Communication Activities As Vocabulary Boosters

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Abstract :

English courses in Asian high school concentrate heavily on teaching the ability to recognise correct grammatical form (grammatical accuracy). Other goals of language teaching, such as fluency and communicative ability, receive relatively little emphasis. This paper contends that
(1) the ability to communicate is the first goal of language teaching as both fluency and grammatical accuracy are meaningless without it, and that
(2) an extensive vocabulary plays a much larger role than a knowledge of grammar in achieving this ability. The emphasis here is placed on the importance of appropriate vocabulary selection to ensure that the most useful words are learned first and the class activities provided should stimulate immediate opportunities for learners to use these words to communicate with others.

INTRODUCTION

A point often debated by language teachers in the relative importance of fluency and accuracy. Advocates of fluency point out that fluent speakers of a language who nevertheless make grammatical mistakes are dicidedly easier to listen to than those who produce grammatically correct sentences but do so jerkily and lack confidence in connecting them. Those who stress the value of grammatical accuracy worry that fluent speakers of grammatically flawed language may fossilize their inaccuracies and never improve.

This paper's position is that the ability to communicate (to pass on a message which is understood) is more important than either fluency or accuracy. This is not to say that grammatical accuracy has no importance, and that teachers should rest forever content with learners utterances similar to sentence (ii) in the examples below. This would make learners vulnerable to unfair judgements regarding their social status, educational level and even intelligence. Communicative ability is not the last word, but it is the first.

So the order of concern should be :
1. **communicative ability** - the ability to understand and be understood.
2. **fluency** - the ability to speak confidently and without hesitation.
3. **accuracy** - the ability to produce grammatically correct utterances.

If Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis is correct, the acquisition of grammatical rules is an unconscious process made possible by receiving 'comprehensible input' and 'lowering the affective filter'. A concentration on communicative ability will lead inevitably to fluency and accuracy in their turn.

THE ROLE OF VOCABULARY IN COMMUNICATIVE ABILITY

In successful communication, the relative roles of grammer and vocabulary can be illustrated by the following two sentences :

(i) John ergled waptily in the putuf yesterday.

(ii) John go shop yesterday buy three book for him mother.

Sentence (i) obeys all the relevant grammatical rules, but communicates only the idea that John did something somehow somewhere yesterday. A learner well versed in these grammatical rules would know from the '-ed' suffix that John's action took place in the past (useful if the learner did not know the meaning of 'yesterday') and that the manner and location have also been specified, albeit incomprehensibly since the necessary words are not known.

Sentence (ii) breaks a variety of grammatical rules, but communicates perfectly since all the words are known to the reader. In fact, as regards communication the broken rules are redundant since observing them correctly would convey no new information.

PRINCIPLES OF VOCABULARY SELECTION

According to Nation (1990), learners need a 1,000 word **productive** (speaking and writing) vocabulary which will enable them to use the language as a system of communication (ELI/ VUW's THOUSAND WORD LITTLE LANGUAGE) and a 2,000 word **receptive** (recognition) vocabulary, which will enable them to read and listen and so become independent of

their teachers. Learners at this stage should also be able to guess from context and use a dictionary.

A person's **productive vocabulary** are all the words that individual has available for *speaking and writing*. In this vocabulary, learners do not need two words to express the same idea. A purely productive vocabulary would be based on the principle of *one word for one idea*. Therefore, a productive vocabulary of 1,000 words will not contain the redundancy (or the subtlety of expression) of a native speaker's vocabulary, but it can still do all the things that the native speaker's can.

A person's *receptive vocabulary* are all the words that individual can understand when *listening or reading*. Here, several words which express the same meaning will be useful, provided they are all fairly frequent (e.g. :'begin', 'start' and 'commence' ; 'big', 'large' and 'huge'). A learner will probably meet all those words in reading material.

THE THOUSAND WORD LITTLE LANGUAGE (TWLL)

The TWLL is the brain child of Helen Barnard and Dorothy Brown, former staff members of the English Language Institute of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Their initial concern was to provide some help for Asian teachers of English who came every year to the above institute for further training.

