

A Qualitative Portrayal of the Problems of Teachers in Promoting English Language Communicative Competence among Intermediate Students

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Abstract

The role of the language teacher is versatile. The study intended to delve deep into problems of English language teachers at an intermediate level in district Dera Ghazi Khan. The research study was qualitative in nature. The researcher developed a semi-structured interview for the teachers. Its population included all of the male English language teachers at higher secondary schools and colleges of the district. The researcher used purposive sampling procedure to collect data. The study found that teachers face a lot of problems in promoting oral English language communicative competence at intermediate in terms of in-service training regarding communicative competence, no activities in English language textbooks at intermediate. The study suggested arranging online and on-campus training to enhance the capacity of teachers in a specific area of communicative competence, to add a feature of oral English language assessment (viva voce) in annual examinations on the pattern of science subjects' practical work and marks.

Key Words:

Promoting English,
Communicative
Competence, Fluency,
Accuracy

Introduction

Apparently, language learning as a social process takes place informally through interaction in society. However, in schools and other educational institutions, its acquisition formally takes place under the tutelage of a teacher at certain class levels. The basic purpose of any language is to promote communicative competence among its users (Hymes, 1972; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The function of teaching a language at schools is not only limited to impart good vocabulary, grammatical structures, but it aims to promote speaking skill also among students. Therefore, the role of language teachers seems to be fundamental in developing and enhancing the competence of students in communication to make them good communicators so that they can communicate with good discourse, produce appropriate utterances, negotiate with related context and finally think and response in the target language. The knowledge and practice of these linguistic features enable learners to be competent in oral communication.

English is regarded as a foreign/second language in Pakistan. The primary objective of its teaching is to enable the students to become good in the communicative situation (Ellis, 1994); and to enhance the ability of the learner to converse with fluency and competence (Hymes, 1972). However, some of the researchers (Karim, 2004; Liao, 2004; Li, 1998; Menking, 2001; Rao, 2002) observed that learners focus on learning structure of language instead of engaging themselves in communicative activities; and the content of English textbooks is assessed on the pattern of grammar-based written examination. They have also noticed that students lose their motivation in such oral communication activities arranged and conducted by teachers in English language learning classrooms as these activities don't help them in getting good marks in the annual examinations (Yu, 2001). This sort of students' behavior and examination format restrict teachers to keep the students engaged in written English only so as to enable them to get higher marks in the examination. That is why the grammar-based written examination is a prime obstacle for students in gaining English language communicative competence. This brief backdrop suggested conducting the current study, which evaluated the problems that English teachers face in promoting English language oral communicative competence among undergraduate students.

Literature Review

Communicative competence appears to be one of the significant features of effective communication. Also, it seems to be one of the important aims of language learning. The learners find it difficult to express themselves fluently and accurately in oral English at an intermediate level. They face problems in their oral communication (Leong & Ahmadi, 2016). It is too difficult for them to find proper words and expressions to communicate their internal feelings and messages both in the classroom and in social settings. Furthermore, they also report problems like anxiety, less motivation and low self-esteem to communicate expressively despite having language knowledge. But the current scenario of globalization demands intermediate graduates to be well conversant and competent in the English language. It makes them comfortable and goal-oriented (Leong & Ahmadi, 2016).

Here it becomes prime responsibility of the language teacher to know the interests and tendency of language learners to promote self-confidence and high morale among students in their communication. Therefore, an effective teacher of English language creates a supportive environment in the classroom where students work cooperatively and interact in a friendly manner. It promotes confidence, a sense of liberty and enthusiasm among students for (English) language learning (Leong & Ahmadi, 2016).

