

Communicative Activities in Language Teaching and Learning Process: A View of a Teacher Training Session

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Abstract— This paper depicts the characteristics of communicative activities that are likely to be carried out in the classroom language teaching and learning process. These activities are conducted based on the belief that language is naturally functional for communication rather than just substantially formal and structural, consisting of multi-layered components. The strong belief underlying such classroom activities is that it is possible to acquire communicative competence regardless of the knowledge about grammatical rules. When the activities have focused the conveyance and reception of meanings, are likely to happen in real-life social interaction, and are stimulating the learners to be active and participative, we can say that the activities are compliant with the characteristics of communicative activities. This article is conceptual and descriptive in the sense that the writers present some thoughts concerning the features of communicative activities in the language classroom and describe them based on the data obtained from a teacher training session.

Keywords: *communicative activities, language teaching & learning process, teacher training session*

I. INTRODUCTION

A one-year-old baby is capable of understanding her mother's speech and giving some proportional physical responses despite her knowledge about the grammar of the language. An Indonesian man selling meat-balls in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, can survive in interaction with his surrounding Arabic speaking community although he might not have adequate knowledge about Arabic grammatical rules, *nahw*, and *shorf*, especially in his initial months of dwelling there. On the other hand, a university freshman in an EFL country may have been able to recall the definition of gerund, and yet, in his speech, he may still say, "I eat breakfast before *going* to school," which is grammatically incorrect. It indicates that the knowledge about structural rules may still result in an erroneous use of the rules in communication. Those three cases above imply that the ability to communicate is, to some extent, independent from the knowledge of grammar.

The pedagogical implication is that for the learners to acquire the communicative ability, it is possible to go through the way of directly practicing to use the target language in communication without being preceded by the knowledge about structural rules. The teaching and learning process can be designed by the teacher in terms of learners' doing tasks using the target language or the teacher's use of the target language in interaction with the learners (such as that in direct method) (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, 2013). This goes in line with the principle of the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1988) which states that there is a natural process of language acquisition by learners when they use the target language directly in the practice of communication.

One of the approaches in language teaching & learning process in class is a communicative approach (Littlewood, 2010; Brumfit & Johnson, 1987). All activities carried out in class are based on the belief that language is a communication tool and therefore the way to acquire it is by using it directly for communication. This is diverse from the structural approach which is based on the belief that language consists of words arranged as building structures which are then used functionally for communication.

The consequence of those two approaches appear in class activities. The learning process following the communicative approach consists of activities conducted by learners to

directly use the target language without focusing on grammar or structure of language. Conversely, followers of the structural approach require learners to know and understand the structure of language, then that knowledge is used to construct sentences and practiced for communication. In summary, communicative approach emphasizes the direct achievement of communicative ability, whereas structural approach requires knowledge of the language system which is subsequently drilled to communicate.

There are basically three characteristics of communicative activities. First, the activities are focused on meaning rather than on structural rules (Krashen & Terrell, 1988). Second, the activities are authentic, in the sense that they are likely to occur in communication activities in real life (Nunan, 1989). Third, students are active and participative in class activities.

a) Focus on meaning

In carrying out communicative activities, learners focus on the fluency of the conveyance and/or reception of messages and not on the accuracy of the grammatical structure of the language. When playing the role of a journalist who is interviewing the principal, for example, learners no longer think of grammatical rules. What is important is whether the question can be understood by the principal and whether the interviewer understands the answers given by the principal. When the learner listens to English news and records the important points in the news, furthermore, he no longer thinks about the grammatical rules used in the news, but he only thinks about the contents of the news. When learners are asked to share their experiences during the holidays, what is important is whether the story is comprehensible to the listeners, without thinking about whether the grammar is correct or not. So, meaning becomes the main factor to consider and not the grammar of the language.

b) Authenticity

The second characteristic of communicative activities is authenticity (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014) in terms of whether the activities carried out in the classroom are indeed and/or likely to occur in real life communicative events. For example, after a learner reads a newspaper, the teacher asks, "What are you reading?" The student answers, "News about an accident." Teacher, "What accident, when and where did it happen, and how many victims were there?" These questions about the contents of the news are communicative because such questions are very likely to occur in real life. However, if the teacher asks, "Is the news you read narrative or descriptive?" Such kind of question is not likely to occur in real life after someone reads a newspaper. Questions about the generic structure are only asked pedagogically rather than authentically (Nunan, 1989).

