

Interest-Oriented Language Learning through Situational Conversation

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ABSTRACT

Today's world face two great explosions: one is population explosion and the other is knowledge explosion. The second one happened only because of English language which has become the common communicative language of the world. The importance and dominance of English cannot be discounted at any stage of life starting from personal to educational to professional growth. The increasing demand of English in all fields makes it imperative for the students to attain a high degree of proficiency in the language. It is the need of the hour that the English teachers to change the mode of teaching. As we look back and also look ahead, it is clear that the teaching-learning relationship is one of mutual understanding. The challenge before the teachers today is to see how they can take this mutual beneficial relationship forward in an increasingly interdependent academic and professional world. This paper aims at imparting language skills creating an interest-oriented learning process through situational conversation. As this practice improves the acquisition of communicative competency, the students become more confident to face the real-life situations successfully.

Keywords: Activity-based learning, communicative competency, Interest-oriented learning, knowledge explosion, learner-friendly, real-life situation, situational conversation.

1. INTRODUCTION

A powerful tidal wave is surging across much of the world creating a new transition from tradition to modernity in all sorts of human life. At this juncture the world faces two great explosions, such as population explosion and knowledge explosion. Knowledge explosion happened only because of English language which is the common communicative language of the world. Globalization and technological development has increased the demand of English in all fields thus making it imperative for the students to attain a high degree of proficiency in the language. English language efficiency is needed not only for educational purpose but also for survival in the globally competitive world. The objective of teaching English is to develop communication skill in the target language. That has resulted in a huge accumulation of methodological alternative to select from to teach English as a communicative language. It is in the hands of the teachers to choose correct procedure particularly appropriate to the students. The conventional methods of teaching language do not satisfy the needs of the students. Teachers have to experiment and find out some innovative tools and techniques to make teaching effective. The imagination and creativity of the teachers and necessary improvisation in the

existing techniques are needed to make teaching and learning English language more effective. Besides using learner-friendly teaching and learning materials it is important to make teaching and learning interesting for both teachers and the learners. It is the responsibility of the language teachers to help students prepare for lifelong learning. Teacher should adopt student-centered, interest-oriented, creativity-based activities through individual and group projects that would motivate students who were faced with daunting task of understanding between their mother tongue and English language. When the learning process involves innovative strategies, it definitely bridges the gap between academic efficiency and communicative ability.

2. OBJECTIVE

As English is a tool for communication in the global village, the objective of teaching English is to develop fluency, accuracy and appropriateness resulting in learners becoming proficient users of English language. This calls for addressing the issue in relation to the selection of activities to improve communicative competency. Learning materials and learning practices should provide a stress-free atmosphere to learn the language and simulate the use of language in everyday life.

3. THEORIES

Theories of English Language Teaching have been framed keeping in mind the techniques, methods and approaches of teaching the learners of English. The American Applied Linguist Edward Anthony identified three levels: Approach, Method and Technique. Accordingly “Approach is the level at which assumptions and beliefs about language and Language learning are specified. Method is the level at which theory is put into practice and at which choices are made about the particular skills to be taught, the content to be taught, and the order in which the content will be presented. Technique is the level at which classroom procedures are described (Richards & Rodgers 2001, P19).

According to Richards & Rodgers, in Language Teaching, there are three different views of Language and the nature of Language Learning: Structural view, Functional view and Interactional view. The Structural view states that Language is a system of structurally related elements such as phonological units, grammatical operations and lexical items. The Functional view mentions language as a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning. It emphasizes the semantic and communicative dimensions rather than merely the grammatical characteristics of language. The Interactional view suggests that Language is a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relation and for the performance of social transaction between individuals. Wilga M Rivers (1987. P4) defined Interactional Language Teaching as: Students achieve facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages (that is, messages that contain information of interest to both speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both). This is interaction. Interaction plays a vital role in improving communication. It promotes participatory learning. When learner’s involvement is there, then the ultimate aim of communication will be realized in the Language classroom.