These teachers faced, in their countries, teaching situations all too common in Asia-only a few hours of classroom time were allocated to English each week and those precious few hours were occupied by courses which taught grammar to the virtual exclusion of all other aspects of language, even the selection of lexical items to fill the grammatical slots. All too often, the results were secondary school English graduates who could discuss English grammar at some length in their own languages and could

even compose example sentences to illustrate the rules they cited, but who could not - in short - *speak English!*

The assumption of these courses was aptly described by Cook, Long and McDonough (1979:9) :

"An L2 learner is expected (in such courses) to have a system that is some fragment of the native system, not a system in its own right, and he is required to learn the language bit by bit. For instance, in learning English as a foreign language, the learner may first be taught the present tense, the past tense, and so on; each of these tenses corresponds to part of the target language, and after he has covered them all, the learner will have pieced together the tense system of English; he is not, however, allowed to develop a progressively more complicatied system of tenses of his own as a native child does.

Barnard and Brown (1974 : B1-2) similaryl decry the failure of school

English courses to emulate the feat of first language learners:

"A child aged eighteen months or two years speaks a 'little language...' His language is smaller in all ways than that of a five year old child. He does not use all the sounds of the adult language, and he uses far fewer words and constructions... However, the language of even a two year old child is... *a language, not part of a language* (my emphasis). His vocabulary may have twenty words and his grammar may only consist of putting certain words before others, but he makes known what he wants to make known; his language does what the child needs it to do... A child's vocabulary is not random. It works in an efficient way. Each item in it has a purpose, has a function, produces a wanted effect. The range of the vocabulary covers every area of the child's needs and responses to persons, activities and things which concern him... *Unfortunately (my emphasis), the language of (an) ... Asian child who has had only school English lessons may not be a language in this way."*

The blame for the sad truth of Barnard and Brown's closing sentence must be laid at the door of school courses which do not, at any stage, give the learners control over their own 'little language'. Instead, these courses, with their focus fixed on some far horizon, have a vision of the learner's ultimatie native-speaker-level control of the target language (totally ignoring present communicative needs) and offer fragments of this in the apparent belief that the learner will eventually amass enough fragments to piece together the language itself. Evidence of the success of this strategy is rare; rather, Asia is littered with examples of its failure.

Also in Asia are large numbers of learners of English who have, independently of such courses and even in spite of them, developed their own 'little language'. Such systems are widely recognised by linguists as stages in language development, being referred to variously, with slightly different emphases, as 'interlanguage' (Selinker, 1972), 'approximative system' (Nemser, 1971) and 'transitional competence' (Corder, 1975). Schuman (1974) compares the development of the learner's 'little language' toward the target language with the evolution of pidgin languages into 'creoles' (and eventually new languages), recognising the same stages of 'simplification', 'reduction', 'complication' and 'expansion'.

The purpose of the TWLL, then, is to simplify the learner's task of creating a personal 'inter language/little language' by providing a foundation vocabulary to help fulfil present language needs and to provide defining words to allow other words to be grafted on. It is primarily a productive vocabulary, the 'one idea

- one word' principle is usually observed. However, it is also a receptive vocabulary since it is used for reading and listening passages, stories and exercises which the learners can read. Therefore, certain very frequent words are included even though they contain the same meaning.

In creating the TWLL, Barnard and Brown sought to avoid the pitfalls of previous vocabulary lists (such as the tendency of frequency lists to ignore beginners' language needs, and the huge learning burden placed on the learner by Ogden's 'Basic English' as well as its unnaturalness of expression and 'island' self-sufficiency, which makes it difficult to build on) and to profit from the work of Harold Palmer and Michael West, as well as the Lorge-Thorndike Semantic Count.

The *principles of selection* are briefly described here and are elaborated on in Nation (1986), from which this and other important and useful word lists are available.

Language Needs
(personal, social, thinking and labelling)

The words selected must empower learners to express their personal needs in cooperation with others. People need language to help one another, work together, influence one another and to show their feelings for one another.

The TWLL must also empower learners to explore the world and think about it. They should be able to think about possible or imaginary situations, to solve problems and explore language itself and the relations between symbols. They need language for science, religion, literature, mathematics, history and philosophy.

For all of this, they need words which refer to persons, places and things, their features and qualities, as well as to the relations between events and things in time and space, to actions, to general ideas and to language itself (labelling needs).

As noted above, with its built-in limitation of 1,000 words, the TWLL will not enable learners to fulfil these needs with the subtlety and eloquence of an adult native speaker, but crude fulfilment is better than none at all and it is the foundation of the genuine communication that is real language.

Frequency :
Some words have been included because they occur frequently in the natural language of native speakers. Michael West's *General Service List* was a useful source of such words.

