

Developing Communicative Competence Through Language-Based Activities in Business Communication Courses

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The objective of this study is to assess the impact of introducing communicative language activities in teaching methodology, as opposed to 'chalk and talk' method, in order to enhance the communicative competence of learners of English as a second language, in particular business communication students. A total sample of 264 undergraduate students from a management institute was included in the study. Quasi-experimental, non-randomized pre-test and post-test control group design was adopted for the study. The quantitative data was obtained through three internal tests and one external university examination conducted over the period of one year to measure the level of improvement of the learner's communicative competence during the study period. Moreover, qualitative research questions in the form of written feedback were taken. The findings indicated that there was a significant difference in the learners' post-test scores, which suggested that these language activities were powerful in creating an interactive learning environment in which the students could experience how to make use of the intended language spontaneously.

Introduction

Communicative language teaching has gone through a dramatic evolution in the recent years and the onus of the learning has shifted predominantly to the learners. The primary focus of oral communication activities is to provide authentic and meaningful practice of the target language. In any diminutive group communication tasks, the learners must make multiple usages of the target language in order to develop both accuracy and fluency. The learners are required to negotiate meaning drawn from their own resources rather than merely replicating and absorbing language. This can sometimes have an adverse effect if the teacher is teaching a language about which learners already have set ideas, particularly if it differs greatly from the teacher's own.

According to Candlin (1987), "The definition of a language-learning task requires specification of four factors. The aim, the inputs, activities resulting from these inputs,

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and lastly the role of both the learner and the facilitator involved in the learning process.” Furthermore, he added that tasks must not only provide the inputs but should set the ground for different roles to be played by the learners, and must also provide ample scope to the facilitator for monitoring, evaluation and constructive remarks. Input refers to the information put forward to the learners to work on. Roles denote the association amid the contributors in the activity. Milieu refers to the physical location, i.e., the classroom and outside classroom arrangements needed in the activity. Actions are the *modus operandi* and associated activities to be performed by the students. Supervision means regulation of the task underway. Results are the desired outcomes of the activity, and feedback is the assessment of the activity. The classroom tasks are usually accepted or restructured in either ‘actual world’ or ‘pedagogic’ terms. Activities with an actual world rationale necessitate the students to calculate approximately what kind of behavior is required of them to function in a real world beyond the four walls of the classroom. Activities with an academic rationale, in contrast entail students to perform multiple tasks with different active roles. This approach is completely in contrast to the traditional learning setting where learners were always at the receiving end. Since they cannot be justified on the pretext that they are facilitating the students to practice authentic world performances, they must have an alternative rationale. This usually gives a psycholinguistic outline alongside the appearance of will, even though students are occupied in activities which in normal instances they do not usually execute beyond the classroom setting. The activities are thought-provoking replica of genuine world activities and hence they will come first with orientation to some sort of needs examination, and academic activities will be chosen with reference to second language acquisition hypothesis.

The classes of a majority of Indian colleges are very large and the main focus in the class is on teacher’s activity. The teacher is at the center of the learning process. The students merely reproduce the words and sentences spoken by the teacher in a mechanical manner. Occasionally, they answer questions asked by the teacher which are factual type and based on the lessons of the textbook. In this manner, all the students do not get a chance to answer the question. Most of the students feel very shy to speak in an unfamiliar language in front of the class. Teaching is mostly based on the form introduced in the lesson. Practice is also form-focused.

Classroom interaction is mainly like one-way traffic from teacher to the learner, and from the learner to the teacher is very little and learner to learner is nil. So, there is no opportunity in a class to produce natural language and create inquisitiveness for the language. Instructions are given in regional language to the beginners as well as the intermediate level learners. Most of the time, vernacular language is used in an English language class. So, the source of exposure to the language use is minimal. Though there are certain external sources like television, radio, newspapers, magazines and story books, they are hardly utilized by the learners.

