

Towards Developing Pragmatic Competence

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One of the aims of teaching language is the development of communicative competence in the user of the language. This is truer in the context of teaching English as second language in the pan Indian, multilingual, pluralistic context in country. The English language has assumed a larger role in the context of globalization and thus it has become the language for intranational and international communication.

Pragmatic competence is one of the major components of communicative competence and it is the ability to express appropriately a range of language functions. The recent trends in language teaching and in particular the communicative approaches to language teaching stress that in order to be effective language users, learners need to know more about the appropriate ways in which English can be used in social context than the need to know about the systems of the language.

The lack of pragmatic competence in the user of the language is likely to lead the user in committing errors and thus to have negative judgments about the speaker's personality.

How to develop this competence in the user of the language? What will be the role of the teacher in developing such a competence? What kind of classroom dynamics should prevail to facilitate the learner acquire this competence? What will be the implications for curriculum development? Can exposure to the target language alone bring about the required competence in the user?

This paper attempts to address the above issues within the framework of second language teaching contexts and approaches in India.

The thrust has now been on 'communication'. Communication as we all know is a two way process and it is of two kinds namely the verbal and the non-verbal. The non verbal mode includes gestures, facial expressions and the like. On the other hand the verbal involves using language for the purpose. Language is meaning potential and meaning is 'Context bound'. In other words when one is said to be involved in the act of communication he/she is deemed to be involved in 'Conveying meaning' which is context specific and context driven. The act of 'communication' may be in two modes namely the spoken and the written. Further when one is involved in the act of communication he/she is said to be involved in a 'meaningful discourse' which includes the application of communication strategies.

These strategies may be meta-cognitive and cognitive. In a situation like the one we have in an English classroom there are opportunities for the teacher to apply these strategies meaningfully and provide a model and thus an exposure to the different models of language.

'Communication skills get developed only by communicating'

The teacher in the classroom has to be a good communicator for the reason she/he has to be all the time conveying meaning in a coherent and cohesive manner. This implies the choice of language in terms of vocabulary and structure appropriate to the context. The need to be communicatively competent on the part of the teacher gets further strengthened for the agent he/she is the catalyst to the language used by the student.

Communication if it has to be effective, the communicator has to be aware of the following:

- The need to be intelligible
- The need to understand the context (formal or informal or casual), the relation between the individuals involved in the act of communication and the purpose
- The need to be accurate and appropriate

- The need to be competent to create an environment for continued discourse
- The need to be pragmatically competent i.e. the need to have the ability to express appropriately a range of language functions.

It is generally acknowledged that the classroom does not normally provide adequate context for learners to pick up pragmatic information incidentally. In other words using the language appropriately depends on taking into account a number of contextual variables such as the social identities of and social relationships between speakers. This is to imply that the typical L2 classroom may not provide language learners with adequate opportunities to observe how things are done with words in the target language in the wider variety of situations and settings the learners are likely to encounter outside of the classroom. Hence there is a need to become aware of the pragmatic features of language which will not only make one's communicative ability become more purposeful and meaningful but also help in the effective instruction of second language. Hence, the need for developing in practicing teachers pragmatic competence a component or an aspect of communicative competence.

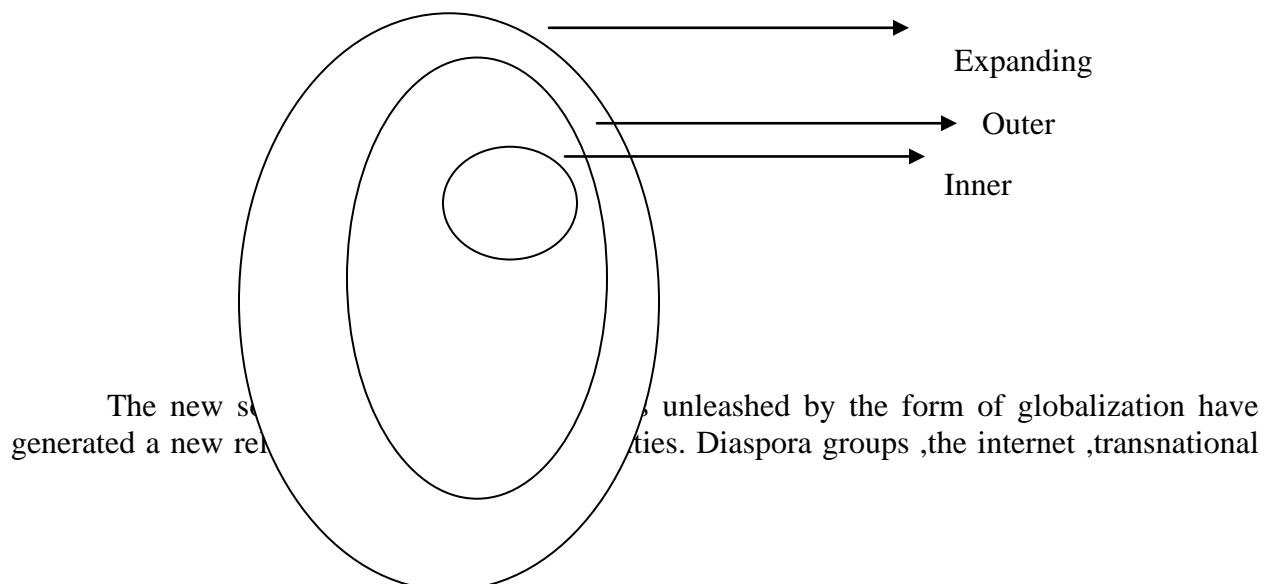
English language teachers thus need to have instruction about pragmatics so that they can develop awareness and a well informed professional knowledge base about pragmatics.

