

Inside an English Language Classroom: The Communication Perspective

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Abstract

This qualitative case study focused on the primary classroom communication which explored its nature, strength and weakness in an English lesson of grade three. The school, teacher and learners involved in this study had been selected using convenience and purposive sampling procedure. Data had been collected through direct video observation of the English lesson, English teacher interview and student group interview were analyzed thematically. The findings showed that question-answer, pair and group work, body language and use of audio loaded with songs, rhymes and lesson's content promoted classroom communication. Teacher used an audio to deliver the lesson which increased communication among the children including teacher. Use of some posters and teachers' friendly approach enhanced communication as well. On the other hand, some external factors and the dominance of bright learners hindered effective classroom communication.

Key Words: English classroom, classroom communication, audio-visual material

1. Background and Rationale of the Study

Teaching-learning of English language have always been a point of attention to the educationists. English language teaching has seen many changes in the last fifty years. The history of language teaching can be classified under three phases (Richard, 2006);

- a) Traditional approaches of language teaching (up to the late 1960s)
- b) Classic Communicative Language Teaching (1970s to 1990s)
- c) Current Communicative Language Teaching (1990s to the present)

The phases show that the teaching practice shifted from traditional lecturing to interactive classroom communication. The changes in English language teaching methodology occurred due to the demand of time, since it has been realized that English Language is more a skill-based subject than a content-based one (NCTB, 1995). This point of view emphasizes the third phase above in which effective classroom communication is the core of English

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language teaching. However, practical situation is different where teachers' thoughts and perceptions vary in communicative practice (Richard, 2006).

The present study has been designed to explore the features of English language classroom communication. Literature shows that researchers have been continuously interested in the areas of classroom communication and interaction. In the early days, attention was given to classroom conversation (Gaies, 1977 & 1979; Henzl, 1979; Long, 1983 and Sato, 1983) and classroom questioning (Steven, 1912 in Gall, 1979; Sanders, 1966; Dillon, 1982 & 1988; Hamilton & Brady, 1991). Studies particularly on questioning were conducted in USA and UK. (Newton & Newton, 2000; Shahin et al, 2002; Harrop & Swinson, 2003; Myhill & Dunkin, 2005). The Asian researchers had also shown their interest on classroom communication focusing on classroom questioning (Ghazali, 1998; Ho, 2005; Hussain, 2006; Yang, 2010).

In Bangladesh, English language teaching-learning has an important place in the national curriculum, but the implementation of CLT is not satisfactory. For example, Teaching Quality Improvement (TQI) study showed that classroom practice in ELT is still based on traditional grammar-translation method (Power & Sreshtha, 2010). Struggle continues to achieve the goal of CLT in Bangladesh. Using target language is difficult here and students are usually reluctant to participate in the English classes (Sadek, Ahmed & Begum, 2006; Maleque, Begum & Hossain, 2008). In these circumstances, a nine years project "English-in-Action (EiA)" has been started aiming to help 25 million people of Bangladesh to improve their ability of using English for social and economic purposes (Woodward, 2010). The audio-visual materials and training provided by EiA has helped teachers to improve communication and participation of learners in the English lessons. This study particularly included those intervened schools where teacher and students had used the prescription of EiA and investigated what exactly happened in those lessons.

Not many studies on classroom communication have been conducted in Bangladesh. The necessity of such studies cannot be denied especially when an intervention is aimed at improving classroom practices. The current study will be helpful to fill the gap in such research in Bangladesh. The study findings will provide feedback on the interventions of the EiA project and may help the project team redesign its activities accordingly.

