



MJAL

The modern journal of applied linguistics

Volume 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974 – 8741

Editor-in-chief: Dr.R.Narayanan, Ph.D.

Chief-Advisor and Editor: Dr.N.Rajasekharan Nair, Ph.D.

Editorial Board: Dr.Krushna Chandra Mishra, Ph.D.India

Dr. Mohammad Ali Salmani-Nodoushan, Ph.D.Iran

Prof. Amy Huang, US

Dr. S. Senthilnathan, Ph.D.India

Dr.R.Gowrishankar, Ph.D.India

Dr.S.Robert Gnanamony, Ph.D.India

Dr.S.Iyyappan, Ph.D.India

Dr.R.LalithaRaja, Ph.D. India

Is there a Textbook in the Language Classroom?

V.B. Vinod

Is there a Textbook in the Language Classroom?

V.B. Vinod

Vinod Balakrishnan is an Assistant Professor in English in the Department of Humanities at National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli. He earned his Ph.D in “Popular Fiction and the Use of History” from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. He was a Fellow at the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University, New York in 2008. He is a recipient of a Bronze Medal for poetry by the National Library of Poetry, USA. His poems have been archived and widely anthologized. He is the author of Indian Classics in English Translation and has coauthored a book on Literary Theory. His articles have appeared in The Quest, CIEFL Bulletin, Journal of English Language Teaching and Indian Express. His research concentrates on Pop Culture Studies, Cultural Studies, and Indian Poetics. His current research interests include East-West Peace Studies, Pop Fiction, Politics of Representation and History of Thought. Currently, he is working on “Networks and Mobility in Literature”.

Abstract

This paper addresses a few fundamental questions: Does the prescribed Textbook satisfy learner needs? What is the role of the Textbook in a Communication class? What are the concerns that a Textbook must address? The paper seeks answers to these questions. In the process, it makes a strong case for a student-oriented Textbook (particularly at, NIT, Tiruchirappalli. The author raises a concern about the capacity of a Textbook for whetting the communication skills of the stakeholders. It calls for a shift of emphasis from knowing *about* communication to *knowing* communication. It elaborates the author’s action research involving 120 students. The specific topic that was animated was, “The Process of Communication.” The learners were made to meditate on the keywords: Process, Concept and Internalization. It concludes with the samples of 4 learners to demonstrate the shift that the class made from the conventional (approach to) Textbook towards the *internalized* Textbook.

This paper looks at the role of the Textbook in the Communication Class. The reflections emerge out of the use of a stipulated book on Technical Communication for the freshmen in the National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli [NITT, hereafter].

A Textbook must be, first and last, engaging. It becomes the field of stimulating activity generating discourse involving the teacher and the student. The student comes to the class with a repertoire of needs which influence his or her engagement with the textbook. The teacher on his part has to manoeuvre the resources of the Textbook in such a way that most of the learner needs are addressed satisfactorily. After all, “the discourse which actually results in the classroom is shaped as much by learners’ reactions as by Teachers’ intentions” (Prabhu, 95)¹.

A Textbook gets chosen over others on the same subject through a process that, in itself, is worth examining and has the scope for a separate paper. This paper picks up the thread from the point of a particular text being anointed. Once, the Textbook comes into use, it occupies a vital space in the learning process. It becomes its own justification by continuing to engage those who peruse it both from the point of view of instruction and of learning.

At this point, it becomes imperative to consider the specific subject of Communication where the relevance of the Textbook needs to be visited. Communication is, understood in the present context, not just a subject. It is not even like any subject where the learner compensates for the absence of a specified Textbook with inputs from a variety of sources like books on the subject in the library, the Internet, experts and so on. Communication is perhaps the only subject where the teacher and the learner need a platform, suitably provided by the Textbook, for any learning-oriented transaction to take place.

If one takes a closer look at the structuring of most curriculums, one hardly escapes the paradox about the Textbook. The inspiring teacher and the eager learner don’t

need a Textbook to determine what is necessary in the classroom. However, what is necessary in the classroom cannot be determined without a Textbook, even by the most inspiring teacher and the most eager learner. It is, in the light of this paradox that the process of deciding on the Textbook becomes a significant exercise.

