

Communicative Teaching and Evaluation of Speaking

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1. Introduction

In the new *Course of Study* published in March 1989, the importance of the ability to communicate in English is stressed more than ever. Especially in terms of listening to and speaking English, while 'listening' and 'speaking' were previously categorized in one area as 'listening and speaking,' now they are categorized as two independent areas. This shows that more emphasis should be given to these two areas in teaching English. In this paper I will particularly deal with 'speaking,' discussing communicative teaching and evaluation of speaking skills.

2. What is communication?

In order to understand what communicative teaching means, it may be necessary to know what communication is. It has been suggested that there are at least six features of communication. And they may have direct applicability to communicative teaching. (Morrow 1979; Irie 1991; Aoki 1992)

(1) COMMUNICATION HAS A PURPOSE: Most speakers in real communication have a purpose in mind while they are speaking. For example, if I ask, "Where is the nearest bus stop?" or "What is your telephone number?" my purpose is to get information. If I say, "I'll be there at ten o'clock," I am making a promise.

If I say, "Could you help me with this luggage?" I am asking you for help. In some cases, communication has mostly a social purpose. If I say, "Good afternoon," my purpose is to perform a social custom and to show that I am friendly.

(2) COMMUNICATION TAKES PLACE IN DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS: In real communication, we deal with stretches of spontaneous language above the sentence level. This means the ability to manipulate the formal features of language in isolation does not necessarily imply the larger ability to be communicatively competent. Also, communication takes place in a social context. The relationship among people involved in communication is reflected in the way they communicate with each other.

(3) COMMUNICATION IS USUALLY INTERACTIVE: Usually, when someone speaks, someone else listens and responds. Then the listener becomes the speaker, and the speaker becomes the listener. And this cycle continues as the conversation holds. The response can be nonverbal. If someone says, "It's very hot," my response might be just to move my hand rapidly as if it were a fan. If someone says, "Where is the stapler?" I might just point at

the stapler on the desk.

(4) IN COMMUNICATION, THERE IS USUALLY AN “INFORMATION GAP”: One of the major purposes of communication is to bridge an information gap. When we say there is an information gap, we mean that one person doesn't have some information which someone else has. Sometimes the listener has information that the speaker needs. For example, when I ask the bus driver, “Does this bus stop at Tsu Station?” the driver answers me yes or no. There may be situations in which there is not much information gap. For example, when the purpose of communication is mainly social, as when I say, “Good evening” or “You're welcome,” the term information gap may not be applicable. In this case, friendliness, not the information, is the important thing. In most situations of communication, however, there is an information gap.

(5) COMMUNICATION IS UNPREDICTABLE AND CREATIVE IN CONTENT AND FORM: Although it has norms, communication is to some extent unpredictable and creative in content and form. Content is meaning and what we want to say. Form is vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. The speaker chooses what he wants to say in what form. The hearer cannot anticipate what the speaker might say in what form. At the same time, however, when the listener becomes the speaker, his content and his form are to an extent influenced by what the other person has said. Both the speaker and listener must process new information constantly under time constraints.

(6) IN COMMUNICATION, CONTENT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN FORM: Because content is more important than form in communication, it is possible to communicate with sentences that have mistakes in form. Sometimes ungrammatical sentences are as equally communicative as grammatical sentences.

When we want to teach communicative English, it is important to take into consideration these six features of real communication. When we are doing some communicative activities, we need to ask ourselves how many aspects of real communication are involved in the activities.

3. Communicative teaching

3-1. Four domains of communicative competence

In communicative teaching, we help students to develop their communicative competence. What is communicative competence? Littlewood (1981:6) gives four domains of communicative competence as follows:

(1) The learner must attain as high a degree as possible of linguistic competence. That is, he must develop skill in manipulating the linguistic system, to the point where he can use it spontaneously and flexibly in order to express his intended message.

(2) The learner must distinguish between the forms which he has mastered as part of his linguistic competence, and the communicative functions that they perform. In other words, items mastered as part of a *linguistic* system must also be understood as part of a

communicative system.

(3) The learner must develop skills and strategies for using language to communicate meanings as effectively as possible in concrete situations. He must learn to use feedback to judge his success, and if necessary, remedy failure by using different language.

(4) The learner must become aware of the social meaning of language forms. For many learners, this may not entail the ability to vary their own speech to suit different social circumstances, but rather the ability to use generally acceptable forms and avoid potentially offensive ones.