Authenticity of communication also refers to the gap-filling of information. It means the questioner asks a question because s/he does not have such information and needs it. There is no point of asking for information when the questioner already has the knowledge about it. Therefore, testing questions cannot be categorized as communicative in this sense.

c) Student's being active and participative

The third characteristic of communicative activities is student's being active and involved in classroom activities, either receptively or productively. When students are listening and paying attention to the teacher's explaining or giving instructions, their mind is actively thinking to understand what the teacher is saying. When the students are listening and following the teacher's words, it also shows they are participative or engaged in communication or involved in the thinking processes. But, when the students seem to be listening but actually their thoughts are straying and thinking about other things and not following the teacher, it means that they are not participative.

Active and participative involvement are also observable in the form of students' physical movements. For example, students participate in discussions, do tasks or games such as board race, exchange the seats, moving locations, role playing,

matching pictures, etc. Their answering questions also shows their active and participative engagement in the learning process.

II. METHOD

This paper is conceptual and reflective. It is conceptual because the ideas in this paper are presented based on the writers' belief about the characteristics of communicative activities which should ideally be followed and complied with by teachers in conducting language teaching and learning process in their classrooms. It is reflective because the exemplification and description of the activities are grounded on the writers' personal experience and involvement in the teacher training session. Hence, some sample activities were obtained from that session.

The data were gained from a training session where its participants were teachers of English for Islamic junior secondary schools. They were collected by participant observation when one of the writers became a trainer there. Having been collected, the data were presented and discussed as the writers' conceptual reflection.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The training session was about communicative activities in language teaching. The trainees were exposed to ten statements representing classroom activities and asked to identify them whether they belong to communicative or non-communicative activities. This step was aimed not only to generate interest in the topic but also to see the extent of the trainees' understanding of the construct of communicativeness.

The result of observation shows that some teacher trainees' were hardly able to differentiate the communicative activities from the non-communicative ones as evidenced by the fact that some of them misidentified the activities. Related to the above three characteristics, the ten language teaching and learning activities are discussed as follows.

Activity 1: Teacher (T) drills the sentences of a certain pattern and students (Ss) repeat.

This activity is non-communicative because teacher's drilling a certain pattern and repeated, chorally or individually, by students is focused on the practice of a structural rule rather than on meaning. It is intended to train the students to be able to memorize the pattern; thus, they are expected to be able to automatically produce structurally correct sentences (see Audio-Lingual Method, Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Drilling to be repeated is likely done only in language classrooms and hardly occur in real life communication.

Activity 2: Ss listen to English news recorded from TV and are asked to write down its main contents.

This activity is communicative. First, the text is an authentic material because it is taken from real life TV media, not designed principally for pedagogical purposes (Nunan, 1989). Second, this activity is concentrated on meanings because students' listening to the text news is to grasp its messages,

and they do not really care about the structural forms used in the text. In addition, listening to news is authentic because it normally happens in real life communication.

Activity 3: Ss are asked to read a story and to change the present tense verbs into past tense.

This is a non-communicative activity because it deals mainly with structures with little or no consideration of the meanings. Such an activity is not authentic because in real life changing tenses with no reason is out of the mind. In spite of the fact, however, it is beneficial to drill the learners to memorize the present-past form alterations.

Activity 4: Ss play the role of interviewing the Principal in order to put his profile on a wall magazine.

This is communicative because in conducting an interview, students should pay attention to the exchange of messages. They must understand as well as be understood. Such an interview has a clear purpose as its aim is to gain information about the interviewee's profile in order to be written on a school wall magazine. Such a task is authentic because interviewing to collect information to be written in a report is probable to happen in real life.

Activity 5: While distributing a text, T says, "OK, now read this text in five minutes." After five minutes, T asks questions based on the text.

The focus of this activity is not obvious whether it is on meanings or on forms. That is due to the obscurity of teacher's instruction. Students might wonder why they should read the text and for what purpose. The teacher should have told them the purpose of the task prior to distributing the text. In real life, one is engaged in reading always with a purpose in one's head. Doing a task without knowing its purpose is absurd. Therefore, to be communicative it is advisable that a teacher announces the purpose of the task to the students before asking them to do it.

Activity 6: The class is focused on the generic structure of a text.