English has been taught as a second language in the pan- Indian context. The language which has been considered as a link language, associate official language and library language is also used as the language for lingua franca communication in the multilingual, pluralistic environment in India besides being a second language.

All these have their implications for curriculum development and classroom pedagogy. The paper focuses on the existing scenario in terms of the teacher-learner profiles, the linguistic background and the approaches to English language learning and teaching. All the issues related are addressed in the light of the paradigm shifts in teaching and learning; to mention a few the shift from teacher centeredness to learner centeredness and now to learning centeredness; from behaviorism to looking at language learning as a cognitive process wherein the learner will have to apply a few strategies of learning acquired over a period of time notwithstanding the dichotomy between learning and acquisition.

The spread of English language

Kachru's (1986) notion of world English has given us a hint on the spread of English language in the global village. Kachru's model has pluralized the English language by showing the rule-governed nature of the new varieties that have emerged in post colonial communities. The spread of English is in three concentric circles as shown by:



production and economic relationships and expression of time and space through travel, media and communication account for what is called post modern globalization(Hall ,1997). This social context is marked by traits that differ from center /periphery stratification that accompanied globalization and have been with us until recently in what Hall calls modernist globalization. This has led to the emergence of a new social context. The new social context can be further described thus.

The interaction between communities in multi lateral (i.e) international involvement at diverse level is needed in today's economic and production enterprises. National boundaries have become porous as people, goods and ideas flow across borders. Language communities and cultures have become hybrid shaped by their fluid flow of social and economic relationships.

Expanding and outer circle communities are developing new norms has the use English for lingua franca communication. When speakers in the outer circle and expanding circle speak to each other they are able to negotiate their differences their own terms and accomplish their communicative needs effectively developing new norms. The search is still on for lingua franca core a possible grammar that does not belong to any national variety but facilitates communication when speakers step outside their communities.

English is a heterogeneous language with multiple norms each norm coming into play at different levels of social interaction. While lingua franca norms coming into play in multilingual context, the local norm may have to be used in clearly demarcated contexts of inner circle or outer circle usage. In extremely formal institutional contexts where inner circle norms are conventional one has to adopt the established norms. Proficiency in the post modern globalization requires the ability to negotiate this variability. The need of the hour is to address the fact that there are different norms that come into play at different levels of social interaction.

English having become the global language, the objectives of learning and teaching of English have become all the more different and the focus has become very specific i.e, to develop the ability to construct and extract meaning; the ability to construct and extract knowledge in English in other words the ability to become proficient in using the language. It is not at just at the level of skill getting it is also at the level of skill using and thus the ability to encode or decode meaning appropriate to the appropriate situations. The objective has thus become the development of the ability to understand the functional aspect of language. Thus the emphasis is on learning the functions of language. i.e., the communicative purpose for which language is used.

For example, the ability to acquire and use the language for expressing day-to-day needs, such as making a request, expressing a suggestion, expressing agreement and disagreement, interrupting a conversation or a dialogue, greeting, introducing, welcoming, thanking, seeking and giving information, initiating a dialogue, ending dialogue, expressing opinion and so on and all these in both formal and informal situations. The need then is to acquire the 'forms' of language to express these functions and use them appropriate way in meaningful contexts.