The choice of a Textbook, in an ideal situation, addresses concerns like: For whom is the Textbook? How much of the work in the class requires the Textbook? Will the student use it for his private study and preparation? One does not consider, here, the lobbying and hard-sell which clinch the issue of choice in favour of one author or publisher over other authors and their publishers. The latter consideration forecloses any discussion on the Textbook and renders any theorizing an exercise in futility.

Once a Textbook is decided, it automatically becomes a subject for evaluation. It has to answer all the questions relating to use-value. No Textbook is above the student's need to be convinced of its credentials as an "authentic material" in the classroom. And conviction stems from the fine balance between the matter that is purveyed and the manner in which it is conveyed.

Here, one does look at how the textbook meets the student. Authors, obviously, give this thought the thought it merits. Authors, doubtless, also weigh equally pressing thoughts before applying themselves to the task of writing. They, perhaps, also realize that their Textbook is not the ultimate instructional destination. It is not meant to fill a void of knowledge. Most of the times, it is meant to join the continuing conversation on a given subject. However, when the Textbook is written, the thought must always be about how the Textbook would meet the student.

If the thought about the student is the most occupying one in the author's mind, and one would even posit, the most overriding concern, then the author must get into the shoes of the student or rather, get under his thinking hat. The author's choices are determined by what a student might possibly want out of the Textbook. It is in this context that a Textbook on Communication is close-read for its merits.

Students in a Technical institution, with the prospect of a placement in the 6th or 7th semester, are acutely conscious of the role of communication in determining their

future. Such students are self-consciously alert to the subtle but significant changes happening to their personality. A student who is so driven would invariably place specific demands on the Textbook and it becomes imperative for any author to respond to these demands adequately. The self-conscious approach to personal improvement influences the conscious decision to accept or reject an author or the Textbook. It is an awkward situation if the teacher finds himself/herself at pains to justify a Textbook in the classroom, much like diplomats and official spokesmen who must speak with a straight face on mangled issues.

The context can be mapped, then, with the following key words: Technical Institution, High Communication need and a Textbook on Technical Communication. One does not fault the author for any serious lapses in the Textbook. On the contrary, it is a correct book where all the learning components are in their places. However, it could be more than what it is if only the author chooses to be different from the conventional approach to Textbooks that renders them professional, humourless, business-like, drill and too impersonal. For a Textbook on Technical Communication, it is high on being Technical and almost completely bereft of Communication if one considers the manner in which it meets the student.

If it were a Textbook on Technical Education it would pass muster with the authorial approach that obtains at the present time. However, in the Communication class, no opportunity must be ignored as far as whetting communication skills are concerned. The classroom must be transformed, imaginatively and constructively, into an activity zone with as high a potential for communicative exercises as possible. The teacher has an important role as the animator, moderator, motivator, and the exemplar for any classroom activity. The students establish a dynamic relationship with the teacher and their peers to put the communication process on a more purposeful keel. In their influential book titled *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching: A Description and Analysis* (1986), Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers emphasize that:

Learner roles in an instructional system are closely linked to the teacher's status and function. Teacher roles are similarly related ultimately both to assumptions about language and language learning at the level of approach. (23)²

Communication, described by any chalk, is a process whose lifeblood is relationship. The consciousness of being related as a Sender to the Receiver or vice-versa, fuels the dynamics of any communicative move. The consciousness brings into play a field of imperatives that influence and guide the act of communicating. In situations where the consciousness of being related suffers, undesirable elements infiltrate the message and mar the process of communication. The onus is on the teacher to emphasize the importance of relationship-consciousness in managing the Communication lines.

The teacher who goes to the Communication class in a technical institute like the NITT needs to set his bearings to ensure that the program is on course. It becomes necessary to decide whether it is desirable for the student to know *about* Communication or *know* Communication. It is not a case of merely substituting the Preposition (about) with the Verb (know). In fact, there is the essential difference between the Preposition and the Verb. It is desirable for the student to accept the Verb-al dynamics of bringing agreeable predicates to the named subject. It is imperative that the teacher persuades his class to see the classroom activity as being “linked in principled ways to the real-world tasks [that] learners might be required to engage in outside the classroom” (Nunan, 88).³ A student whose career mobility depends on impeccable verbal skills would have little gain from merely knowing about Communication (as theory).