4. METHODOLOGY

English Language Teaching has undergone changes leaps and bounds. The growth of English Language Teaching could be traced from the nineteenth century as Grammar Translation Method which paved way for Direct Method leading to Communicative Language Learning. It has now realized as Task Based Language Teaching. H.G.Widdowson (1978) states that “The problem is the students, and especially students in developing countries who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in ability to actually use the language and to understand its use in normal communication, whether in spoken or written mode.”

Language acquisition takes place when there is an opportunity for the learners to practice the language. The type of input given should be comprehensible, match their level of competency at the same time slightly above their level to challenge, interesting, relevant but not grammatically sequenced and filled with anxiety.

Situational conversation practices can be utilized by the teachers because the students are supposed to understand learning materials through experiments and experience. It undoubtedly proves the Chinese proverb “What I hear, I will forget, what I see I remember but what I do I will learn”. Much more benefits could be mentioned referring to the use of situational conversation practices in the language classrooms.

5. OUTCOME

Situational conversation is an activity-based, interest-oriented, learner-centered approach, so it makes the students to become active participants in the teaching/learning process. It motivates the learners to communicate in English including those with low proficiency in the language. It provides new avenues for the participants to involve in real-life communication such as expression of ideas and emotions, adaptability and appropriateness, respond and react, thereby giving them more confidence in facing the competitive world.

6. UTILIZATION

Language learning is a skill-based activity. It is not of hoarding knowledge on spelling, grammar and pronunciation. What they learn should be applied to productivity base activities. The proposed activity should be thought in terms of acquiring marketable skills that will enhance their profile and enrich their skill on accommodating themselves to real life situations. Communicative skill characterizes the quality of anyone. Teaching English for the purpose of communication is the need of the hour. How to teach this foreign language? Creating an ambience of listening to that language leads to imitation that proceeds with practice which in turn ends in reinforcement. If the students are properly guided at the initial stage they can become the champions of using that language, custodians of grammatical correctness and trustees of confidence and professional development.

Like all language learning activities, situational conversation practices could be used to teach any linguistic and paralinguistic features. In particular, this is appropriate to enhance the communicative competence of the learners. Though it looks as an informal activity, it motivates

the learner, removes the fear and creates an atmosphere for better understanding of the language. Moreover, this helps to teach vocabulary and expressions appropriate to the context and environment. Pronunciation, stress and intonation practices could also be taught. The splendid aim of learning is to make learning more realistic and meaningful. Jermy Harmer stresses that good learners do not wait to be taught. (1998: P.9) This means that the students are responsible for their own learning. In fact, the situational conversation activity encourages creativity and imagination thus promoting autonomy in learning manageable skills. Maley and Duff, (1982, P.14) said "every student needs periods in which to practice what he or she knows without restraint, without fear of being wrong". Situational conversation is an apt interest-oriented, informal practice and yet purposeful activity which gives a stress-free situation to learn the language for both participants and viewers.

7. PROCEDURE

Language cannot be practiced in isolation. Positive approach towards learners helps in achieving the developmental attitude of language learning. Language acquisition takes place when there is an opportunity for the learners to practice the language. As language is a skill a progressive way of learning situations have to be created in imparting language skills. As a revolution to conventional methods of teaching, situational conversation activities make learning an enjoyable experience. The following five point plan is to be followed by the teacher and the students to get maximum benefits of using situational conversation to enrich communicative ability.

PREPARATION – PRESENTATION – PRACTICE – SUBSTITUTION – EVALUATION

7.1. Teacher's Role:

The teacher has to prepare the minds of the students to participate in the activity with interest and involvement. The classroom should be kept ready to do the practice. According to the number of students in the class they have to be divided into pairs or groups considering their level of understanding and doing the activity.

Next the teacher ought to know what he or she wants to achieve. She must present her idea and its execution also to the better understanding of the students.

Afterwards the teacher should give practice by selecting academically good students, guiding them in choosing correct tone, vocabulary, sentence structure and body language.

Followed by this, substitution of students and situations has to be carried out making more number of students to participate in the activity. As it is just the imitation of the previous groups, the slow learners also participate with some sort of confidence and interest.

Finally, the teacher can give evaluation report based on their performance related to their use of language, pronunciation, body language and confidence level. Thereby the teacher and the students analyze, evaluate and find out appropriate remedy to improve communicative competency.