As for the meaning of the word “communicative,” Underhill says as follows: “When a learner says something that is relevant and true (for himself at least), to someone else who is interested and has not heard it before (from that speaker, at least), then that act of speech is communicative.” (1987:8)

3 – 2. Communicative activities

One way to examine classroom activities is by classifying them by means of a continuum, with “manipulative” activities at one extreme and “communicative” activities at the other extreme. Along this cotinuum, Paulston (1975) classifies drills into three categories as shown below.

Manipulative activities *Communicative activities*

Mechanical drills Meaningful drills Communicative drills

In the mechanical drills, there is one correct answer and the student can many times produce that answer mechanically without knowing what either the cue or the response means. Most traditional pattern drills fall into this category. Meaningful drills are those which, while practicing a grammar pattern, elicit a personal response. Thus the answers differ and there is no “correct” answer. Finally, the communicative drills lead the student to use certain grammatical patterns without predicting a specific response.

Meaningful drills and communicative drills are the main drills in the classroom, but it is not that the mechanical drills do not have any roles to play at all. For example, so-called pattern practice is useful as long as (1) the pattern which is practiced can be actually used in real life and (2) the situation in which the pattern is practiced is clear enough for the students. (Watanabe 1980:16–17) Also in the mechanical drills, it is crucial to move on to the next activity before the students lose interest in the practice. Too much time should not be spent on the mechanical drills.

In order to develop communicative competence of students, it is vital to maximize opportunities for language acquisition to take place. According to Taylor (1987:47), the classroom instruction should incorporate the following features:

- (1) Opportunities for students to be exposed to real communication
- (2) Opportunities for students to engage in using real communication
- (3) Activities which are meaningful to students and which will motivate them to become committed to sustaining that communication to accomplish a specific goal, such as solving a problem or completing a task.

When we do communicative drills in class, we should keep in mind that “communicative competence, for most learners, can only be achieved by *subconsciously* acquiring the language through active participation in real communication that is of interest to those learners — such as in conversation — in a process similar to the way children acquire their first language.” (Taylor 1987:46) (italic is mine) In emphasizing this claim Taylor has more to say: “for most students language is best acquired *when it is not studied in a direct or explicit way*; it is acquired most effectively *when it is used as vehicle for doing something else* ...when learners are directly involved in accomplishing something via the language and therefore have a personal interest in the outcome of what they are using the language to do.” (1987:46) (italics are mine)

4. Mistakes and their correction

4 – 1. Mistakes are welcome

In order to encourage students to engage in communicative activities positively, it is important to encourage students not to be afraid of making mistakes. As we have seen elsewhere, in communication content is more important than form. But in Japan accuracy has traditionally been stressed in learning English. There is an interesting study which shows a negative outcome of this tradition. Kono et al. (1982) has revealed that the Japanese have a tendency to have pauses before function words, while the Westerners have a tendency to have pauses before content words. If we are too concerned with mistakes in form, it may hinder our efforts to actively participate in communication.

We need to change our traditional attitude towards mistakes in English class. We should have more positive attitude toward making mistakes in learning language. Learners should be encouraged not to be ashamed of making mistakes. They can learn a great deal from their mistakes; it shows they are learning. It is more important to try and risk being incorrect than not trying at all. (CLAIR 1990) If the teacher encourages his students to speak up without being afraid of making mistakes, it is important for the teacher himself to do the same. It is rather unconvincing to tell students to do what the teacher does not do positively.

4 – 2. Mistakes and correction: five questions

There are five basic questions concerning mistake correction. (Hendrickson 1987)

- (1) Should learner mistakes be corrected?
- (2) If so, when should learner mistakes be corrected?
- (3) Which learner mistakes should be corrected?
- (4) How should learner mistakes be corrected?
- (5) Who should correct learner mistakes?

Let us examine these five questions one by one. First, should learner mistakes be corrected? There would be no teachers of English who have never corrected the mistakes of their students. Students also often want to be corrected. For example, many of my students ask

me to correct their pronunciation most often. Correcting learner mistakes does help him learn language, so the answer to this question is yes, but more important questions will be the next four ones regarding the method of correction.

