

Assumptions and Applications of Communicative Activities for Collaborative Learning in ESL Class

K.YUGANDHAR

Abstract

The quality of ESL class can be improved with collaborative learning with communicative activities. Various real world situations and discourse communities encourage language learners to observe the effective users of the language and imitate them according to their needs. A teacher needs to have a clear conception of the communicative tasks design and then to be able to design appropriate tasks for collaborative learning.

The aim of the paper is to provide college teachers with a framework for analyzing and designing communicative tasks, presenting teachers with the approaches of designing communicative tasks to solve the learners' two main problems - learners have lower rates of verbal participation and they fail to express themselves with basic fluency and accuracy. The paper first focuses on the principles that are to be followed in designing communicative tasks, and then various components of the tasks are detailed. The problems on the part of learners while participating in communicative tasks are discussed in the next phase of the paper and then approaches to solve the problems in participating in the activities are illustrated. This helps teachers select, adapt or create their own design of effective communicative tasks and make their teaching more successful and more effective.

Key Terms: Communicative tasks, Principles and components of the tasks, Practicalities to involve learners in the tasks.

Acquisition of linguistic proficiency by their learners is a constant concern for language teachers. Teaching experiences enable the teachers to figure out two common challenges - learners have lower rates of verbal participation and they fail to express themselves with basic fluency and accuracy. Against this background, it is of great importance for a teacher to have a clear conception of the communicative tasks design and then to be able to design appropriate communicative tasks for different teaching materials and to conduct activities to implement these tasks in appropriate ways with different sets of students in different classes. It is crucial for a teacher to frequently reflect on their teaching beliefs and teaching practices so that they can make continuous progresses in their teaching.

Designing effective communicative tasks suitable for graduate students to solve these two problems and to develop the learners' communicative competence is crux in improving their language proficiency. The focus of this paper is to provide college teachers with a framework for analyzing and designing communicative tasks, presenting teachers with two approaches of designing communicative tasks to solve the learners' two main problems. This helps teachers select, adapt or create their own design of effective communicative tasks and make their teaching more successful and more effective.

Principles of Communicative Tasks Design:

Task design is the most important element in Task based Language Teaching. Teacher need to have a clear idea about kinds of tasks, whether focus on language form or not and how difficult the tasks should be in order to facilitate learning of different learners with different learning levels. Four basic principles relating to communicative tasks design are discussed that help teachers to design the tasks for improving language skills for college students.

1. The Principle of Meaningful Tasks: Halliday (1975) emphasizes that learning a foreign language involves the acquisition of a new system for realizing familiar meanings. Language develops in response to the need to mean and to understand what others mean. It follows that materials we offer learners should allow them to focus first on meanings in contexts and then go on to look at the wordings that realize the meanings.

From these viewpoints, we can argue that any pedagogical process which supports natural acquisitional processes should therefore lead from meanings to wordings. This is a major principle behind a task-based approach to course design. In setting learners a task to achieve (e.g., a problem to solve), the emphasis is first on learners' exchanging meanings to complete the task, using whatever language they can recall. Then they examine the language that fluent speakers or writers used to do the same task and focus on typical words, phrases and patterns (i.e., wordings) that occurred (Willis, 1998a).

2. The Principle of Some Focus on Language Form: Of the many issues in our field, that of focusing on form or focusing on meaning has probably been one of the most widely discussed. Most applied linguists argue that both are important, and that they are in fact two sides of a single coin and not the opposing issues.

Meanwhile, when we design a task or an activity, we mean that a good guidance to each task, even a subtask is usually shown in the language teaching or learning, so as to have learners understand and use language effectively in the communicative activity, through a rich array of task practice. Although many students acquire a new language with little focus on language form, there is now some evidence that learners do better if, at some point, their attention is drawn to typical features of language form (Skehan, 1994a). This can be done in two ways:

- Through consciousness-raising exercises highlighting frequently used language items, to help learners perceive patterns (Schmidt, 1990), and systematize what they know.
- By challenging learners to communicate in circumstances where accuracy matters, so they feel the need, at a prior planning stage, to organize their ideas clearly and to check that their lexical choices, their grammar and pronunciation are accurate.

3. The Authenticity Principle: If learners never get to listen to or read authentic texts in the supportive atmosphere of the classroom the challenge of functioning effectively in genuine communication outside the classroom will be that much greater (Nunan, 1999).