Competence of English language teacher also plays a key role in promoting communicative competence among the students. A creative and competent (English) language teacher designs and offers different activities to promote oral communicative competence among his/her students. These may include classroom discussions, question-answer sessions, and use of the direct method of teaching English etc. If the teacher is less creative or s/he uses and believes in traditional methods of teaching, the students will not be engaged in activities for English language learning. It, resultantly, wouldn't develop or promote oral communicative competence and confidence among the students. The creative ability of (English) language teacher helps him/her to make optimum utilization of available teaching and learning resources for promoting communicative competence among the students. The creative teachers use multiple instructional techniques (and technologies) and resources in promoting the communicative abilities of the learners (Tabatabaei & Pourakbari, 2012).

Government of Punjab, school education department, has been working on in-service training programs for the English language teachers but there has been little focus of government on teaching and learning language skills especially oral English language skill among the teachers and students (Aziz, Umar, Dilshad & Mustafa, 2015). Teachers of English language have scarce opportunities for proper training on promoting oral language skills. Even, proper facilities appear to be deficient in public sector schools to promote communicative competence among intermediate students. Nonetheless, the curriculum meets the demands and needs of the intermediate level students but meagerly in terms of teaching English language communicative competence to intermediate students (Raju & Joshith, 2017).

In Pakistan, students learn English as a subject to pass the examination at all levels of school education, i.e. from grade-I up to grade-XII or intermediate level. English is the second language in Pakistan, but it is scarcely used by students to communicate their feelings and ideas fluently and accurately. Therefore, they appear to be poor in oral communication properly. Generally, they seem to be interested in getting higher grades in the subject of English. Current syllabus of English (subject) in Pakistan and particularly in the province of Punjab is content-based at intermediate level and can be a cause of this reason as it motivates students to learn rules of English language. Keeping in view the importance of English as a subject, the teachers have to focus their mind on reading and writing skills. The English language skills of students are assessed through written examination. Whereas, an oral examination is not conducted at an intermediate level in Pakistan and hence oral communicative competence of students is not assessed. Teachers use the translation method in English subject classroom. Students learn grammatical rules related to correct English written expression. They spend most of their time in practicing translation from "*Urdu to English and from English to Urdu*". The interference of mother tongue in learning (English as) second language is another problem which students usually face. These issues can be addressed through focused and appropriate training programmes. This will enable teachers to use interesting and creative methods of language teaching to the students (Aziz et al., 2015).

The relevance of qualification of English language teachers and their poor instructional skills appear to be another problem. It is a general practice that due to the lack of English language teachers; teachers of other subjects are assigned the additional duty of teaching English to the students. Its result is that the teachers do not take an interest in the additional subject which they have to teach in compliance with the instructions of the administration. If a teacher lacks the required knowledge and skills of the English language, then his/her students would lack the same (Bashiruddin & Qayyum, 2014).

Khan and Khan (2016) found different factors to be responsible for the poor performance of students in English including interference of regional languages, educational policies in Pakistan, scarcity of English language teachers, particularly, in far-flung public sector schools or institutions, poor alignment of the syllabus with

examination system. The syllabus of English is content-oriented, and teachers have to prepare their students with the same objective in mind to enable the learners to achieve good marks in paper manifestation passing the subject of English rather develop communicative competence among students or graduates (Khan & Khan, 2016). No proper training on communicative language teaching, poor instructional facilities or A.V. aids and old curriculum with outdated textbooks were also reported problems of English language teachers and intermediate students as well. Therefore, the curriculum and syllabus need to be aligned and reflect modern methods of teaching language (Teevno, 2011).

The teaching of English aims to enable students to communicate and converse with their contemporaries belonging to different cultures and background while using the English language (Easton & Sun, 2008). Teachers of English language confront diversity in the culture and background of the students. This diversity also hinders the promotion of English language skills due to limited time in classroom instructions because the teachers have to complete the syllabus in due course of time. The poor background of different students in the English language puts teachers in difficulty to complete syllabus and promote communicative competence among students (Rasheed, Zeshan & Zaidi, 2017). The teacher has to consider each and every student of the class and his needs and demands to pass and get good marks in the terminal examination. The teacher of English is using traditional methods of teaching English, including the most practiced lecture method keeping in view the strength of the class. In this method of teaching English, the students are passive learners. Their role is to be silent, and in silence, they lose their concentration.