A number of experiments have been carried out in India with an aim to improve upon the present situation. All these experiments were based upon the developments in language teaching throughout the world. Many of the developments have been at

the level of syllabus design and are associated with the concepts of notional and functional syllabuses. Others are concerned with methodology. A large number of interesting new procedures and techniques have come up which challenge our traditional views of what should happen in the classroom. These developments share a common background with a common set of assumptions, which has made it possible to put them under the single label of communicative teaching.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to:

- Prepare interactive classroom materials to enhance communication among learners at the tertiary level;
- Pilot-test the set of interactive classroom strategies; and
- Find out the difference between the effects caused as a result of the two different treatments given to two different groups.

Research Design

The present study is a quasi-experimental one with the primary purpose of preparing language activities for developing communicative competence of undergraduate students in social contexts and to evaluate the effectiveness of this communicative approach of teaching by comparing the performance of the two student groups, namely, control group and experimental group. At the beginning of the study period, before introducing the tryouts, a pre-test was conducted among the students of the experimental group, in which their language skills were evaluated on five different areas—speaking, reading, grammar, writing and listening, with equally distributed marks in each of them totaling to 100. A similar pattern was followed in three subsequent tests, viz., first internal, second internal and prelims at three monthly intervals each. The tryouts were launched within one week from the date of the pre-test. The control group was given no additional intervention than the conventional mode of teaching English in the class.

The Sample

On the grounds of feasibility of the study, the sampling frame was chosen from an undergraduate management college in Gujarat. All the 264 first-year students of BBA were approached for this experiment. They were distributed equally across two groups (132 each), one taught by the researcher herself (experimental group) and the other (control group) by another faculty with similar qualifications and experience. The sampling was a convenient one, yet the researcher ensured comparability between the experimental and the control groups.

Tools

Tools used in the study included three internal tests conducted in the college itself for internal validity; marks obtained in English in 12th standard; and marks of the Final University examination for external validity. Moreover, feedback was taken from the

students of the intervention group after the tryout. A pre-test was administered before the tryout for the students of the intervention group.

Materials

After understanding the problems of the learners and after taking a close look at the number of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) course books, the researcher took up the preparation of materials. The course was designed keeping in mind the level and interests of the students. Further, it was in accordance with the present syllabus of FYBBA (Honors) with a few additions.

Treatment

To decide the entry behavior, the scores of English subject in the 12th standard examination were taken as the base for both the groups. Later the control group was taught through the traditional course and methods, while the experimental group was taught through the language activities prepared by the researcher. Both the groups were taught from July to February for each academic year (i.e., 2007-2008 and 2008-2009). The researcher herself taught the experimental group, whereas the control group was taught by another faculty for English and Communication Skills with similar qualifications, background and experience. Intermittent tests were administered to the experimental group.

Classroom Procedures

Criteria Used for Preparing the Package of Materials

Before deciding the criteria, the researcher came across the criteria for syllabus design employed by Van (1975), Wilkins (1976), Munby (1978), Johnson (1999), Jones (1978), Savignon (1983), and Littlewood (1981) which helped her in selecting areas and design her materials for this research study.

The main purpose of the materials lies in offering different kinds of tasks for performing various communicative functions in day-to-day affairs. For preparing materials, the researcher had adopted the following principles for activities development and selection:

- Use of real-life communicative situations in the classroom;
- Learner-centered activities; and
- Cooperation and empathy.

Occasionally, authentic communicative conditions evolve instinctively, for example, when we exchange observations on deteriorating condition of roads in our town or about somebody's new dressing, etc. In a majority of the modules, teaching situations, however, are focused on the direction of language-oriented communication, or what Rivers (1978) calls 'skills -getting' in which learners bring into play the second language (English), essentially in structural exercises and predetermined replies by the students.

Since second language teaching should help students achieve some kind of communicative skills in the second language, all situations in which real communication occurs naturally have to be taken advantage of and many more suitable ones have to be created (Klippel, 1995, p. 4).