A Textbook on Communication has to manage a fine balance between what is generally practised and what needs to be practised. The Textbook has to balance the general purpose of informing the student about Communication and the need to initiate him into the actual process of Communication. So, the burden of any author would involve the balancing of proportions between theory and practice. In this regard, one remembers the lacuna in Textbooks and syllabuses as pointed out by Richard Allwright who in an article titled: “Language Learning through Communication Practice” (1979) says:

Textbooks and national syllabuses, typically, and for obvious reasons, present an analysis of language rather than of communicative skill. . . . A logical extension of the argument would suggest that if communication is THE aim, then it should be THE major element in the process. (167)⁴

Given the fact that it is a Textbook on Communication that addresses the equation between communicative performance and a career, it must favour the room that can be created for practice in the class than the space already appropriated by theory.

The teacher must, gently and persuasively, shepherd the class away from the relatively easy task of knowing about Communication towards the more challenging and very creative enterprise of knowing Communication. There is the need to convince the class that the greater virtue is in accepting the more demanding occupation of establishing relationships, sustaining the communication lines, and self-consciously learning the ropes. Students must be weaned away from the temptation to see Communication as another subject for the examination. They must be charmed out of the comfort of answering questions about Communication in the quiet of the exam hall. Instead, they must be encouraged to see every concept as that which can be put into practice. For the activity in the exam hall is a test of one's familiarity with the concepts. The greater test is the performance in the Interview Hall where the consciousness of the relationship between the teacher and the taught gets transmuted into the relationship between the Interviewer and the Interviewee.

There is one other aspect of the Textbook that needs to be highlighted. The Textbook is still sacrosanct for most students and for teachers. An attitude of uncritical acceptance of the contents of a Textbook indicates the almost absolute hold it has on the imaginative and intellectual faculties of the stakeholders. It is not easy for the unsuspecting student or the unprepared teacher to break out of the Textbook's stranglehold. If one does not take the onus of effectively delivering the concepts upon himself/herself, there is only a mere shifting of content-location from the teacher to the learner. The enterprising teacher will have to devise strategies for validating the purpose of the Textbook on Communication.

During the class on "The Process of Communication", it was felt by the author that by adopting the general practice of lecturing on Communication and its process, an opportunity for enabling the students with the right inputs would go abegging. So, the class was involved in an exercise to see if there was a better way of doing the concept of Communication-Process. In this context, one must recall the objective of the authors in writing the Textbook and which appears in the Preface: "The main aim of

this book is to enable the reader to face the challenges in communicationThe main strength of the book is its audience-centred approach.”

The Textbook is purveyed by both the teacher and the student in the classroom. The classroom is the space where meaningful change to the entry-level personality of the learner must happen. To use the image from metallurgy, the classroom is the smelter where the elements for unlearning can be separated by the student from the corpus of personal formation. S.J. Gaies would see the classroom as “the crucible” (Allwright and Bailey 18)⁵ that brings together the teacher and the learner so that language learning is enabled “as a result of the reactions among the elements that go into the crucible – the teacher and the learners” (18). Taken in this sense, every visit to the classroom by the teacher and the learners is an opportunity to galvanize the potential for personal formation into reality.

The teacher started the *Unit* on “*The Basics of Technical Communication*” by referring to the “Process of Communication” which, in the Textbook, is represented schematically as the movement of the encoded message from the Sender to the Receiver through a channel which is then decoded for the purpose of a suitable response. At this point the process of Communication is said to have come a full circle. There are two choices before the teacher: 1. Follow the general practice of lecturing on the Process of Communication or 2. Enable the student “to face the challenges in communication” through an “audience-centred approach,” as the book purports to do.