Learners at all levels and in particular at the tertiary level need the language for performing higher level functions and thus they need to equip themselves with the acquisition of appropriate language skills to facilitate an effective and meaningful communication and understanding of the content in English. Communication having become the 'core' of language use the learners at any level must also acquire the ability to 'fine - tune' the language acquired both in the oral and written medium .Language being a means of discourse, the learners at different levels may require those skills and aspects of language appropriate to take part in different discourse kinds such as narrating, describing, arguing, expressing cause and effect

relations and so on. The language to be acquired thus will be 'need – based' to cater to the differing language – use events/environments. Thus the objective, to use the term coined by 'Dell Hymes' is to become communicatively competent i.e., to acquire linguistic competence, grammatical competence, socio – linguistic competence and strategic competence – which constitute communicative competence.

When the objectives of teaching and learning have become so clearly defined, what ails our learners in realizing these objectives. This takes us to the next issue – Who is our learner?

A brief profile of the learner at the tertiary level:

English Language learners at the tertiary level are invariably from differing socio – economic, academic linguistic backgrounds and are differently able with differing levels of motivation, need achievements, differing learning styles and 'needs' .Needless mention the demographic differences among them, the influence of mother tongue besides poor acquisition – rich environment and the lack of awareness on the part of the learners of the need to become proficient users/competent users of the target language. Besides these, the learner at this level require language competence to comprehend what is being transacted in the class (i.e., understanding the lectures through listening) and read in English for knowledge construction and later express through speaking and writing wherein the learner is also required to acquire higher academic skills such as note-making, extracting, writing abstracts, summaries and transcoding the content. The learner at the tertiary level is deemed to have formally learnt the English language at least for a period of ten years before entering the said level.

The ability to negotiate English in diverse transnational contexts in post modern communication requires us to move beyond proficiency in single varieties of English and to develop broader competencies that enable students to deal with these needs. The competencies to be developed in the learners then will include Language awareness

Social linguistic sensitivity and Negotiation skills

The learners will have to realize that there are well established pragmatic conventions for English communication. They will have to be aware of dialect differences, identity considerations, contextual constraints and cultural sensitivity. The need of the hour is thus to devise more interactive and collaborative pedagogical formats for developing one's proficiency in strategies of language negotiation

In the light of the above, the teachers responsibilities in the class, besides transacting the content include equipping the learners with a set of techniques and skills required for realizing the objectives of learning the language and for realizing the goals set before him/her .The teacher at this level hence needs to equip himself/herself with the necessary skills to successfully transact so as to cater to the needs of the learners.

The paradigm shift – from learner centeredness to learning centeredness, focuses not on the product of learning but on the processes of learning and it has changed the role of the teacher from that of knowledge giver or dispenser of knowledge to that of a facilitator and a change agent. In this role the teacher needs to understand the differing inherent styles of learning of the learner(s) and the 'schema' that each one has. In the absence of any such conscious application or employment of the schema or strategies, there is a need on the part of the teacher to formally train the learners in the use of well tried out and frequently used learning strategies.

For years the language teaching scenario at the secondary level has been dominated by the SOS approach .The early 1980's -1990's witnessed the change from the behaviorist centered approach to cognitive approach which views language learning as a process. That has been reflected in the CLT which as an approach focuses on developing the ability to convey meaning.

In other words the focus has been on the functions of language and not on the 'forms' of language and thus the shift from the use of graded materials to those materials which look at language as a 'whole'.

Achieving these will be possible only through a curriculum (The term curriculum is used here to refer to syllabus.) Which is learner centered and need based? In the recent years there has been an increasing argument among syllabus planners, teachers and learners that English language courses should incorporate them learners' future language needs into them. The learner needs in the changing scenario are diverse in nature. The skills required, for instance, include effective communicative abilities to realize the objectives of communication both at the prospective work place(s) and social environments. Further with advent of globalization and technology driven life style the purpose of acquiring need based skills has become all the more important.e.g. Negotiation strategies.

A need based curriculum thus will be holistic and will focus on the development of language through a content (across different discipline and genres) and attempt skills development in an integrated mode. Also, in other words, it will attempt to impart by including in it content from the specific discipline and from the general. A need based curriculum will equally emphasize on cognitive functions and language/communicative functions which relate to the day to day practical academic needs of students at the said level. A learner then will have an exposure to content materials (subject specific) and process materials. Content materials will chiefly serve as sources of data in information. The main purpose of content materials will be to serve as a means for the process of learning. Process materials, on the other hand, will serve as guidelines or framework for the learner use of communicative knowledge and abilities. Their main role will be initially to organize and facilitate the learner's process competence in relation to any particular content.