To follow this, the researcher tried to incorporate situations which learners are familiar with for promoting the use of English language, viz., the Uttrayan Festival, the changing face of teenage fashion, some popular superstitions, etc. Here the purpose was to use their knowledge about these situations for encouraging communication in the classroom. Two devices, 'information gap' and 'opinion gap', helped the researcher in designing learner-centered activities using learners' familiar communicative situations.

The CLT strategies adopted for teaching the experimental group were as follows:

Orientation of the Learners

The focus of these language tasks was to provide the learners with opportunities to make use of their knowledge for using English in practical communicative settings and at the same time to free the students of the notion that communication is measured solely in terms of linguistic accuracy.

The first meeting with the students was devoted to a discussion of what it means to communicate. What are some non-verbal forms of communication? How do we evaluate a person's ability to communicate in a foreign language? How important are word order, pronunciation and grammar in order to understand a non-native speaker of English? How important are all the four skills in communication in English?

Focus on Meaning and Appropriacy

Each function was aimed at developing the communicative competence of the learners. The experimental procedure consisted of observation and performance of a variety of communicative acts with meticulous consideration given to the kinetic features of communication. Emphasis was placed on conveying meaning rather than on linguistic accuracy. The chief purpose was to get the meaning across. The students were urged to use every means at their disposal to understand and in turn to make themselves understood.

English was used first to define the situation so that the students and the instructor would become familiar with the content. The students were free to say what they 'meant' rather than being limited to saying what they actually 'knew how to say' (Krashen, 1982).

Informal Atmosphere in the Classroom

An informal atmosphere was maintained throughout the teaching program for all the three groups. Students were free to interact with the teacher and with the student participants. In the communicative situation, the students were free to define the context and elicit responses. Emphasis was on real, meaningful communication rather than activity topics and artificial situations. Attention was paid to the development of the ability in the learners to understand and convey information content.

Almost everything that was done in the classroom was done with a communicative intent. The focus of every module was on the performance of some operations ('learning how to do something').

Judicious Use of First Language (L1)

The learners were encouraged to use more and more English while interacting with their classmates and friends. Although there was intermittent use of the students' L1 (i.e., mother tongue) during the initial few days in order to establish a relaxed and informal relationship among the participants, the use of the L1 was a means to an end and not an end in itself.

The Role of the Teacher

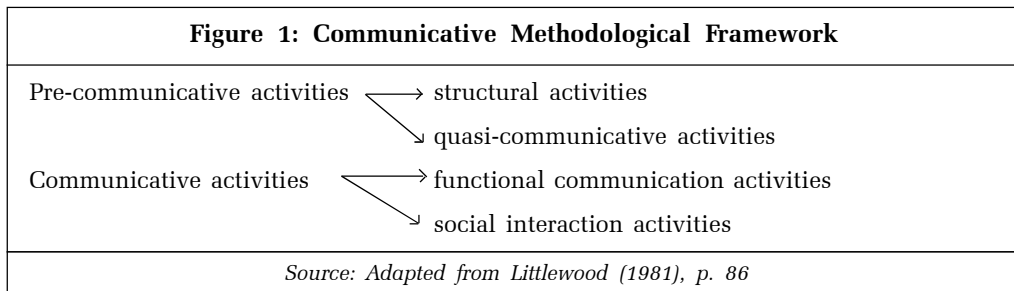
The initial role of the teacher was to initiate the interaction process among the learners in the classroom, and to provide a start to the range of tasks and texts. Sometimes, her responsibility was to perform as a contributor within the teaching\learning group. She tried to establish situations likely to promote communication. When discussions were going on, the teacher went from desk to desk to ensure the active participation of all the learners. During the activities, she acted as an advisor, answering students' questions and monitoring their performance. The teacher often withheld structural correction and postponed it until after the activity. The teacher's role was to set up the conditions for communication to take place. She actually assumed roles to model the language, and to act as someone for the learner to communicate with. She also set up the conditions for the students to practice communicative operations themselves. She created situations where information breaks existed and motivated the learners to restore them in suitable ways. Moreover, there was no teacher intervention in the communicative activities.