Range :
Some words were chosen because they had a wide range. This means they occur naturally in many different kinds of written and spoken English, such as lectures, seminars, informal conversation, textbooks, newspapers, magazines, novels, letters, plays and some advertising.

Economy :
Synonyms and easily paraphrased words (e. g. : *punctual, generous*) have been avoided, unless they are extremely frequent, e.g. : *start, begin.*

Regularity :
Because they are so much easier to learn, regular nouns and verbs (e.g. : *start*) are generally preferred to irregular ones except where the *frequency* principle urges otherwise, e.g. : *begin, eat, child, man.*

Defining Power :
Some words have been included because they are useful for defining and explaining other words, e. g. : *action, feeling, thing.*

Classroom and Teaching Needs :
Some words have been included because they are used frequently in the classroom, e. g. : *a desk, chalk, blackboard, video.*

Loan Words :
English words used in the learner's own language require little or no learning effort and should be included if the meaning of the loan word is still the same as the English.

Used in conjunction with the following *communication games,* the TWLL provides learners with the chance to:

(i) use their productive vocabulary to speak and write

(ii) use their receptive vocabulary to undertand and to use both to

(iii) acquire new vocabulary (i. e. to be able to ask the meanings of words and to understand the answers).

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION GAMES IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Communication games have four roles in language acquisition. Firstly, they facilitate comprehensible input by simplifying language naturally since small group interaction demands easier vocabulary, grammar and syntax with more extralinguistic support (eye contact / body language/ facial expressions) than is available in teacher centred activities. They also lower the affective filter by removing the need to use an unfamiliar language in front of the whole class. Then, they involve learners in actually *using* the language and not simply practising language - like exercises. Learners have to think and act on the basis of information received through the target language. Finally, they give learners the opportunity to take *direct charge in controlling input.* In small group activities, it is considerably easier for normally shy learners to interrupt their partners and request repetition, paraphrase and reduce speed of delivery.

COMMUNICATION GAMES AS VO-CABULARY BOOSTERS

The following communication games have been found by the writer to be particularly useful as vocabulary boosters

(i) Who behaved best ? (The STORY OF KHUN PAN) - A RANKING EXERCISE :

(adapted from Nation and Thomas, 1988)

Learners hear a story and have to judge the moral behaviour of the characters by ranking them from best behaved to worst.

First, they do this *individually* (thus ensuring that each participant begins the group activity with a definite point of view).

Then *in groups* they try by discussion to achieve a consensus. Vocabulary items essential to the story are listed on the blackboard before the story is heard, but only explained on request.

(Readers should not be alarmed to find many of the vocabulary items in this story unfamiliar to them in this and other activities. They are not English. They are included to allow teachers to share the (hopefully) productive bewilderment of their learners).

WHO BEHAVED BEST ?

Khunpan was a puyay. He was luplor, brave and wise and the king loved him very much. Khunchuang was also a puyay. He was very luay, nagliet and bad-tempered. He was also cruel to his khoncay. Wuntong was the most cantik girl in the district. Her family was poor. Everybody who knew her thought she would be a very good istri and ibu.

Khunpan and Khunchuang both asked to marry Wuntong. Wuntong bercinta kepada Khunpan but her ibu wanted her to marry Khunchuang because he was luay. At last Wuntong was allowed to marry Khunpan. They lived happily together and had one lugcay.

But then a big war started and the king ordered Khunpan to command his tentara. Khunpan may yu bahn for many months. Khunchuang saw his chance. He spread a story that Khunpan day le : w. When Wuntong heard the story, she was very sad. Khunchuang again asked Wuntong to marry him. At first, she maj aw, but her ibu grot mag and said that Wuntong *must* marry Khunchuang. At last, to please her old ibu, she agreed.

Early on the morning of the wedding, Khunpan returned from the war with a new istri, Laotong. Laotong was jealous of Wuntong. She

went straight to Wuntong's bahn and laughed at her and phud maj di her. Wuntong grot mag. She hurried to Khunchuang's bahn and asked to be married diawni! Khunchuang happily agreed.

When Khunpan heard the news, he went to the king and asked him to judge all the people in this sad story.

(ii) Same or Different (An INFORMATION GAP Exercise)

(also from Nation and Thomas, 1988)

Paired learners have separate sheets of paper containing pictures (see Figure 1a and 1b). Eash may look only at his/her own pictures. By talking and listening, they decide if their pictures are identical or not.