When should learner mistakes be corrected? According to Hendrickson (1987), there appears to be no general consensus among language methodologists or teachers on when to correct student mistakes. Many language educators recognize, however, that correcting every mistake is counter-productive to learning a foreign language. Therefore, teachers need to create a supportive classroom environment in which their students can feel confident about expressing their ideas and feelings freely without suffering the threat or embarrassment of having each one of their oral mistakes corrected.

When students are learning new patterns or vocabulary, especially through some mechanical drills, correction is necessary and useful. On the other hand, when students are participating in communicative activities such as games and role plays, correction is not desirable because it will disrupt the flow of the activities.

Also, when students are engaged in the activities in which their fluency is being developed, correction is not desirable, whereas correction is necessary when accuracy is an objective of the activities.

Which learner mistakes should be corrected? Mistakes can be divided into two: global mistakes and local ones. (Hendrickson 1987) A global mistake is a mistake that causes a proficient speaker of a foreign language either to misinterpret an oral message or to consider the message incomprehensible with the textual content of the mistake. On the other hand, a local error is a linguistic error that makes a form or structure in a sentence appear awkward but, nevertheless, causes a proficient speaker of a foreign language little or no difficulty in understanding the intended meaning of a sentence, given its contextual framework. It has been claimed that the correction of one global error in a sentence clarifies the intended message more than the correction of several local errors in the same sentence.

We should also pay attention to the degree of stigma that native speakers attach to the spoken language by non-native speakers. Investigation in this matter is necessary.

Lastly, mistakes that occur frequently in students' speech should be corrected.

To sum up (1) mistakes that impair communication significantly, (2) mistakes that have highly stigmatizing effects on the listener and (3) mistakes that occur frequently in students' speech should be corrected. (Hendrickson 1987)

How should learner mistakes be corrected? Traditionally, teachers had a tendency to correct oral mistakes as soon as they were made. Recently, however, it has been suggested that in communicative activities correction should be delayed. (Edge 1989) The rationale is that correction can prevent the flow of the communicative activities, thus damaging the motivation of the students to engage in the activities continuously and willingly. Also, indirect correction rather than direct correction should be used. The teacher does not correct the mistake right away. He encourages the student to correct the mistake himself by showing that a mistake has been made.

Finally who should correct learner mistakes? Besides traditional teacher correction, there are self correction and peer correction. As for self correction, "several language specialists propose that once students are made aware of their errors, they may learn more from correcting their own errors than by having their teacher correct them." (Hendrickson 1987:365) Peer correction should also be encouraged. Edge (1989:26) gives four advantages of peer correction as follows:

a) Firstly, when a learner makes a mistake and another learner corrects it, both learners are involved in listening to and thinking about the language.

b) Secondly, when a teacher encourages learners to correct each other's mistakes, the teacher gets a lot of important information about the students' ability. Can they hear a particular mistake? Can they correct it?

c) Thirdly, the students become used to the idea that they can learn from each other. So, error correction helps learners cooperate and helps make them less dependent on teachers.

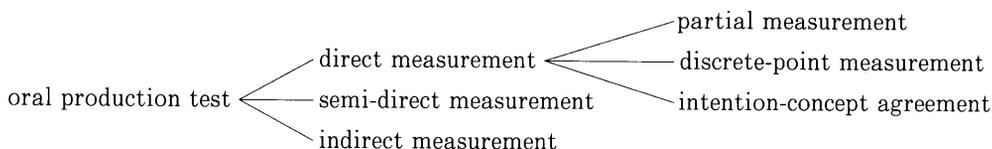
d) Fourthly, if students get used to the idea of peer correction without hurting each other's feelings, they will be able to help each other learn when they work in pairs and groups, when the teacher can't hear what is said.

5. Testing and evaluation of speaking skills

In the past there were some teachers who conducted speaking tests in their own way, but most probably the majority of the teachers did not include speaking tests in their regular English tests. One of the major obstacles in testing speaking in Japan was, and still is, the number of students: there are as many as forty students in each class. It just takes too much time to give a speaking test to forty students. But as speaking activities in class increase, in spite of the size of the class, many English teachers find it necessary to conduct speaking tests in order to evaluate speaking skills of students. Here I will classify speaking tests, and then I will discuss some of the tests which can be used by English teachers in Japan.