Error Tolerance

Grammar and pronunciation errors were expected and were always ignored when they did not interfere with the meaning. The teacher reacted to what was said, not how it was said. Errors were appreciated and were treated as an expected result of the process of developing communication skills. The facilitator never tried to correct them immediately. She provided other students a chance to answer appropriately. If she found that nobody was able to answer properly, then she provided the correct response and provided them an opportunity to take note of it.

The CLT Procedure Adopted

The CLT procedure was adopted for teaching the experimental group (see Figure 1). The teacher began with quasi-communicative activities that gradually led to the communicative activities. Then, the students were provided with a communicative task and were asked to use whatever language they had at their disposal to perform the task. Students' errors were not corrected. The students were given an opportunity to learn new ways of performing the communicative tasks. These tasks are either communicative



or socio-cultural or learning how to learn. These tasks help to create and preserve interpersonal relationship, and by this, the learners could learn exchange of information, thoughts, views, attitudes, feelings, and how to get work done.

Use of Group Work and Pair Work

The teacher used pair and group work activities frequently. Emphasis was given to the techniques such as language games, role-play, simulation, quizzes, debates and discussions, and information gap activities. The teacher used such procedures that would involve the students in using language to communicate their own thoughts, opinions and emotions and sometimes to reproduce what others have said using passive voice, giving instructions, etc. It has been suggested that students require the chance to discuss the novel input, thus making it certain that the language, which is listened to, is adapted to precisely the comprehensibility they know how to administer. The learners were also of the opinion that small group work offered the most favorable setting in the classroom and over and above gave ample opportunities for language production. Studies on second language acquisition quote instances where language has, in the process of conferring meaning, been customized by students, thus escalating the amount of understandable input to which the learners are exposed. This, it is hypothesized, increases the rate at which they learn (Long and Porter, 1985). The pair and group work also assisted in increasing the number of negotiations and consequential learning from one another.

Input

In all these tasks, language was used by the learners to get things completed, to express their opinions and to acquire and communicate knowledge and information: therefore the entire communication was authentic. These activities stimulated the learners to organize all their linguistic resources and to endeavor indefatigably to broaden their linguistic limitations. An assortment of skills was amalgamated in these activities, and thus it gave an opportunity to the learners to carry out and build those skills in an evocative framework which had close resemblance to the real life.

Procedure Used for Implementing the Communicative Materials to the Experimental Group

The final draft of the materials was then used in the FYBBA class by the researcher herself. The experimental group was given experimental treatment for one full academic

year (June 2008 to February 2009). Each module was given at least 5 lectures of 1 h each. For teaching the students, communicative techniques like group discussion, pair-work, role-play and simulation were used.

Each module was divided into four stages: (i) introductory stage; (ii) teaching stage; (iii) practice stage; and (iv) testing stage.

Introductory Stage

The researcher started each module with some pre-communicative activities. The overall purpose was to prepare the learners for later communicative activities by providing them with the necessary linguistic forms and the necessary link between forms and meanings. Later, these pre-communicative tasks were divided into structural activities and quasi-communicative activities. Learning activities that are incorporated in textbooks or practical handbooks are known as structural activities, e.g., word list, grammar exercise, etc. These tasks are helpful in the later stage of communicative tasks, e.g., question and answer. The purpose of quasi-communicative activities is to generate connections between the language forms being practiced and their probable purposeful connotation, thus taking into consideration both structural and communicative aspects of the language.

Teaching Stage

The learners who were introduced to various tasks sometimes listened to the dialogs or played a guessing game, or mimed in the class on the basis of instructions given by their partners. General questions were discussed either in pairs or in groups. Pictures were also displayed and the tape was played. Learners were encouraged to discuss the several issues in their respective groups and pairs. Grammatical mistakes were tolerated. The students were provided with activities that were communicative in nature, for example, brief dialog, role plays, simulation, group tasks and group discussion. Important language forms involved in the tasks were highlighted and focused on. The students were provided with partially communicative activities focusing on grammatical accuracy and linguistic forms. Fluency was stressed. Socially acceptable language was used and its use was encouraged in the classroom. Both the types of tasks, pedagogic and authentic, were used for teaching.