Classroom communication is an important aspect of teaching-learning which influences learners' achievement. In Nigeria, a number of interaction studies (e.g. Ajayelami, 1983; Akuezuilo, 1987; Domike, 2002; Emah, 1998; Iyewarum, 1983; Mani, 1986; Okafor, 1993; Okebukela, 1985; Okebukola & Ogunniyi, 1984; Ogunkola, 1999; Udeani, 1992) has indicated that some relationship exists between classroom interaction pattern and students' achievement. Okafor's (1993) study has explored the communication features with an intensive investigation mode. Understanding on classroom communication generated from these studies suggested for teachers, trainers and researchers ways to improve their practice and look at it from different perspectives. (Brophy and Good, 1974).

2. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to understand the overall classroom communication practice of an English language class. To meet the general objective three specific objectives were considered. These were to:

- Explore the features of English language classroom communication;
- Identify the strength of English language classroom communication; and
- Find out the barriers to English language classroom communication.

3. Theoretical Framework of the Study

The core focus of the current study is classroom communication which is the heart of CLT. A number of scholars interested in ELT and others studied aspects of communication theory. Shannon and Weaver (1949) explored the “Mathematical Theory of Communication” whereas Schramm (1954) and Berlo (1960) studied the process of communication. After years of Berlo’s research on the process of communication and Blumer’s work on “Symbolic Communication” (1969), these attracted attention of educationists. Later in 1972, Mehrabian worked on nonverbal communication. Griffin (2006) presented many more aspects and theories of communication in his book “Communication Theory”.

These theories of communication partially matched with the concept of current study. As the study directly concentrated on classroom communication, the researchers needed a theory related to communication between teacher and students. A model on classroom communication was adopted from the book “Introduction to Educational Technology” (Sampath, Pannirselvam & Santhanam,1990). The model has been considered as the theoretical base of the study which includes five basic components named sender, message, media, receiver and medium of classroom communication. The model is shown below.

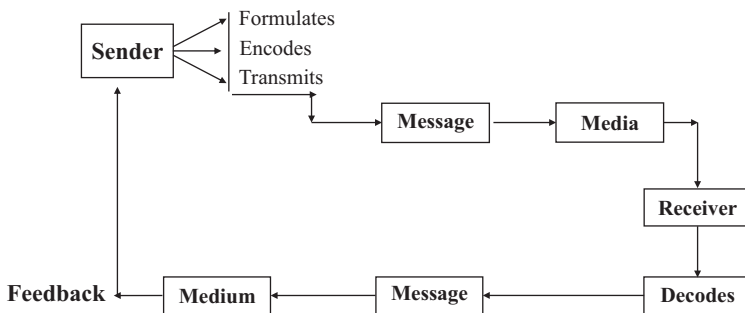


Figure: Classroom Communication Cycle

The diagram shows that the sender (teacher) formulates, encodes and transmits a message to the receivers (learners). S/he may use audio-visual teaching-learning materials or verbal lecture or something else which are the media of passing message to the learners. After receiving the message the receivers (learners) decode that and again send back to the sender in the form of another message using a medium which may be termed as feedback. In this way a message starts its journey from the sender and after passing several steps comes back to the sender again. This whole process is termed as a “complete communication cycle” (Sampath, Pannirselvam & Santhanam, 1990). The role of sender and receiver may change which is expected to happen in a communicative classroom.

4. Methodology of the Study

This study is a qualitative one where “Case study approach” has been chosen to undertake an exploration of the work and to make the proper interpretation of data (Merten, 2010; Creswell, 2011). Data were collected from only one teacher from a Government Primary School of Bangladesh using convenience sampling technique (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Purposive sampling technique with typical case sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) has been chosen to observe only one English lesson of grade three. Creswell (2011) also suggested that a single individual or site could be studied while one wants to report details about any phenomena using qualitative case study. Again, keeping to the qualitative nature of the study, data have been collected intensively from the natural settings. One English lesson of the intervened teacher had been observed as the main source of data. Besides interview was conducted with that teacher and a student group interview was conducted with eight learners of the observed lesson to clarify the critical incidences of the observation. Sodata triangulation (Denzin, 1970) and methodological triangulation (Cresswell, 2011, Thurmond, 2001) were applied in the data collection and analysis phases of the study.