Teacher's role is that of a facilitator who intervenes when needed. They give opportunities for the learners to express their individuality by sharing ideas and opinions on a regular basis.

8. Activity Plan

8.1. PREPARATION

Introduction of the activity

Describe the activity in detail

8.2. PRESENTATION

Ask some basic questions

E.g. Have you visited bank?

Then ask pertinent question to get relevant information

E.g. For what purpose have you visited the bank?

Ask probing questions to analyze the relevancy

E.g. Whom do you contact first?

Ask clarifying questions to synthesize.

E.g. What does the Manager ask you to do?

8.3. PRACTICE

Relate this to similar experience

E.g. Post office visit

Make them to identify and define new and relevant words

Help them with correct stress and intonation

8.4. SUBSTITUTION

Ask them to retell the conversation practiced.

Introduce new situation.

Teach them to distinguish the relevant information and ideas from those of irrelevant.

8.5. EVALUATION

Analyze and synthesize the activity and performance.

Relate them to their previous responses.

- Summarize the progress of the activity
- Identify proper solution for improvement
- Record their performances and replay
- Pass relevant comments.

9. Does it work?

Mainly three questions arose when I tried to introduce this activity to Engineering students.

1. Do all students participate in the activity?
2. Is it suitable for heterogeneous group of large classroom?
3. Is it really an interest-oriented activity?

First, it was felt that only brilliant and high performers actively participated in the activity. Hitherto, some extroverts considered it too low for their level. The slow learners kept themselves withdrawn and were mere passive observers. That happened only at the initial stage of Preparation and Presentation. At the third stage of Practice average learners came forward and participated eagerly. During Substitution slow learners who stayed passive had also taken part. Almost all students had been involved. I had occasionally tried to draw attention of some not-so-active students. But I had not been quite successful. The reason behind this is the answer for the second question. It was somewhat difficult to bridge the gap among the heterogeneous group. But it was not a great problem. I feel it is more a matter of teacher's interest and initiative to implement novel practices rather than the traditional methods of teaching made it possible to engage all the students.

The third question is about students' interest. It was feared that the students may not show any interest and their concentration may not be retained. But it was observed that many students, including those who had apparently appeared to be passive gave a positive report that they had not lost interest and the active participants told that they had not been bored. At the end, my colleagues and students agreed that situational conversation practice was an effective way of imparting communicative competence that it shifted the responsibility of learning to students who could do that according to their choice and interest.

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, the objective of interest-oriented language learning activities has equipped the students and teachers to evaluate the relative merits of situational conversation and has been accepted as suitable practice for engineering students.

10. Students' Feedback

The use of situational conversation practices helps the students to achieve the following benefits.

*Helps them to acquire communicative skills with ease and interest.

- * Improves their creativity and imagination.
- * Keeps them active and motivating in the classroom.
- * Provides an alternative scenario to traditional classroom practices.
- * Creates a stress-free atmosphere to learn the language.
- * Puts them extend, retain and reinforce vocabulary and sentence structure to real life practices.
- * Trains acceptable pronunciation and intonation.
- * Gives them a chance to take responsibility for their own learning.
- * Develops confidence and ability to empathize with others and become better communicator.

11. Conclusion

Language learning becomes more interesting and enjoyable when the learners are offered with tasks based on their interest. When the learners are provided with activities, they are self expressive. The use of situational conversation practices in English classroom enhances language development. It bridges the gap between what they study in the classroom and real-life situation by providing insight into how to handle the situation in life. It improves listening skill and prompt response. Accuracy and fluency of the language enriched. Richard Amato expresses his opinion on the use of drama into language teaching thus: "because students can lose themselves in the characters, plots and situations, they are more apt to receive the benefits of reduced anxiety levels, increased self-confidence and self-esteem and heightened awareness" (1998, P.145). "Activities that are truly communicative have three features in common: information gap, choice and feedback." (Diane Larsen-Freeman 2004, P.129) This is true in the case of situational conversation in language classrooms. The greatest advantage is that the students become more confident in their use of English which gives a facelift to their personality. Hence it would be apt to say that situational conversation practices are Interest Oriented, learner-centered and activity-based Language Learning Activities targeting the communicative competency of the learners which is the need of the hour.

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