Practice Stage

At this stage of teaching, the language forms used for performing various functions were practiced. Students were given training through dialog, conversation, role-play and simulation, group-work and group discussion. Audio-visual teaching aids were extensively used for the purpose. The teacher also participated in the activities. Communicative tasks were given to the students to perform. Real life situations were created for the use of the 'real language'. Communicative exercise and drills were made use of in order to reinforce and consolidate learners' learning. Students' grammatical errors were tolerated to some extent if their responses were socially appropriate and

linguistically feasible. But accuracy was not neglected altogether. It was, in fact, taken care of pedagogically and students' mistakes were removed in such a way that they did not feel that they were being corrected in front of the whole class.

Testing Stage

The students were given communicative tasks to perform in the real-life situations. Dialog, role-play, simulation and pair-work were used for testing learners' terminal behavior. Newspaper cuttings, magazine cutouts, pictures, original genuine forms, letters, maps, etc. were given to the students and they were asked to perform the communicative tasks with the help of aids. The test items were situation ally and socially contextualized.

Results and Discussion

As the Class 12 board examination and the University Final BBA examination are conducted by two different boards and they test capabilities of the students in different academic parameters, an argument may arise here that challenges the validity of a comparison between the two examinations to assess performance improvement. Therefore, a comparison between pre-test marks and the final university examination marks are presented in Table 1. The average mark of the intervention group in the final examination (62.2) was significantly better than that in the pre-test (46.2).

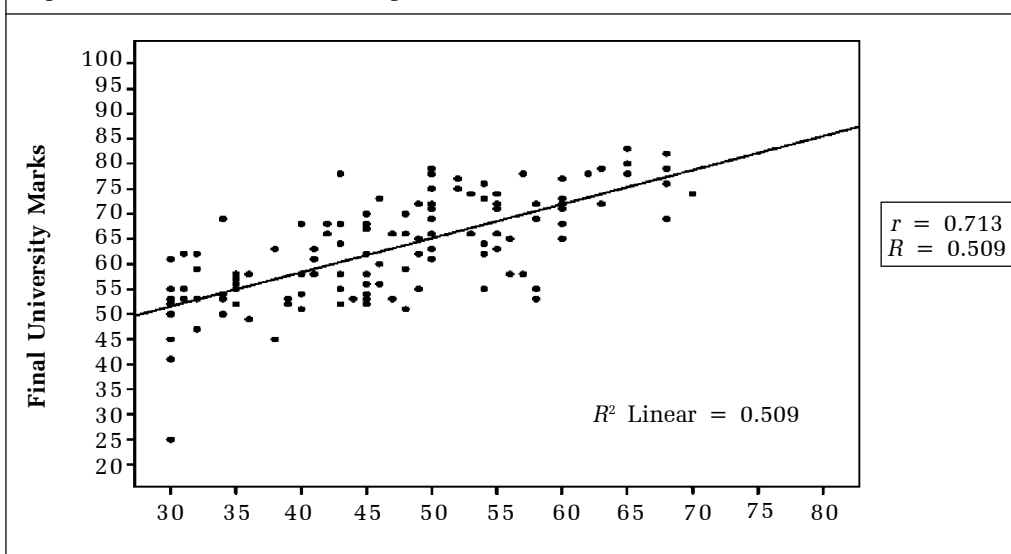
Experimental Group	Mean	No.	SD	<i>p</i>-Value	Correlation Coefficient
Pre-Test	46.2823	132	10.74960	<0.0001	0.713
Final	62.6048	132	10.23688		

However, the above argument is refuted by the fact that the marks obtained by the students of the intervention group in the final university examination were plotted against those obtained by them in their pre-test in a Scatter plot (Figure 2), which shows that about 50% of the final marks can be explained by the pretest marks ($R = 0.509$) and both the pretest and the final marks show a strong correlation ($r = 0.713$).