The researchers used video observation to conduct their study. Video observation had been used in other qualitative researches of English Language Teaching (Wu, 1993; Ho, 2005 & EiA, 2010). In this study the use of videotaping produced a detailed recording of micro-incidents of a lesson which helps in many ways to understand what exactly happened in a class (Glaser, 1998). In the analysis process, first of all the videoed lesson was transcribed. It has been noted that capturing of recorded video in a very thorough narrative transcription sensitizes the researcher to the observation of micro-events (Nilsson, 2012). Nilsson emphasizes the utility of thorough transcriptions of micro-events, which enables the researcher to become aware of the “small details, changes and deviations in the action on the video recording” (Nilsson, 2012, p. 110).

Nilsson (2012) cites Glaser (1978) to report that the use of video is the only method that helps to capture micro-communications of non-verbal participants who communicated by means of macro and micro non-verbal communications. “There is no other method of collecting original information explaining what was happening in their field of interest.” (Nilsson,

2012, p. 107). In doing the video observation usually the presence of the researcher affects the people being observed (Polit & Hungler, 1999), but in this circumstance the observer tried to be hidden and inconspicuous like “a fly in the wall.” The transcription of the videotapes was the most painstaking and slow phase of the data analysis. The video permits the fine-grained, detailed nature of the data to be made explicit (Latvala et al., 2000). Dense data typically contain subtle communicative behavior. Furthermore attaining a high level of precision is enabled by videotaped data (Heritage, 1984). After completing the transcription the researchers organized the data, developed the themes and finally interpreted the data under the themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In any qualitative study four issues of trustworthiness demand attention: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merten, 2010). Researchers tried to maintain the trustworthiness of their study by pursuing these four aspects.

5. Presentation and Analysis of Data

Data analysis of this research was carried out based on the data collected through direct classroom observation. To enrich the analysis, the findings from English teacher's interview and students' group interview were used. Along with communication style the observed strengths of and barriers to such communications were portrayed in a logical manner. The analysis considered the environment of the class, as it is an important factor which influences classroom communication (Arbaugh, 2000).

5.1 Classroom Environment

The layout and design of the observed classroom was well-planned. There were two north-facing windows and one south-facing window with a door and extra ventilation; therefore they provided not only daylight but necessary air circulation as well. The classroom was reasonably well-equipped. The learners sat in four straight columns facing the front of the classroom; as a result, the teacher could not move everywhere in the classroom except in the front. There were some interesting paintings of bright colors portraying different sights of daily life. The hard wall surface protected the classroom from outside noise. There was a calm environment in the classroom as the school itself was located in a nice place surrounded by greenery in a rural area with enough distance from the main road.

5.2. Nature of Classroom Communication

To understand the classroom communication the whole lesson had been divided into three parts; starting of the lesson, middle of the lesson, end of the lesson. The following discussion will explore the communication features of every segment.

Starting of the lesson

Data showed that the teacher conducted the warm up activities at the beginning of the lesson. To do so teacher exchanged greetings with the learners and played an audio song. As a result some communication and interaction occurred between the teacher and the learners in the following way.

Exchanging verbal greetings

As a common norm the learners stood while the teacher entered into the classroom and greeted the learners. From the observed lesson the greeting discourse was as follows,

T: Hello my students, how are you?

Ss: Fine, how are you?

T: I am fine.

The observable feature of the communication was that here the teacher communicated with a group of learners. The communication cycle could be symbolized as “**T<-->Ss<-->T**” where “T” and “Ss” represented teacher and learners respectively. The communication was successfully completed because both the groups had exchanged some meaningful information among themselves. Observation revealed that the learners also communicated with each other in the warm-up session when the teacher played an audio song.