5 - 1. Classification of speaking tests

Nakamura classifies speaking tests as follows (1987:197):



Direct measurement is measurement in which the assessor directly observes the oral performances of the speaker and measures them. Semi-direct measurement is measurement in which the assessor listens to the recorded performances of the speaker and measures them indirectly. Finally, in indirect measurement, the assessor measures the oral skills of the speaker through other tests which may have strong correlation to the speaking test, such as

cloze tests and listening comprehension tests.

Direct measurement can be divided into three kinds of measurement: partial measurement, discrete-point measurement, and intention-concept agreement.

Partial measurement measures only one language element such as phoneme, vocabulary, stress, rhythm, syntactic structure, etc.

In discrete-point measurement, through an interview, speech, discussion, etc., the assessor measures integrated ability of the speaker by quantifying discretely language elements such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, comprehension, etc.

In intention-concept agreement, the assessor measures the communicative competence through oral communication tests such as role playing.

5 - 2. Examples of speaking tests

I will discuss some of the speaking tests which can be used by English teachers in Japan.

(1) Interviews (discrete-point measurement): In real life, communication usually consists of speaking and listening. In other words, a speaker speaks responding to what he has heard. The oral interview, therefore, is an ideal way to test speaking skills in a natural situation.

In the interview test, the teacher seeks to develop a conversation by asking questions to a student. Usually the teacher prepares a list of questions in advance, but he may ask unprepared questions which may suit the answers of the student or to encourage the student's speaking. It is suggested to begin with easier questions and then move on to more difficult ones. Sometimes pictures are used to enhance the interview. As for the criteria on which to evaluate the speaking performance of the student, the oral interview developed by FSI (Foreign Service Institute) of the U.S., one of the most used speaking tests, gives "accent," "grammar," "vocabulary," "fluency," and "comprehension (=listening)." (Nakamura 1984) To these five criteria it is advisable in Japan to add "efforts to communicate" as the positive attitude toward speaking is considered to be important recently. The length of the interview always poses a problem in Japan. In this respect, it is important to note that the Educational Testing Service in the U.S. has determined that interviews in the five-to-seven minute range are adequate for valid and reliable rating by trained examiners. (Keitges 1987) Finally, the teacher should never mark in front of a student. "Nothing is more discouraging for a student than to enter into conversation with someone who is constantly breaking off to enter marks and comments." (Heaton 1990:67)

(2) speechmaking (discrete-point measurement): In speechmaking a student makes a speech presentation which is evaluated by the teacher. Speeches given by students can be divided into five types as follows:

a) Memorized speech: The student prepares a speech and memorizes it before he presents it.

b) Prepared speech: The student prepares a speech but he does not memorize it. He practices the speech many times using notes. His notes may include an outline of the speech, main points of the speech, etc. As he practices his speech his wording may change slightly.

He presents his speech referring to notes. In other words, the student does not have to memorize his speech word by word.

c) Impromptu speech: The student is given the speech topic just before he gives his presentation. Usually a few minutes are given to the student so that he can organize his speech quickly, but the main characteristic of this speech is that the speaker has virtually no time for the careful preparation of the speech.

d) Recitation: The student is given some English passage and memorizes and presents it as if he were presenting a speech, just like the memorized speech. The difference is that in recitation, the student does not write the content of the speech at all, while in the memorized speech the speaker writes his speech.

e) Describing pictures: The student is provided with a single picture or a series of pictures which he will describe. Photographs and posters can also be used.

The criteria for assessing a speech presentation may include the following.

a) Content: Is it focused? Are the main ideas supported by enough details? Is the word usage adequate? (This criterion is applied to a speech prepared by the student as in a prepared speech, an impromptu speech, and describing pictures.)

b) Organization: Is it clear? Is it organized in an easy-to-follow manner?

c) English: Are grammar, pronunciation, intonation, rhythm appropriate? As for pronunciation, enunciation is also an important factor.

d) Delivery: Is eye-contact maintained? Are gestures and facial expressions used effectively? If it is a speech with notes, as in a prepared speech, dependency of notes is also part of assessment.

e) Voice: Is it adequate?

Speechmaking as evaluation can be done in class. A certain number of students are assigned to give speeches in every class or every week. One of the advantages is that the speaker can talk to a large audience as in a real speaking situation in public, which makes the speech performance even more authentic. Another advantage is that it makes peer evaluation possible. Peer evaluation is useful since 1) students become more than simply passive listeners, 2) the evaluation process helps students to gain confidence in their own ability to evaluate speech presentations. (Riggenbach and Lazaraton 1991). The teacher may include the peer evaluation into the final evaluation of the presented speech.