The above discussion urges to portray the problems of teachers in promoting English language communicative competence among intermediate students. It is because of the reason that the researcher is a teacher of English subject at an intermediate level. It is a general observation of the researcher that the students, after passing the intermediate examination, are unable to communicate in English despite the real state of affairs that they had been learning English as a compulsory subject for twelve years.

The current study, "A qualitative portrayal of the problems of teachers in promoting English language Communicative Competence among Intermediate students," explored the problems of English teachers. The researcher explored the problems in-depth through interviews of the teachers in order to reveal whether there exist the problems in curriculum or syllabus or culture of students or training of the teachers.

This study would be significant as communication is a distinguished trait of living things. It is used primarily to express wants and desires. The current study is an effort to explore the causes that hinder in developing communicative competence among the students. The findings would be valuable for English language teachers, students, parents, policymakers and content developers.

The Objectives

This study was conducted to (i) identify the problems of the teachers in promoting English language communicative competence at the intermediate level; and (ii) suggest guidelines how to promote communicative competence among intermediate students.

Delimitations of the Study

The study was delimited to the teachers of English subject teaching in boys' and girls' public schools and colleges located in both urban and rural areas of district Dera Ghazi Khan, Pakistan.

Methodology

It was a descriptive study. Qualitative method of research was used by the researcher. The researcher prepared a semi-structured interview so as to get a deeper understanding of the problems experienced by the subjects of this research study (Bradford & Cullen, 2012). The research instrument was validated by the expert opinions of senior teachers and professors of English subject. The population of the study included all the male subject specialists and lecturers of English subject at an intermediate level, teaching in 17 higher secondary schools and 16 colleges of district Dera Ghazi Khan, in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. The sample of this research work included one male subject specialist and one lecturer of English subject teaching in 33 urban and rural boys' higher secondary schools and colleges of Dera Ghazi Khan. The researcher conducted interviews with 33 male subject specialists and lecturers individually through convenience sampling and took notes of their responses on paper and also recorded in mobile phone.

Research Tool for Data Collection

Narration of the Interview

A semi-structured interview was prepared based on 10 open-ended questions by the researcher in order to explore

the problem in-depth with reference to study, i.e., problems of teachers in promoting communicative competence of the intermediate students in the English language. There were three aspects of this problem i) problems related to the background of the students ii) problems related to infrastructure iii) problems related to policy. The researcher anticipated that the results of the qualitative study would help in understanding the problems of teachers in promoting communicative competence of the intermediate students.

Validity of the Research Tool

The validity of the research tool was conceived as much as it is appropriate in terms of its suitability. The validity of research tool exhibits clarity, and it minimizes any partiality and favoritism (Leung, 2015). The researcher decided to ensure the appropriateness of the interview by validating it. For this purpose, three PhD teachers were requested to assess the appropriateness of the interview protocol. The researcher is indebted to these aforementioned honorable teachers for their facilitation. Their valuable suggestions were incorporated, and the tool was finalized.

Collection of Data

The researcher personally contacted the participants of the study through mobile phone and mutually decided/arranged time of the interview with them to interview them. The interviews were re-read and re-listened and transcribed. This practice generated a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of the interview of the participants are given below:

Anticipation in Formal Pre-Service and/ or In-Service Training on Oral Communicative Competence

Teachers' oral communicative competence and professionalism play a key role in developing and/ or promoting the same in their students. Training (in-service as well as pre-service) brings productivity and improves the performance of the teachers (Khan & Abdullah, 2019). The pre-service training prepares the prospective teachers to assume teaching as a profession –how to face the difficulties and challenges in real classroom situation; whereas, the in-service training updates instructional skills and subject knowledge from time-to-time by imparting new skills and teaching methods so as to prepare them to cope with the new trends in teaching and instruction. Majority of the respondents demonstrated that they did not receive any formal training on improving English language oral communicative competence of the students. They just received induction training when they joined as a subject specialist or lecturer in higher secondary schools or colleges, respectively. The induction training prepares the novice teachers to assume their job effectively as per the demands of the department. However, a very small number of the respondents didn't feel any need for training and said,

"We don't need any training. We have no problem and no issue in promoting oral language communicative competence among our students".