Audio in classroom communication

Audio materials included iPod, loaded with audio version of the English For Today (EFT) textbook with some songs and rhymes. The iPod was accompanied by speakers namely block-rocker and Logitech speakers (Woodward, 2010). A hello song was played at the straining of the English class in the second shift which created scopes for classroom communication between the learners and the teacher. In the audio the “Hello Song” was installed in target language. Teacher searched the song from the iPod and then played it in the class. The lyric of the Hello song was as follows;

“Hello hellohello my friends

Happy to meet you

Happy to meet you today”

All the learners stood and took part in singing the song with the audio. The teacher also took part in singing. As a result the learners and the teacher got a tremendous opportunity to interact among themselves through the target language. Learners looked at each other and greeted themselves through the song, the teacher also greeted them and they greeted the teacher in turn. Thus the “Hello Song” created scopes of communication in two ways clearly;

- a) communication among the learners (**S<---->S communication**)
- b) communication between the learners and the teacher (**Ss<---->T communication**); the teacher reported in interview that the learners liked the song very much and they participated in singing the song.

Middle of the lesson

In this stage teacher basically presented the lesson. The observation showed that during lesson presentation teacher tried to ensure learners' participation, assessed their learning and

provided feedback. In this segment various aspects of classroom communication were explored. These are described below under some sub-headings.

Using learners' name in communication

The classroom observation revealed that teacher addressed the learners by their name. Whenever he wanted to instruct or ask a question, he called learners by their name. He was able to remember each of their names. A conversation between the teacher and a learner called Shaila (pseudo name) is given below.

T: Shaila Stand up (a girl of first bench 3rd column), (Teacher pointed to 20 in poster and asked-)

T: What is it?

S: Twenty

T: First letter?

S: T

T: How many letters?

S: Six (Teacher counted from poster)

T: Ok, thank you, very good, sit down (Teacher indicated to student to sit down by his hand)

The excerpt showed that a complete communication cycle had been established in the classroom through such conversation. As the teacher called the learner by her name, she seemed to be encouraged and willing to respond to the teacher.

Communication through asking questions. Data showed that a major part of communication happened through questioning. Sometimes the teacher asked question to a group of pupil or sometimes to an individual. A conversation related to questioning is given below.

T: You stand up, what is it?

S: Nine

T: Nine, First letter?

S: N

T: N

T: How many letters?

S: Four

T: Ok thank you, very good

It showed that a teacher raised a question as a sender of a communication cycle and the learners received that question. After that the learners processed the information and sent it back to the teacher through their reply. In his case the learners played the role of sender and teacher was the receiver. This way a complete communication cycle occurred in the classroom. Both teacher and learners reported that question-answer was the main way for themselves to interact.

Communication through demonstrating poster

Teacher used a poster of numbers throughout the lesson. The poster had been used as a medium of communication because it engaged both the teacher and the learners at a single point. The following classroom talk highlighted the use of poster as a medium of communication.

T: What is this? (Indicating the number six on the poster)

Ss: six (chorus)

T: six began with the first letter....

Ss: S (chorus)

Here a poster was the starting point of a two way communication between the sender and the receiver. Not only that, while the audio related to number was playing, the teacher pointed his finger on the numbers of the poster and the learners were trying to match that number in their textbook. Thus the poster facilitated communication of the teacher with the learners through question answering, delivering lecture and evaluating learners.

Communication through providing feedback

Whenever the teacher asked any question to the learners, the learners responded and the teacher provided them necessary feedback. Through feedback a mutual communication between teacher and the learners had been possible which is either remedial or praising.

Communication for eliciting information

Generally the teacher elicited information from the learners through questioning. Sometimes the body language like pointing finger to the numbers in the chart helped to complete the mutual communication. The facial expressions of teacher including his eye contact and smile facilitated to communicate for eliciting information.

Dominance of bright learners in communication process

Data showed that the learners from the front bench participated more. While playing the game called “Bingo”, the teacher asked more of the questions to the front benchers. Whenever the teacher asked any question, they replied willingly and quickly by raising their hands. Hence rest of the learners was dominated by the bright learners in the class.