Non-authentic data can provide learners with examples of target grammar and vocabulary in texts that are simple enough to enable learners to understand and process the language. As such, they are valuable resources for learners, particularly in the early stages of learning. So, when we

design a task, we have to deal with the relationship between its authenticity and the contents in the texts and try to have learners understand and practise a language in a naturally authentic language situation. In many ways authenticity of tasks can be achieved and pedagogic tasks can have more meanings and be more related to the real world. These include making tasks more authentic through the following means:

- a. *Through genuine task purposes:* Willis (1998) asserts that one of the crucial aspects of task authenticity is whether real communication takes place. So the first way to make tasks authentic is to find out a genuine purpose for the language to be learned, only when there is a purpose will real meaningful communication take place.
- b. *Through real world targets:* Working within a needs-analysis framework, Long and Crookes (1992) argue that pedagogic tasks must be related to real-world target tasks. Examples given by them are: buying a train ticket, renting an apartment, reporting a chemistry experiment taking lecture notes etc.
- c. *Through classroom interactions:* A classroom is a special society. Students and teachers get together for a common purpose. So, pedagogic tasks can be authentic through classroom interactions. Teachers should have the ability to explore the potential authenticity of the learning situation in classrooms.
- d. *Through learners' engagement:* Another crucial element of task is whether it is relevant to the learners. So in order to make tasks more authentic, task designers must take learners' engagement into consideration. It's true that some tasks are authentic to some learners but not at all to others.

4. The Principle of Reasonable Task Difficulty: Researches have proved that task difficulty have great influences on the effect of tasks , namely the accuracy, complexity and fluency of the learners' language outcomes. So, proper choice of difficulty in different stage of a TBLT class is of great importance.

In order to control the difficulty of tasks, teachers should know how to make tasks easy and difficult to meet different needs. Nunan reviews some factors relating to task difficulty. He and Candlin offer two lists in 1987, one of which focuses solely on the nature of the task, while the other is based upon the cognitive operations required of the learners.

The first list which is offered by Candlin is as follows:

- cognitive complexity
- communicative difficulty
- whether the task follows a general sequence of operations or whether this is unclear
- linguistic complexity

- continuity between tasks

The following is the second list which was issued by Nunan and Candlin:

- attending to or noticing or recognizing the input
- making sense of the input
- processing information
- transferring and generalizing what is learned

After outlining four basic principles relating to communicative tasks design, the paper focuses on the description and illustration of practical process of course and materials design which takes these principles into account.

Components of Communicative Tasks:

Activity refers to tasks, not exercises. Tasks contain some form of input data which might be verbal or non-verbal. An activity is in some way derived from the input and sets out what the learners are to do in relation to the input. Nunan (1989) suggests that the communicative tasks will contain a goal, input, activities, settings and roles. Goals of tasks are to develop students' communicative competence including socio-linguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Goals, input and activities are the three major components of communicative tasks.

1. Task Goals: Goals mean the general intentions behind any given communicative tasks and learning tasks. They may be related to a range of general outcomes (communicative, effective or cognitive) or may directly describe teacher or learner behaviour. The making of goals is very important before learners' communicative activities. Clark (1987) divided communicative goal into three goal areas:

- Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and through this to exchange information, ideas, opinions, attitudes and feelings, and to get things done;
- Acquiring information from more or less 'public' sources in the target language (e.g. books, magazines, newspapers, brochures, documents, signs, notices, films, television, slides, tape, radio, public announcements, lectures or written reports etc.) and using this information in some way;
- Listening to, reading, enjoying and responding to creative and imaginative uses of the target language (e.g. stories, poems, songs, rhymes, drama) and, for certain learners, creating them themselves.

Goals are generally referenced against the sorts of things which learners want to do with the language outside the classroom. Typical goal statements include:

- to develop the skills necessary to take part in academic study;

- to obtain sufficient oral and written skills to obtain a promotion from unskilled worker to site supervisor;
- to communicate socially in the target language;
- to develop the survival skills necessary to obtain goods and services;
- to be able to read the literature of the target culture.

After realizing goals, learners need to have enough materials as input before participating in communicative activities. Input is another important element of communicative tasks, it is necessary to analyze input as is indispensable to a communicative task.

2. Input: The theories of second language acquisition agree that, for learning a modern language, learners must be exposed to a considerable amount of language input either in natural or artificial teaching settings. Rod Ellis (1999:127) considered that input is used to refer to the language that is addressed to the foreign language learner either by a native speaker or by another foreign language learner. The suggestion being made by Krashen, then, is that students can acquire language on their own provided that they get a great deal of comprehensible input.

A further distinction needs to be made, however, between two different types of input: roughly-tuned input and finely-tuned input. The former is language at a level slightly above the students' abilities. The later is language selected very precisely to be at exactly the students' level. For our purposes finely-tuned input can be taken to mean that language which we select for conscious learning and teaching. In communicative classroom, the approaches of input often refer to listening to extract specific information and reading to extract specific information. Listening to Extract Specific Information and Reading to Extract Specific Information are two main approaches of input that are useful and practical.