The latter choice was enacted in two sections of Freshmen in the NITT. About 120 students were put through two rounds of written assignments. The topics for the assignments were the same: *The Process of Communication*. The first round saw everyone drawing the schematic representation of the process and describing it in the aloof and impersonal manner of a Textbook.

Before putting the students through a second round of writing, the teacher made an intervention with a view to fill the perceived lacuna in the approach of a Textbook on Communication. The students were made to meditate on certain keywords: **Process, Concept, and Internalization**. The teacher spent time to help the students visualize

the contours of these key words. The students were guided to bring before their eyes and consciousness the complex operations that are suggested by the word “Process” and which taken as just another word is to ignore the opportunity to “internalize” the “concept” of Communication.

The process of internalization by the student involves his or her engagement with their individual needs as communicators. The members of the class, as a whole, work in the area of fine-tuning communicative efficacy. However, each member would be working only on his or her specific problem-area: identifying, analyzing, devising strategies and working towards elimination of the problem. Louis Trimble in *English for Science and Technology: A Discourse Approach* (1985) calls it “the individualizing process” (23).⁶ Each student would parse the process of communication into the different stages and ask himself/herself as to how they fare in each of the different stages of the communication process.

The word “Concept” calls attention to itself by virtue of suggesting “thought, frame of mind, and imagination” The New OED traces the origin of this 16th century word from the Latin *concupere* (to take together) or *conceptum* (something conceived). Communication, properly understood, is thought-product requiring a frame of mind, is framed in the mind and the imagination takes the complex operations of interests and needs together. Further, the teacher must inject a shot of motivation to enable the students to internalize the concept of Communication as a dynamic process involving every one in the class. The learner needs to be convinced of the efficacy of internalization. In these days of bitter competition there is greater evaluation of inputs and resources by individuals. There is justification too for the insistence among students to know the use-value of classroom inputs.

This author felt that motivating the class was a necessary prelude to the classroom activity that helps learners internalize the process of Communication. The author described the context for the class by expatiating on the historical, political, social, economic, cultural and psychological aspects of our reality in which every student is located. This complex reality is negotiated on a day to day basis through the resources of language and the facility for Communication at the command of the individual. By providing the vital connection between the skills one picks up in the

Communication class and the skill for managing one's affairs in the tough streets of today's reality the student was made to realize the need for looking at the Process of Communication as a thought-product requiring a frame of mind and the imagination to handle the complex attendant operations.

One can see that this exercise manipulates certain variables, experimentally, to determine their effect on classroom learning. Of the three better known classroom strategies the exercise under consideration can be called, "experimental pedagogical studies" (2)⁷. The other two strategies mentioned by Barry McLaughlin are "Descriptive Studies" in which speech samples of Second Language Learners are compared to Target Language norms and "Hypothesis Testing Studies" in which the researcher begins with a specific hypothesis based on the findings of previous research or theory.

First, the student was persuaded to see the danger in the disconnect between the skills picked up in the classroom and the skills that are marshaled for the everyday exigencies of life. From this point it was not a long way to convince them that Communication skills can be honed in the classroom itself and that it does not require one to go out into the quiet of a park or the privacy of home to try out skills. Once the individual members got over their inertia of conventional thinking with respect to the Textbook, they started imagining themselves in all the positions designated in the Process of Communication. The exercise of internalization brings within its ambit the "needs analysis stage of task-based instruction" (Robinson, 289)⁸ which is an important part of M.H. Long's Interactionist Theory. The learners began to see themselves with a more critical eye, introspecting with the facility of a keener understanding of the key words.

When it came down to putting their intrapersonal contemplations on paper the results were dramatically different and definitely purposeful. To demonstrate the results, extracts from the performances of four different learners are arranged in a graded sequence from the conventional cant to the authentic candour: From the conventional Textbook to the 'internalized' Textbook. It must be reckoned that all these learners are high achievers in the core Engineering and Science subjects. These learners are

also proficient in language to handle different speech situations with a fair measure of competence. We shall identify them as L1, L2, L3, L4.

Sample L1

The communication process is a cyclic one. This cycle occurs in the presence of a sender and a receiver.