Communication and external factors.

The presence of the observer made the learners inattentive to the teacher sometimes.

Learners frequently turned their heads to see the observer with huge curiosity. Besides, the late comers, the peeping of headmaster from the door and the ringing phone of the teacher distracted learners' attention.

5.3. Strength of Classroom Communication

The observation disclosed some strengths of classroom communication.

Teachers' voice and body language

Teacher's voice was clear and loud for all the learners to hear the information or instruction properly which helped them to respond immediately. Also the body language and expression of the teacher helped the learners to understand the delivered message from the teacher. Thus both the voice and body language of the teacher fostered the possibilities of classroom communication.

Use of audio

The teacher used some attractive audio clips to warm up the learners at the beginning of the class, to present the lesson and to evaluate the learners. The learners were very attentive to hear the audio which helped them to communicate with the teacher.

Learners' participation

The spontaneous participation of the learners was noticeable in the classroom. The teacher did not force any learner to participate, rather the learners eagerly responded to the teachers' questions and asked questions to the teacher. Thus the learners' willingness to participate in the classroom acted as strength of communication.

Use of poster

The colorful poster used in the classroom represented the message of both the audio and textbook. It helped the learners to visualize the audio and to relate with the textbook. As a result, the attractive poster played a great role to complete the communication cycle among the learners to the teacher. Learners in their interview opined that they liked the poster and their teacher asked them questions from the poster.

Communication through feedback

After every response of the learners, the teacher gave necessary feedback to them. For example, the teacher used some praise words like, "thank you", "very good", "good" and "ok". Such inspiring feedback facilitated good communication between teacher and learners.

Motivated teacher

The observation showed that the teacher was motivated to take the class. The lesson presentation style, eye contact with learners, the way of using the teaching aids, moving around in the classroom, face to face interaction with learners, friendly behavior, questioning pattern and tone of voice were signs of teacher's motivation. This motivation of teacher helped to ensure the two way communication in the classroom.

Target language as medium of communication

Data showed that the learners and teacher communicated using the target language. Teachers reported that in training they were taught to use as much English as possible during classroom interaction and they tried to do so. The children could not communicate at the beginning, but after a few days they could speak in simple English. Learners also reported in interview that they enjoyed speaking English in lesson.

5.4. Barriers to Classroom Communication

Since the classroom was large the teacher faced difficulties to communicate to the back benches. He could not ask questions to all learners as the number of the learners was high. The teacher also said the same thing in the interview.

Classroom distractions.

An observer sat at the back bench of the classroom. This caused some learners lose their attention in the class several times. They were looking back to the observer often. Some people also peeped at the classroom from outside which disrupted somewhat smooth communication in the class. Other distractions included active ringtone of teachers' mobile phone and late arrival at the class of some learners.

Dominance of bright learners.

While the teacher asked any question to the class, the bright learners from the front benches replied quickly. The teacher praised them and did not disallow them to reply; he gave his full attention to those learners. The other learners could not get enough opportunity to communicate with the teacher. Though the teacher reported that he gave the same attention to all learners, in reality it could be observed that he invested more attention on the bright learners.

Less participation in collaborative activities.

It had been noticed that some learners were less motivated in collaborative activities. For example, while the teacher asked the learners to repeat letters with audio, some learners were looking around. Some of the learners did not participate properly in singing the Good morning and Good bye songs, which hampered the objective of good communication.

Difficulties in using English words.

Though the teacher used English in the conversation, the learners did not use English while talking among themselves. They faced difficulties in pronouncing, understanding and uttering English words.

6. Discussion on Findings and Conclusion

The current study has focused on the communication features of an English language lesson. The most positive finding of the study was the learners' participation in the lesson, which means they communicated both with the teacher and among themselves. Such classroom transaction had been considered as successful by specialists (Brophy & Good, 1974). Data

show that some particular practice in the lesson led the young learners of grade three to take part in classroom communication. The teacher reported in the interview that he was taught from EiA training to call the learners' by name in the class. He did so and achieved good interaction with learners. NCTB (1995) also suggested that teachers call students by name.