3. Activities: Activities refer to the behaviour that participants do with the input, which forms the point of departure for the learning task. Nunan(1989/2000)proposes three general ways of characterizing activities:1) rehearsal for the real world (authenticity); 2) skills use; 3) fluency and accuracy.

The Effective Speaking Activities: According to Penny's view (2000:120), an effective speaking activity includes four aspects as the following:

- **Learners talk a lot:** As much as possible of the period of time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by learner talk. This may seem obvious, but often most time taken up with teacher talk or pauses.
- **Participation is even:** Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants: all get a chance to speak, and contributions one fairly evenly distributed.
- **Motivation is high:** Learners are eager to speak: because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective.
- **Language is of an acceptable level:** Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy.

The Problems on the Part of Learners: 1) Shame 2) Nothing to say 3) Low or uneven participation 4) Mother-tongue use.

Now let us look at these problems and consider what we might do in the classroom in order to overcome each of the problems.

The Approaches to Solve the Problems:

- **Use group task:** This increases the sheer amount of learner talk going on in a limited period of time and also lowers the inhibitions of learners who are unwilling to speak in front of the full class.
- **Base the activity on easy language:** In general, the level of language needed for a discussion should be lower than that used in intensive language learning activities in the same class: it should be easily recalled and produced by the participants, so that they can speak fluently with the minimum of hesitation. It is a good idea to teach or review essential vocabulary before the activity starts.
- **Make a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interest:** A good topic is one to which learners can relate using ideas from their own experience and knowledge; the “ability-grouping” topic is therefore appropriate for most students, learners or young people whose school memories are fresh. A task is essentially goal-oriented: it requires the group, or pair, to achieve an objective that is usually expressed by an observable result, such as brief notes or lists, a rearrangement of jumbled items, a drawing, a spoken summary. This result should be attainable only by interaction between participants: so within the definition of the task you often find instruction such as “reach a consensus”, or “find out everyone’s opinion”.
- **Give some instruction or training in discussion skills:** If the task is based on group discussion then include instructions about participation when introducing it. For example, tell learners to make sure that everyone in the group contributes to the discussion; appoint a chairperson to each group who will regulate participation.
- **Keep students speaking the target language:** You might appoint one of the groups as monitor, whose job it is to remind participants to use the target language, and perhaps report later to the teacher how well the group managed to keep to it. Even if there is no actual penalty attached, the very awareness that someone is monitoring such lapses helps participants to be more careful.
- **Role-play and related techniques:** Role-play is used to refer to all sorts of activities where learners imagine themselves in a situation outside the classroom, sometimes playing the role of someone other than themselves, and using language appropriate to this new context. Normally, the groups or pairs improvise their role-play between themselves, simultaneously, with no audience. Sometimes, however, volunteers may

perform their role-plays later in front of the class. This is virtually one of the ways we can give our learners the opportunity to practice improvising a range of real-life spoken language in the classroom, and cooperative.

Since task based language teaching is a realistic approach requiring a change in methodological focus on traditional materials that can provide some activities out of which task-based frameworks can be constructed. The biggest challenge for a teacher is whether a set of materials adaptation or redesign is suitable for a group of students. Communicative tasks design has been proved to be effective in teaching English in promoting the learners' competence in using the language to do things they need to do. Communicative tasks design offers a change from the traditional teaching routines through which many learners have previously failed to communicate. It encourages learners to experiment with whatever English pieces they can recall, to try things out without fear of failure, to express themselves with basic fluency and accuracy.

References:

- Armour, D. "Six Ways of Pairing Students in an ESL Classroom" English Teaching Forum (1996) : 34 . 43-44.
- Chastain, K. "Developing Second - Language Skills." Theory and Practice. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Iovanovich, Inc, 1988.
- Ellis, M. "Approaches to mixed ability groups" The Polish Teacher Trainer (1994) : 3.
- John H. Holloway. *Research Link—Preparing Teachers for Differentiated Instruction*. < <http://www.ascd.org>> December 2008.
- Kerr, L. "Pair Work - Some Practical Hints", English Teaching Forum, 23(1985) 22-24.
- Krashen, D.S. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. New York: Prentice - Hall International 1988.
- Lescano, A.A. "The Remedial English Project" English Teaching Forum, 33.4 (1995) 40-41.
- Scott Willis and Larry Mann. *Differentiating Instruction: Finding Manageable Ways to Meet Individual Needs*. < <http://www.ascd.org>> December 2008.

Author & Affiliation:

Dr.K.Yugandhar
Asst.Professor,
Eritrea Institute of Technology,
MaiNefhi, Asmara.
E-mail : yogi_english@yahoo.com