Whereas, the majority of the respondents was of the opinion that formal training is their need, particularly in developing and promoting English language oral communicative competence. In this regard, one of the respondents wished to have foreign exposure by saying,

"I am not perfect. I want to enhance my oral communicative skills through foreign experts".

In order to promote oral communicative competence of the students, it seems necessary to train the teachers through pre-service as well as in-service training programmes so that their personal oral communicative competence in the English language is enhanced. It would leave a positive impact on the oral communication of students as well.

Curriculum Related Problems of English Language Teachers Which They Face in Promoting Oral Communicative Competence of Intermediate Students

Language curriculum includes content and emphasizes all of the language skills: *"reading, writing, listening and speaking"* (Tanasoulas, 2001). The role of a language teacher is to transmit the knowledge of the language included in the syllabus and to enhance the oral skills of his/her students in that language to make them fluent and expressive. The national curriculum of English language 2006 at intermediate scarcely gives guidelines on how to promote oral communicative competence of intermediate students. Even it could not include assessment for oral communication

skills in textbooks' exercises; it focuses on the assessment of English language only in written manifestation at intermediate examinations. This was what when one of the respondents said,

"Our examination does not give weightage to oral English language communicative competence. The examinations only focus on written competence or skill of the English language".

It means language, which is basically speech and utterance, is ignored in classroom assessments and final examinations, and only content cramming and rote learning are promoted by asking the pre-set questions which are often repeated and reproduced with the same wording times and again in previous papers; these questions are guessed by some of the teachers and students. One interviewee expressed his opinion about the curriculum,

"Curriculum of English subject does not cope with oral communication needs of students and even doesn't meet the language demands of the students".

Majority of the research respondents said,

"Language aspect of English curriculum is not manifested in intermediate English textbooks".

There are no activities and little content in intermediate textbooks to promote communicative competence of intermediate students. It is suggested to include activities in textbook exercises, and arrangements may be made by the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education to assess the oral communicative skill of students through viva-voce or any other viable method. At the same time, intermediate English language teachers may engage their students in oral activities and exercises in order to promote their language competency.

Instructional Problems of Teachers in Promoting English Language Communicative Competence among Intermediate Students

Some of the respondents reported no instructional problems in teaching oral English language communicative competence among their students; whereas, majority of respondents asserted that they faced instructional problems in promoting English language communicative competence among the intermediate students. In this regard one of the respondents said,

"In the classroom, there are students with varied learning experiences and learning styles; different mental faculties and different mental levels; varied interests and inclinations; and have individual differences. Often, they are from different languages and different socio-economic backgrounds. I have to go to the level of students to teach them".

It reveals that the teachers of the English language have to use a blend of teaching methods. They don't depend on the direct method of teaching English due to these reasons. The teachers have to come to the mental level of the intermediate students in order to make concepts of English textbook lessons comprehensible. Talking about his personal instructional problems, an interviewee said,

"My pronunciation is not good due to the interference of my own mother tongue".

It shows that some of the teachers face personal problems in the instructional process for promoting oral English communicative competence among intermediate students due to lack of training and capacity building programmes. Many of the respondents said,

"Classes are overcrowded. There is no availability of modern audio-visual aids."

It demonstrates that a large number of students in one class are a hindrance for teachers to promote oral communication among the students as it is difficult to conduct and manage individual activities for the students' at large scale. These problems may be overcome by conducting continuous professional development courses and workshops arranged by the education department.