Another vital feature of the class was the use of mobile technology in audio form. Banks(2009); Banks, Moon and Wolfenden(2009) and Onguko and Ngata(2010) mentioned that mobile technology could have a significant role in education in developing countries. The validity of their assumption was found in the sampled English lesson where the learners liked the songs and rhymes from the audio. These helped learners to be engaged in class activities intimately which enhanced classroom communication. Many other researches also revealed that songs worked well to teach young learners. It had impact on children' brain response and learning. Through physical vibration, organized patterns, engaging rhythms and subtle vibrations music interact with the mind and body in many ways which are not possible through one dimensional communication and it helps children to perform better (Jackson & Joyce, 2003; Rauscher 2003; Routier, 2003).

Another type of verbal communication occurred through questioning and providing feedback where question-and-answer was the way to engage the learners. Cook (2001) mentioned that students should receive as much opportunity to speak as possible in communicative language teaching. Question-answer provided that opportunity to the learners. By emphasizing on communication through speaking Nunan (1991) said that a general goal of English language teachers is to motivate their students to speak in English. Like the current study many other studies also showed that question-answer facilitated the classroom communication in many ways. Even when teachers mainly asked "closed questions" (those requiring simple factual response), these created scopes for the participants to interact with the teacher (Tsui, 1985; Wu, 1993; Swinson, 2003; Burns & Myhill, 2004; Ho, 2005; Myhill, Jones & Hopper, 2006; Ahsan, 2009; Yang, 2010).

Communication through questioning basically represented verbal communication. Nevertheless, nonverbal communication also occurred in the classroom through the body language of the teacher and learners which can be very effective (Mehrabian, 1972). As noted above, in classroom communication dominance by the bright learners had been noticed. Usually the bright learners sat in the front benches and replied to teacher's questions or shared their thoughts eagerly. As a result, the slow students remained out of the classroom communication cycle. Similar findings have been reported in some other studies (Punet & Tajonera, 1999; Hadfield, 1992; Ahsan, 2009). Teacher could avoid this situation through engaging the bright learners in more difficult tasks.

Sometimes teachers faced barriers to implementing effective communication in English language lessons. A large classroom consisting around eighty children was a difficult place for the teacher to teach well. It was difficult to manage such a large number of young learners

in the class. Similar problems were found by other investigators (Yasmin, 2009; Punet&Tajonera, 1999; Hadfield, 1992 &Ahsan, 2008). Besides the huge number of learners the presence of the researcher with video camera was a point of attention to the children. Problem regarding using video camera in classroom was also reported by Polit and Hungler (1999). Nonetheless, as the researcher was not a stranger to the school and the children, the disruptive influence was somewhat minimized.

Another vital aspect regarding the barrier in classroom communication was learners' lack of skill in using English. Sometimes they could understand the concept, but as they could not organize their thought in English they remained silent. Learners in interview also reported the same. Storch and Aldosari (2010) also found that the learners remained inactive in classroom communication as they could not express themselves through English.

In spite of some barriers the classroom environment was supportive for effective classroom communication. The EiA provided teaching-learning materials and teacher training helped to establish a floor of meaningful classroom communication.

This research represented a success story that took place in an ELT class of Bangladesh. It may not be the typical situation in the primary school classroom, but it shows what can happen. Findings show the positive aspects of classroom interaction which engaged learners directly as promoted by EiA intervention. The classroom practice illustrated the pedagogic principle that language learning is a social activity which should be conducted in an interactive manner, especially at the primary level of education (Vygotsky, 1962 & 1978). Data showed that use of mobile technology including games and songs could create an interactive learning environment. Smidts, Hordijk and Huizenga (2008) also found the same result in their research. However some barriers to classroom interaction were identified which the teacher has to try hard to overcome. .

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