The mean score of the experimental group at the final university examination was 62.6, while that of the control group was 55.43. This means that the experimental group had a higher average score than the control group.

Thus, the quantitative analysis of the results suggests that the experiment conducted in the experimental group of students led to significant improvement in the performance of the subjects. However, the study has its own limitations such as the quasi-experimental design and non-random sampling, resulting in limitations of generalizability of the findings.

Figure 2: Scatter Plot Showing Final Marks of Pre-Test and Final Examinations



It would be extremely difficult to conduct a completely randomized controlled experiment in order to avoid the selection bias possible in our study design. Therefore, in the given scenario, this was the best feasible study design that could be adopted, which provides enough evidence that the two groups, though purposely selected, were comparable across various parameters at baseline such as medium of instruction and Board of study during class 12.

However, it is interesting to note that given consistent reinforcement as was done through the three internal examinations, the experimental group showed continuous improvement in their performance. This probably opens a new dimension to the experiment on developing communicative competence through non-conventional techniques such as those used in this study. It would be worthwhile to study the effect of such strategies across a large number of students and various types of educational institutions in future.

Participants' Response: Tryout

To make the evaluation of the tryout more objective, the students were given questionnaires for feedback and self-appraisal (see Table 2). The purpose was to find out what the learners thought of the materials and whether they felt any difference in their confidence level and language competence or not.

Table 2 shows that 60% of the students have found the materials to be very useful, while 40% of them said that the material was useful for them. 85% students claimed that their communicative competence has increased highly, while 7.40% answered that it went up but not so high. 7.40% found there was no significant change in the communicative competence after being exposed to the innovative materials. 92.59% students preferred to learn English through such modules-based materials in the next class. This proves the success of the innovative package.

S. No.	Question	Very Useful	Useful	Not So Useful	Useless
1.	Do you think the materials were useful?	59.25%	40.75%	0.00%	0.00%
2.	Do you think that your communicative competence has increased?	High	Not so high	Remained the same	Low
		85.18%	7.40%	7.40%	0.00%
3.	Through what kind of materials would you prefer to learn?	Like your modules	Like your textbook	Any other	
		92.59%	7.40%	0.00%	

Students were quite curious in doing these activities and the researcher could ensure maximum participation from the learners. It was also observed that at the initial stage some of the students were quite hesitant to participate in the classroom activities. The researcher's presence enhanced their problem. At once, they were divided into groups and pairs, which were made heterogeneous. They gradually started exchanging views and sharing their feelings and problems. Secondly, the introduction of pre-tasks, which were less demanding, helped reduce their nervousness. Thirdly, the researcher decided to give instructions in English, but the learners were given the liberty to raise their doubts even in their L1 (if they were not able to raise it in English).

The applied aspect of learning has its own impact on the psychology of the students. They sensed the usefulness of the language learned and started using it immediately after the class. In this course, the familiarity with the functions of English language is of paramount importance. The researcher found a gradual increase in the degree of motivation and it was sustained over the entire course.

The role of the teacher in each module was to work in various capacities such as initiator, motivator, and facilitator and of a classroom manager to generate genuine communication in English. The researcher took personal interest in the students, which could ensure the participation of the shyest students of the class. However, the group and pair work activities made them more willing to contribute. After some time, it was observed that the students themselves were taking initiatives in such activities, viz., miming, discussion, role-playing and simulation. The nature of the discourse changed to include more interaction and more negotiation. They also appeared to listen to their classmates more attentively.

Conclusion

The outcome of the tryout, obtained through data analysis, shows the effect of communicative tasks. These tasks rely on providing learners with the experience of using language as the main means of learning to use the language. With these tasks and

activities, the four macro skills can be integrated to set up meaningful situations, which will foster the learners 'communicative competence'. The interaction between members of the groups provides a basis for language learning. The language used in such situations is nearer to the one used in real life, i.e., obviously mother tongue. Through these activities the learner gets access to the social, cultural and pragmatic aspects of the language. ☉

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