This activity is apparently dealing with the structure of a text rather than with its content. It is true that to identify the structure of a text, one needs to understand its contents because the structure of a text represents the organization of ideas in the text. Its likelihood to be discussed in real life communication, however, rarely is it possible to ask about the genre of a text.

Activity 7: Ss are asked to read a job vacancy and to write a letter of application to apply for that job.

This is a communicative activity in view of both meaning focus and authenticity. There is a clear purpose for the students to read an advertisement of job vacancy, i.e. to be able to give an appropriate response in term of application letter. In order to respond properly, students need to understand the contents of the advertisement well. Such an activity, writing a letter of application in response to a job

vacancy is very likely to occur in real life communicative situations.

Activity 8: Ss are asked to imagine being on a trip out of town then to write a story about their trip.

Writing a story after having a trip is normally done by many people. That is intended not only to preserve interesting memory for further personal enjoyment in later time, but also to share blissful experiences with friends, family, or colleagues. In order to write an imaginable and effective story, moreover, students focus more on contents than on grammatical structures. Therefore, such an activity is communicative.

Activity 9: Playing the role of a customer service officer, a student interviews her/his partner while filling up a form of registration.

This is another example of communicative activity. Interviewing for the purpose of filling up a form focuses more on contents than on structures. In order to fill up the form correctly and completely, it is important for the interviewer to focus on what to ask than on how to structure the sentences to ask. As far as the information is gained completely for the form, it is no use thinking about whether the sentences are grammatically correct and complete. This activity of interviewing to fill up the forms is common in real life, such as done by clerks, customer service officers, administration staff.

Activity 10: T shows a book and puts it on the table, then asks Ss:

T: What's this?

Ss: A book.

T: What color's the book?

Ss: Blue.

T: Where's the book?

Ss: On the table.

Some teacher trainees identified this activity as communicative. The reason they claimed was that it consists of dialog between teacher and students. Besides, the conversation is meaning-focused rather than form-focused. To this point, their claim was acceptable. However, concerning its authenticity of communication, there are some absurdities in that conversation. First, it sounds weird that someone is holding a book and asking about what it is. Such a question may be acceptable when the thing at hand is an unfamiliar technical tool, for instance. Second, except for a color-blind person, holding a thing and asking about its color is peculiar. Third, it is strange to ask where the book is while putting it on the table. In sum, it is meaningful but not communicative.

Such a conversation, however, is possible to do in a language class as it is one way to conduct a language drill. There are three levels of language drills: mechanical, meaningful, and communicative (Finocchiaro, 1989). Mechanical drill is a drill of a certain pattern regardless of meaning and the aim is to enable the learners to produce sentences of that pattern automatically and correctly.

Meaningful drill is a drill of a certain language item in meaningful way. The aim is to enable learners' not only to memorize the item but also to use it meaningfully. The conversation in Activity 10 above is an example of meaningful drill, by which the teacher trained the learners to memorize colors and prepositions of place. Communicative drill, furthermore, is a drill of target language by using it in a communicative way to enable learners to use it proportionally to satisfy their communicative needs.

The border line separating meaningful from communicative practices lies on the needs of information. While communicative use of language is underlain by the needs of information or to fill the gap of information, meaningful use is not necessarily triggered by the absence of information. For example, while pointing at the wall of the classroom, a teacher asks a student, "What color is the wall?" This is meaningful but not communicative because the teacher already knows the answer. However, when she asks, "What color is the wall of your house?" This is communicative because she does not know it and needs that information in case she wants to do a home-visit.

IV. CONCLUSION

The ability to communicate is independent from the knowledge about grammar. It implies that the acquisition of communication ability does not necessarily follow the learning of grammar. Consequently, teacher in language class can conduct communicative activities to promote the acquisition of communication skill (compliant with the communicative approach) in addition to the giving of grammatical explanation to improve learners' understanding of structural rules (following the structural approach).

Communicative activities are desirably conducted as a language teaching and learning strategy to improve learners'

communicative competence. In exerting that strategy, teacher needs to take into account not only whether the learners carry out meaning-focused activities but also whether such activities, including the tasks and texts, are relevant with the real-life out-of-class communicative events. Moreover, in the language teaching and learning process, the activities should be designed and conducted in such a way that learners become active, participative, and involved in the learning process.

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