Problems of English language Teachers in Time management for Promoting Communicative Competence of Intermediate Students

Timely completion of syllabus is a source of satisfaction both for the teachers and students (Rehmani, 2006). When the researcher asked the respondents about the time for completion of syllabus and promoting communicative competence among intermediate students; most of the respondents expressed their satisfaction in terms of time allocation for English subject in higher secondary schools and colleges. Majority of the interviewees said,

"We don't feel problem-related to time allocation to English subject".

They affirmed that as a good teacher, they manage their time according to the content of the subject.

However, some of the research interviewees found it difficult to manage the class for oral communicative activities. According to them, time is not sufficient to pay individual attention to the students toward both the completion of the subject and imparting oral communicative skills among the students. One of the interviewees said,

“As an English teacher, I have to use the Urdu language in English classroom because there is a question of translation which puts me on the mercy of Urdu language while teaching the English language”.

Problems of English Language Teachers in Developing Communicative Competence Because of Grade-Based Examination System

Examinations play a significant role in determining the success of an educational program. A prominent number of the interviewees were of the view that the examination system in Pakistan needs to be reviewed and revised, especially with reference to English language activities and assessment. English Language assessment has been narrowed down to only written skill, whereas reading, listening, and speaking skills have been compromised. As a result, the intermediate students are not able to speak a few sentences in English in a real-life situation. It is because of the reason that oral communication is not prioritized in textbooks and examinations. Most of the respondents found that the present assessment system and textbooks enhance translation skill, and examination system promotes rote learning and memorization. Some of the interviewees said,

“Examination system encourages rote learning; the assessment of textbook is carried out through objective and subjective questions in written examination”.

One of the interviewees said,

“Curriculum failed to promote oral English language communicative competence among intermediate students. It could neither replace out-dated textbooks at intermediate part two nor introduced such a mechanism as to assess listening and speaking abilities of the students”.

It is obvious from the above response that oral side of language learning remained neglected since long. Since the creation of Pakistan, no education policy, no curriculum, no textbook, no examination system suggested a holistic mechanism for promoting oral English language communicative competence of the students up to the intermediate level in public institutions. The present format of examination does not support teachers in promoting oral communicative skills of the learners as there is no assessment of oral communicative competency. It may be improved when the public examination system is incorporated with the viva type assessment of oral communicative skills on the pattern of practical work in science subjects.

Problems of English Language Teachers in Developing Oral Communicative Competence of Intermediate Students Due to Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds of Students

Language learning is a social process. It develops in a suitable environment. It is not necessary to teach culture but promote understanding of language and its nature through its acquisition process (Kumagai, 1994). The interviewer explored the problems faced by respondents in promoting English language communicative competence. Most of the interviewees were concerned about the students as they had no or less experience of communication outside of the English classroom. They use mother tongue most of the time, which is a basic hindrance in promoting their oral English language competency. One of the interviewees said,

“Many students come from multilingual backgrounds: Saraiki, Balouchi, Urdu, Punjabi and other regional languages; and they are present in English language classroom -. It is, therefore, difficult for me to instruct them in a single teaching method”.

One of the respondents said that students from uneducated and poor linguistic backgrounds find it difficult to understand even in Urdu. He said,

“Students from hard areas speak Balouchi. They cannot understand even Urdu”.

The students of such backgrounds, as mentioned above, have no solid base of English language. The aim of their learning English is just to pass it somehow. Some of the respondents suggested that primary education may be imparted in mother tongue so that the basic concepts of the students are clear, and students may feel confident and familiar with the English language.

Conclusion

This study found that workshops and in-service programs for teachers' capacity building in the area of oral communicative competence is not arranged by the education department. They need to be trained through digital

sources or through on-campus training so that their oral English language communicative competency is enhanced. English language curriculum may emphasize the oral aspect of language. Activities related to oral communication may be added in the exercises of English language textbooks at an intermediate level. Language labs may be established for both teachers and students to learn and practice communication skills through drills and practice. Oral assessment feature of the English language may be added along with written-based examination in order to promote English language oral communicative competency among the intermediate students.

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