Mianoona (1992) has outlined three broad approaches to course design. They are

- language centered
- skill centered and
- Learning centered which is all inclusive focusing on both the academic and specific needs of the learner and it provides context for cooperative negotiation, joint interpretation and sharing of expressions.

Problem posing approach to language curriculum:

This approach involves many steps .The first step in this approach is to identify topics of concern to students. The concerns are then presented to students through visual or linguistic input: a picture, dialogue, or other text types. Criteria used for selection of this input are that it depicts a situation that students can easily recognize, and that it poses a problem with several possible solutions. The text or visual should not provide solutions so that a discussion of the problem will encourage students to think of options and possibilities. The problems which are posed should not be overwhelming or unsolvable, and the presentation of the problem should be sensitive to local culture and beliefs, so that students can consider steps they might take to address or resolve the problem.

Teachers encourage discussion of the text or visual through questions which lead students to describe the situation, identify the problem, relate the problem to their own experience, analyze the cause of the problem, and seek solutions. Through this question and answer dialogue, students generate vocabulary and use structures that the teacher later draws on to develop a series of exercises, practice opportunities, and application activities which make up the rest of an instructional unit. The posing and discussion of problems provides teachers who have few

materials with a focus on content and language structures that they can exploit in a series of language teaching lessons following the problem-posing sessions. This process enables teachers to renew and supplement curriculum outlines with language activities that develop students' English language skills as they address interesting and meaningful issues.

Since language learning in a problem – posing design evolves out of an issue that is relevant to students' lives, it has the advantage of being highly motivating and providing a purposefulness to language – learning activities. Students learn to say in English what they really want to say, and structures can be acquired in the order students need then for authentic discourse creation/construction. Problem – posing allows for affective responses while building the language, critical thinking, and life skills students need, and providing them with opportunities to practice and apply those skills.

The learner at the tertiary level requires both communication skills and language skills required for performing specific purposes. When language is taught or learnt for specific purposes, the curriculum for the same should include activities which focus on practical skills and activities that will help in preparing learners perform macro tasks directly relevant to their prospective vocation. In short that curriculum should aim at developing the ability to perform and acquire skills at the micro and macro levels.

Example, making an oral presentation to secure a technical project.

The learner will have to take part in different discourse type and use language meaningfully in recurring situations. This implies grammar based approach to course design or a function based course design may not be able to facilitate the fulfillment of the academic /language needs.

Illustration:

Specific needs of the students of science (cognitive and linguistic)

- Acquiring, recalling and confirming facts.
- delineating scientific concepts ,principles or theoretical models'
- identifying problems
- solving concrete problems
- solving problems by applying in scientific context
- making or testing hypothesis or specification
- identifying or describing or recording observation
- interpreting, observed or recorded data
- inferring from observed or recorded data

When needs being so specific for students of different disciplines language teaching will not be found interesting or useful in an inclusive classroom for the simple reason that at the tertiary level there are learners who belong to different discipline in one situation. The existing course materials don't seem to be catering to the needs of an inclusive class. Hence an argument is made for a design which is learner centered, interesting and need based. A content unit of such a design will focus on development of the language skills besides creative thinking and relative cognitive skills for better performance and acquiring language competence. A content unit of such a design will resemble thus.

Text for reading Comprehension activities (differing levels)

Discussion (on an issue-related to the reading content)

- Dialogue
- Presentation &
- Debates

Writing

Academic writing with grammar and language functions in-built, note making, note taking and reports.

Note: The text suggested may be across different disciplines and genres. Literary text can also be one such kind.

having a learner friendly approach to language teaching in the classroom besides using materials that have the in-built potential for language use and language acquisition and such materials should facilitate learner interaction and opportunities for constructing language for conveying 'meaning'. Further such materials it is hoped will provide learner autonomy, which goes with increased language awareness. Consciousness-raising in the area of language form and structure will take care of itself. The materials will also encourage greater awareness on the part of the learners of the learning strategies which they use. Such greater consciousness will help make learners more reflective, flexible and adaptable.

CONCLUSION

A problem posing and solving approach is based on the principle knowing a language in which appreciating how and why its rules can be broken or creatively manipulated. Such an approach helps the learner become more aware of the language rules that assists in the development of interpretative and inferential skills.

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