As with (i), vocabulary is pre-supplied, but explained only on request. In one exercise, it is supplied to each learner alternately (with alternate pictures), allowing that learner the chance to use it to describe the picture to try to make its meaning clear).

(iii) Context / Definition Dykomm

One learner has a page with new words in context, while a partner's page contains definitions, as below. They match them by reading them to each other.

THE SAME OR DIFFERENT ?

These words and phrases will help you.

a circle	big	is	on the left/right of
a cross	curved	are	
a dot	small	on top of	
a line	straight	under	
a square	two	above	in the middle/corner of
a star		through	

THE SAME OR DIFFERENT?

These words and phrases will help you.

a circle	big	is	on the left / right of
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a line	straight	under	
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a star		through	

Figure 1 b

CONTEXT / DEFINITION DYKOMM

Learner A	Learner B

Learner A

Thre is a line under one word in each sentence. Find out from your partner the meaning of this word. Write down the number s/he tells you next to the word.

****

Everybody went out and he was *khondiaw* in the room.

The leader of a country or a good singer is usually a *yumei* person.

We learn *sejararah* at school.

A *semut* has six legs.

The *eri* of a shirt goes around your neck.

A *multitude* of young children was waiting for the bus.

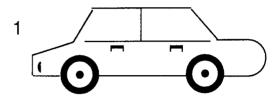I *multitude* of young children was waiting for the bus.

I *gliet* to make a mistake.

Bees make *nampern*, and people eat it with bread.
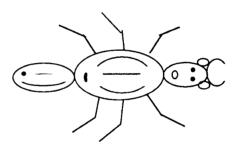
In hot weather I put *namkeng* in my drink.

He has a *mobil* and he goes to his office in it.

Learner B

1

2 A large group of people.
3 Do not like.
4 A sweet yellow food.
5 By yourself, with no other person near you.

6

7 Known by many people.
8

9 It tells us about things in the past.

(iv) Find your 'new word group' :

Sentences with new words are written on strips of paper. One new word is contained in three different sentences and a fourth will refer to it with a pronoun. Thus, there are four sentences for each new word. The strips are jumbled and one is given to each learner who is told to memorise the sentence on it. The learners have to find the group of four who have memorised the sentences containing their word.

Sample Groups

A kapal is usually made of wood or iron.
People can travel in a kapal.
A kapal goes on the sea.
Sometimes the wind moves it.

Namkeng is made of water.
Namkeng is cold and hard.
Namkeng looks like glass
People put it in drinks.

People are happy at a pesta.
People eat and drink at a pesta.
When someone marries, there is a pesta.
We have one on our birthday.

(v) The Glossary Game :

How to make it :

Almost any L1 - English phrasebook may be used.

(a) Photocopy the glossary and separate the English half from the L1 half.

(b) Number the L1 sentences and mark the English ones with letters of the alphabet.

(c) Make a key of equivalent sentences (A = 8; B = 5 etc.).

(d) Cut the L1 sentences into strips and put the strips into an envelope. Leave the English sentences together on one page.

How to play it :

(a) Learner A takes the envelope containing the L1 sentences. B takes the page containing the English sentences.

(b) A takes a sentence from the envelope and tries to express the same idea in English. If B can recognise what A is trying to say, B asks the number and records it with the letter of the English sentence (A = 8 etc.).

(c) At the end of the game, the players check their answers from the key.

Whatsitsname and Also of value are *Relatively Speaking* (Hadfield, 1990), which are excellent vocabulary boosting games since they force learners to explain and define objects without using their real names. This has the double benefit of making the real names more memorable by the delay in learning them and making learners more able to communicate in all too common real life situations when the real names are not known.

In conclusion, learners are *more likely to remember* words they encounter during the heat of a communication game when not knowing the word has impeded communication. When supplied at this point, the new word is perceived as *significant.*

Therefore, all communication games are vocabulary boosters as they are language acquisition boosters. They give learners opportunities to reinforce their grasp on familiar words by using them and to infer the meaning of new words by hearing them used in meaningful contexts.

Appendix

USEFUL SOURCES OF VOCABULARY BOOSTING COMMUNICATION GAMES

Hadfield, J.: *Harrap's Communication Games,* Harrap Ltd., 1984.

"   "   : *Advanced Communication Games,* Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1987.

"   "   : *Intermediate Communication Games,* Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1990.

I.S.P. Nation and G.I. Thomas :   *Communication Activities* (Occasional Paper No. 13), English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, 1988.

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