system of communicative functions. His model reminds us of those lined out at the beginning of this chapter containing all the components of Moles', except for one, namely context. Jakobson stated that a common code is not sufficient for the communicative process. A context is necessary from which the object of communication is drawn. Jakobson assigns a communicative function to each of the components

The emotive function focuses on the addresser and resembles Bühler's expressive function. The addresser's own attitude towards the content of the message is emphasized. Examples are emphatic speech or interjections.

The conative function is allocated to the addressee. Bühler called it the appellative function, so it is possible to find both terms in the literature. It is directed towards the addressee. One example is the vocative.

The referential function refers to the context. Here we, again, have the function emphasizing that communication is always dealing with something contextual, what Bühler called representative.

The phatic function helps to establish contact and refers to the channel of communication. Some of these utterances only serve to maintain contact between two speakers.

The metalinguistic function deals with the code itself. This is the function of language about language. This whole reader is an example of metalanguage. We use it to examine the code. The metalinguistic function is also predominant in questions like "Sorry, what did you say?" where the code is misunderstood and needs correction or clarification.

The poetic function is allocated to the message. Messages convey more than just the content. They always contain a creative 'touch' of our own. These additions have no purpose other than to make the message "nicer". Rhetorical figures, pitch or loudness are some aspects of the poetic function. Naturally, several functions may be active simultaneously in utterances. To find out which function predominates requires analysis.

These functions of language have the following pedagogical implications:

- The English language teacher should not only teach the language for students to communicate their ideas (referential function), but he/she should also teach

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expressions, phrases or interjections to help them maintain relationships (phatic function), enjoy the language (poetic function) or to understand the language better (metalingual function).

4.2. Halliday's model

The British linguist Michael Halliday believes language exists to fulfill certain human needs, such as the need to make sense of the world or to relate to others. His model of language is called functional or systemic grammar. The development of this grammar was a reaction to more abstract approaches associated with Chomsky's generative grammar. Halliday sees language as a social and cultural phenomenon, whereas Chomsky sees it as a biological one. According to this author there are the following functions of language:

The ideational function: This function emphasizes language as an instrument of thought with which we represent the world to ourselves. We use the language to conceptualize the world: language refers to real or imagined objects, persons, events, etc.

The interpersonal function: This function emphasizes language as an instrument of transaction by which we represent ourselves to other people. We use language as a personal medium: to establish or maintain social relationships.

The textual function: This function emphasizes language as an instrument of communication with which we construct sentences cohesively and coherently. We use language to form texts, whether spoken or written.

Several pedagogical implications can be derived from this view of language:

- The language presented to students must be contextualized in realistic and natural situations.
- Students are expected to interact with one another through pair and group work in order to experience communication.
- Syllabuses should be organized around the notions and functions that learners should acquire.

As we have seen communication is the exchange of meanings through a common system of symbols. Now it is time to ask ourselves: What does communication in the classroom imply?"

5. The communicative approach or communicative language teaching (CLT)

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5.1 Background

As an extension of the notional-functional syllabus, CLT also places great emphasis on helping students use the target language in a variety of contexts and places great emphasis on learning language functions. This means that successfully learning a foreign language is assessed in terms of how well learners have developed their communicative competence, which can loosely be defined as their ability to apply knowledge of both formal and sociolinguistic aspects of a language with adequate proficiency to communicate.

5.2. Principles

CLT is usually characterized as a broad approach to teaching, rather than as a teaching method with a clearly defined set of classroom practices. As such, it is most often defined as a list of general principles or features. One of the most recognized of these lists is David Nunan's (1991) five principles of CLT:

- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the Learning Management process.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

These five features are claimed by practitioners of CLT to show that they are very interested in the needs and desires of their learners as well as the connection between the language as it is taught in their class and as it is used outside the classroom. Under this broad umbrella definition, any teaching practice that helps students develop their communicative competence in an authentic context is deemed an acceptable and beneficial form of instruction. Thus, in the classroom CLT often takes the form of pair and group work requiring negotiation and cooperation between learners, fluency-based activities that encourage learners to develop their confidence, role-plays in which students practice and develop language functions, as well as judicious use of grammar and pronunciation focused activities.

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5.3. Communicative competence

The American sociolinguist Dell Hymes established a new concept in language theory which complemented Halliday's functional view: the communicative competence. It is defined as what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community. Hymes coined this term in contrast to Chomsky's theory of competence. For Chomsky, competence simply implied the knowledge of the language system. Hymes maintained that Chomsky's theory was incomplete, and that a communicative and cultural dimension should be incorporated. A speaker does not only need the ability to use grammatical structures, but also to learn how to use those structures in a community (appropriateness). Canale and Swain (1980) were two linguists who expanded the previous description of Hymes establishing the dimensions of the communicative competence (subcompetences):

Grammatical Competence

The ability to put into practice the system of grammar rules by which a language operates.

Sociolinguistic Competence

The ability to produce appropriate utterances in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purpose of the interaction....

Sociocultural Competence

This is understood to be the knowledge of the social and cultural context in which the language is used.

Discourse Competence

The ability to produce unified written or spoken discourse that shows coherence and cohesion in different types of texts. On the other hand, Canale defined Discourse Competence as the aspect of communicative competence which describes the ability to produce unified written or spoken discourse that shows coherence and cohesion and which conforms to the norms of different genres

Strategic Competence

The ability to use verbal and non-verbal strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication, or to improve the effectiveness of communication, as for example, the use of paraphrasing, tone of voice or gestures.

5.3. Communicative activities

Communicative activities refer to the tasks and exercises that the student carries out for real communication. These activities focus more on the message than on the linguistic features of the language. Children learn how to speak without knowing what verbs, adjectives or verbal tenses are. The communicative approach believes that the practice of communicative activities will produce the unconscious learning of the structures of the language. A communicative activity must be:

- Interactive: Two or more people are involved in the communicative interaction.
- Unpredictable. A student has to seek the information his/her partner has. This will create the necessity and the desire to communicate.
- Within a context. This refers to the situational context (place, circumstances, time, and channel used...) as well as the linguistic context (cohesion in linguistic forms and in vocabulary).
- Authentic. The language used should be genuine, that is to say, similar to that of an English-speaking person.

Examples of oral communicative activities:

- Information-gap activities.
- Role-play.
- Problem-solving.
- Following instructions.
- Describing personal experiences.
- Communicative games.

Examples of written communicative activities:

- Writing instructions.
- Writing short messages.
- Writing short letters.
- Writing to penfriends.
- Writing questionnaires, quizzes, puzzles, TV programs.
- Writing imaginary diaries.
- Filling in forms.
- Project work.

6. Conclusion

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Communication is the main purpose of a language, and the use and function that fulfils depends greatly on the characteristics of the information or the form of the message. In any case, for a communication process to be complete, it is necessary that both addresser and addressee negotiate the meaning of what is being transmitted, overcoming any possible obstacles difficulting that process.

Learning a foreign language today implies knowing how to use the language just as a native does: knowing the structures and the vocabulary, at oral and written levels, in a variety of circumstances and situations.

In this unit we have seen how to study a language from a communicative point of view. We have also analyzed the differences between oral and written language that let us study some important Communicative Theories. To conclude we have shown how important it is to create Real Communication Situations in our Classrooms in order to improve language teaching by the explanation of the Communicative Approach.

This topic has crucial importance for the teacher because it settles the theoretical principles of language and its nature; that let the teacher carry out the teaching process focused on student learning process.

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