A drawback of speechmaking is that it lacks the essentially interactive nature of genuine oral communication, but this drawback can be offset to some extent by having a question-answer session after each speech presentation.

(3) Testing in a language laboratory (semi-direct measurement): In this test, all the students at once answer to pre-recorded questions through headphones. Their answers are recorded on tape and later collected for grading.

There are advantages and disadvantages of the testing in a language laboratory. Some of the main advantages and disadvantages that Underhill (1987) gives are as follows (my comments in the parentheses):

Advantages

a) It is possible to test many students at the same time. (This is the biggest advantage in Japan where a regular class usually has about forty students.)

b) The test marking does not have to be done in real time, i.e. in the same place at the same time as the test itself. It can be done where and when convenient, in comfort, with the facility to replay any part of the tape if desired.

c) The marking time for each test can be considerably shorter than the test itself. Most language laboratories have the facility to switch student recorders on and off from the main console while continuously broadcasting a master tape. This enables the teacher to turn the machines on to record each student's response and to turn them off during instructions or longer stimuli.

d) The largely predictable nature of what the student will say makes it possible to anticipate the most likely responses and produce a detailed marking key. Such tests normally produce reliable marks.

e) Recorded tests can be useful where live interviews are difficult because of practical problems in getting students and teachers in the same place at the same time; or for personal or cultural reasons, for example, young people who are shy or embarrassed to speak openly in front of a stranger. (Teachers are not strangers to students, but some Japanese students are shy and may feel nervous in interview-type tests.)

Disadvantages

a) This type of test is not very authentic. There are few situations in the real world in which what the student says has absolutely no effect on what he hears next.

b) The teacher can hear everything that the students say, but he misses all the visual aspects of communication such as gestures and facial expressions.

c) A live test where the teacher can participate can be lengthened or directed if the teacher finds it difficult to evaluate, or has not heard or understood something; but there is nothing the teacher can do if the student's speech sample is unclear or unsatisfactory.

d) Technical difficulties can lead to poor quality recordings, or even no recording at all. Recording tests should be carefully checked at the end of each recording session to ensure, at the very least, that each student's voice has been registered.

It is essential to keep these advantages and disadvantages in mind when conducting a speaking test in the language laboratory.

Koizumi (1990:20) developed criteria with a rating scale which he has been using in his testing in language laboratory. His policy is that whether the message is communicated or not is more important than the grammatical accuracy.

fluency of response:	natural response.....	2 points
	unnatural pauses are observed	1 point
	cannot answer	0 point
clarity of response:	clear	2 points

	unclear	1 point
	cannot answer	0 point
appropriateness of response:	appropriate	2 points
	not appropriate, but understandable	1 point
	cannot understand	0 point

(4) Role playing (intention-concept agreement): The student is asked to take on a particular role and to imagine himself in a particular situation. He has to converse with the teacher in a way that is appropriate to the role and the situation given. (Underhill 1987)

(5) Cloze tests (indirect measurement): It has been suggested that cloze may be a satisfactory substitute for the TOEFL and oral interview. Cloze tests tend to correlate most highly with those tests that require high-level integrative skills such as dictation and listening comprehension rather than with discrete items of grammar or vocabulary. (Hinofotis 1987)

The procedure involves automatically deleting every n th word from a prose passage and asking the student tested to give the missing words in the blanks. Cloze tests are justified on the assumption that "a person who is either a native speaker of the language tested or a reasonably proficient non-native speaker should be able to anticipate what words belong in the blanks given the contextual clues of the passage." (Hinofotis 1987:413) Cloze tests are effective in developing the ability to anticipate, which plays an important role in natural communication.

There are two main scoring methods: exact word scoring method and acceptable-word scoring method. Studies suggest that the acceptable-word scoring method yields more reliable scores.

6. Conclusion

With the renewal of the *Course of Study* English teachers are now expected to teach English for communication. When teaching English communicatively, teachers need to be familiar with features of communication, domains of communicative competence, and methods of correcting mistakes. As the speaking activities increase in class, it is vital to include speaking tests in examinations. Though there are difficulties in conducting speaking tests such as the class size, teachers are encouraged to give them in their classes.

Notes

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