The sender, first, encodes the message that has to be sent. That is, the sender gives a form to the message. The form can consist of words, actions, signs, objects or a combination of them. Then, the sender sends it through a channel.

The receiver, receives the message, decodes it and sends back a response. However, the response need not be appropriate. For instance, in case there is a problem in the encoding or decoding process the response delivered may be inappropriate. Some 'noise' in the channel can also cause the same.

The transmission of the receiver's response to the sender is called feedback. Feedback is essential as it is a barometer of effective communication.

Sample L2

The Oxford English Dictionary says that to internalize means "to make (a belief or attitude) part of one's behaviour or thinking." During the process of communication, this meaning differs, but ever so slightly. Instead of the belief or attitude, it simply refers to the information being exchanged between the sender and receiver. This is one of the key concepts to an effective conversation, or in general, communication. Internalization is basically the process of placing ourselves as both sender and receiver and trying to piece together the exchange of information that takes place between them.

The communication is not complete (in a sense) just by the receiver sending his/her feedback to the sender. The sender first has to check if it is the correct response to his message. If it is not, he has to see why it was not: whether it was because his message was too complex for the receiver to respond to it in proper way or it was because the receiver communicated as he did not understand the message at all. The receiver also has one extra job other than decoding and giving a response: he has to check why this message was directed to him and if yes, can there be more than one way of interpreting the message; in order to do this, he has to put himself in the senders' [sic] shoes.

In other words, both of them (sender and receiver) also think like the other; they believe/accept the others' [sic] thoughts in their own. This is internalization.

Sample L3

Communication plays a very important role in everyone's life especially in one's professional life. So putting myself in the shoes of the sender and receiver, I will

analyse my strengths and weaknesses while conversing in different situations be it with friends, relatives or an employer.

When amongst the company of friends I am totally at ease while conversing with friends be it as a sender as well as a receiver. None of the people I talk to are strangers to me so I don't feel hesitant while talking to them. But when I talk I expect others to listen to me or at least act as if they are listening to me by means of some gestures or a wink of the eye etc. When talking to friends, there is no need for me to use flowery language to convey the message. Also, I have an excellent sense of humour which helps lighten the mood when talking to friends. With friends one can discuss anything and everything fearing nothing.

As a receiver I make it a point to listen intently to what the other person is saying. But if a conversation gets too monotonous or repetitive, I can't tolerate it and I tell my friend very bluntly to stop the conversation.

But with relatives it is a bit different. As a sender, I am bit more reserved and hesitant to open a conversation. I am not open or free with my relatives. I prefer to play the role of a receiver and just answer the few questions they ask me.

Going one step higher, say teachers. The way I speak and behave with teachers is obviously different from how I converse with friends. When I talk to teachers I stay calm and control the words that I speak. I don't show gestures nor do I use too many body actions. The tone in which I speak is that of respect to the person's position, experience and seniority. But at times, to be honest, I take advantage of a teacher's innocence either by talking too much in class or coming late to class or doing some other things in class totally unrelated to what is being taught.

As a receiver, the extent to which I pay attention in class depends on how well the teacher takes the class or during which part of the day the class is. I can assure you that I am least attentive in classes after lunch. To be frank, I expect the teacher to listen to the students' point of view and not use his position to his advantage.

Now coming to a more important part of one's career, a group discussion. I have participated in a few group discussions as part of a personality development programme and during some club inductions within the campus. I am sharing what I have learnt through these discussions now.

When it comes to a GD, I am always hesitant to start the discussion. The reasons for this could be that there might be people who are elder to me so I wait for the elder person to start. Another reason is that if someone else starts the discussion it gives me clarity on the topic and more time for me to think of some valuable points. At times this leads to an inferiority complex within me. Regarding the topics of discussion I am more comfortable with national and social issues or current affairs. I find it hard to discuss abstract topics such as 'tring tring the bell rings.' When I am expressing my views I expect others not to interrupt and wait for their turn to talk.

Seventeen years of living a social life defines one's conduct and behaviour, and gives them a fair idea of where they stand in the art of connecting with others.

Throughout life, one finds themselves in the company of a variety of people. Like all, I'm most frank and open when among friends. Around my lot, I am the talkative, humorous one with a cool attitude. Among elders and superiors, life professors, dad's colleagues, etc, I prefer to be attentive and sober, yet convey a quiet confidence. My tone will be more respectful and soft.

Mass communication is a field I'm more than familiar with. Be it a speech in school or a presentation at the students' mock-UN conference, I aim to impress. Though I admit to getting sweaty palms once in a while when asked to face a crowd, I don't like to waste a good opportunity. After all, it's all about reaching out and expressing yourself, your ideas and learning from the responses.

While talking I usually move my hands a lot. I consider body language important. I'm known for my ever-changing facial expressions and dramatic tones. My father used to say that while conversing informally or in personal circles, a touch can speak volumes and express feelings no flowery words can. I try to put it in practice often.

More than judging others, I judge myself. I am a constant self-critic. But I do assess the people I come across; so as to categorize them mentally, appreciate their talents and learn from their flaws.

Generally, during an interview or debate, or any such situation that requires a testing of my personality, I prefer to portray a cool, calm and confident side. I tend to crack jokes in the middle to lighten up the mood. If I have nothing to offer on a certain topic, I at least give my opinion on someone else's views. But I'm not a person who blabbers before thinking. I believe its better to be a man of few words than a man of many useless words. I am a fast speaker. People often find it hard to keep up with my speedy deliveries.

As far as the receiver in a communication channel is concerned, I consider my self average. Unless it's a really boring talk that makes you want to hang yourself after hearing, I am a pretty attentive listener. I may not respond to each and every bit of information, but I do take in every word thrown at me.

On the whole, after this self-analysis, I rate myself a good enough sender and a satisfactory receiver in the ever-diversifying process of communication. I do have a long way to go in improving myself and I plan to do that, one step at a time.

After all, man is a social animal; and the better he interacts with the world, the better his life becomes.

Closing Comments

The Samples, L1, L2, L3 and L4 have been exhibited in a deliberate sequence. This is to demonstrate the mindset of the student during the process of weaning him/her away from an uncritical approach to the Textbook. These four samples are typical of the four different stages in the evolution of the student. Sample L1: demonstrates a

fixation with the Textbook. There is a capitulation to the idea of communication as the Textbook lays it out. The student appears to be content with the content of the Textbook. Sample L2 is slightly better than L1 in the sense that there is a willingness to refer sources outside the Textbook like the Oxford Dictionary. However, the use of the source is only for the purpose of corroborating whatever is laid out in the Textbook. So, the idea of communication is elaborated using extra- Textbook resources like the Dictionary. Sample L3 is better than L1 and L2, in that, it goes beyond the Textbook by demonstrating the willingness to internalize the concept of communication. This internalization is shown in the manner in which the process of communication is played out by the student in different spheres of creative, public and professional life. Sample L4 is the best of the selections as it shows complete internalization of the concept of communication. The student explores the concept in all its dimensions while at the same time keeping an intimate, confessional tone that adds credibility to the idea of communication as it unfolds in every walk of life. Moreover, the student is able to trace the curve of evolution from personal experiments, through self-criticism and self-analysis towards and objective evaluation by peers. L4 shows the journey of the individual from tentative attempts to confident performances. It is also marked by the commitment of the individual towards continuous self-improvement.

References

1. Prabhu, N.S. *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: OUP, 1987.
2. Richards, Jack C., and Theodore S. Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods In Language Teaching: A Description and Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
3. Nunan, David. *The Learner-Centred Curriculum: A Study in Second Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.
4. Allwright, Richard. "Language Learning through Communication Practice." *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*. Ed. C.J. Brumfitt and K. Johnson. Oxford: OUP, 1979. 167-182.
5. Allwright, Dick and Kathleen M. Bailey. *Focus on the Language Classroom: An Introduction to Classroom Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge, 1994.
6. Trimble, Louis. *English for Science and Technology: A Discourse Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.
7. Mc Laughlin, Barry. *Theories of Second Language Learning*. London: Edwin Arnold, 1987.
8. Robinson, Peter. *Cognitive and Second Language Instruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

