DEVELOPING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILLS: SOME USEFUL TIPS

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ABSTRACT

The ability to communicate effectively in English has became exceedingly important in relationships, education and work-so far the twenty-first century globalized milieu is concerned; and this requires a typical dexterity and adroitness on the part of the communicator. This is because communication is basically the process of transferring signals/messages between a sender and a receiver, being the mechanism we use to establish and modify relationships in personal / professional sphere.

In this paper, I am mainly concerned about the development of English communication skills of English language learners, with English as a Foreign Language and English as a Second Language. Now, the edifice of English communication constitutes speaking, listening, reading and writing English in ways that reflect natural language use.

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving, and processing information. Speakers must be able to anticipate and then produce the expected patterns of specific discourse situations. An ideal speaker should avoid monotone and use dynamics. His/Her pitch should raise and lower periodically; and the speaker should 'animate' his/her voice as and when necessary. Radio DJs are usually a good example of this. Apart from that, one should observe the mouth movements of those who speak English well; and should try to imitate them. A speaker should watch television to do that; and should repeat what they are saying, while imitating the intonation and rhythm of their speech. Until the speaker learns the correct intonation and rhythm of English, he should slow his speech down. The meaning of the spoken words should be carried by way of voice-modulation; and by adhering to stress and intonation patterns. One should not speak too quickly and with a wrong intonation and rhythm, for native speakers will have a hard time understanding him. One should not rather worry about his listener getting impatient with his slow speech, for it is more important that everything the communicator says should be understood.

KEYWORDS: Development of English Communication Skills, Ideal Speaker, Lower Periodically, 'Animate'

INTRODUCTION

Each language has its own quality of 'cadence'. One should not use the music of his own language while speaking English. Moreover, people are prone to judge the communicator's competence through his vocabulary. As such, dictionary and thesaurus are to be used for vocabulary-building. Furthermore, while going through the dictionary, the speaker should try and familiarize himself with the phonetic symbols of his dictionary; and should look up the correct pronunciation of words that are hard for him to say. He should record such words, listen to them and practice saying them. In fact, the speaker should make a list of frequently used words that he finds difficult to pronounce; and should ask someone who speaks the language well-to pronounce them for him. And it should be remembered that the ending of each word is to be pronounced repeatedly, to see to it that the tail does not drop; for example, special attention should be paid to '-s' and '-ed' endings. Moreover, such a practice would help the speaker to strengthen the mouth muscles that one uses

while speaking English. Actually, research has shown that it takes about three months of daily practice to develop strong mouth muscles for speaking a new language; and there is no gainsaying the fact that if such be the situation, one should 'read' as much as possible in English 'aloud' everyday. A speaker is also advised to record his own voice and listen to that for pronunciation mistakes. This is a very important exercise because doing that will help the speaker to become conscious of the mistakes he is making. One can change the way he speaks; but that would simply not happen overnight. People often expect instant results and give up too soon. However, one can change the way he sounds if he is just willing to put some extra effort into it. To be candid about it, various versions of the English language exist. As such, one has to begin by identifying the category one falls into; and should start by improving the 'clarity' of his/her speech. First of all, the speaker should focus on removing the mother tongue influence and the 'Indianisms' that creep into one's English conversations. The English speaker is advised to watch the English news on television channels like Star World, CNN, BBC and English movies on Star Movies, HBO etc; he should also listen to, and sing English songs. While going across the English channels, one should be definite about observing the delivery styles, vocabulary and body language of the anchors.

A very important requisite for an English language learner is that he ought not to hesitate; and should talk to whoever he/she can. One should decide among his circle of friends that he would only talk in English with each other. This way he can get rid of hesitation; and can also have his friends correct him when he is wrong. It is advised to start a conversation with strangers in English. Since the communicator does not know the stranger personally, he/she would feel less conscious about what they feel about him/her. Maintaining a diary to record the events of one's day is a great way to practice one's writing skills. One can take one's time to use new words and phrases when he writes in his diary.

An English language learner should also read the newspaper aloud whenever he/she can. A standard daily English newspaper and the Readers Digest have very good reading material; and while reading 'aloud', one ought simultaneously to record his voice and listen to it to know the areas--the sounds, words and alphabets that give the speaker trouble, and on which he needs to work.

The mother tongue influence is a real problem for the speakers of English as a Foreign Language and English as a Second Language. To reduce that, one must make more English speaking friends; and should make a determined effort to speak only in English, even if the speaker keeps forgetting words, or tend to stammer, or his/her friend tend to laugh at him/her. This will definitely require a lot of will power; but, is one of the most effective ways to enhance English communication skill. Actually, if someone corrects the speaker's pronunciation, he should not take offence; and instead the speaker should be grateful that he/she is helping to correct the speaker; and that's a question of attitude.

The speaker is suggested to try 3 to 5 new words and look up the meaning in a dictionary; and then he should try and use these words in his daily work, and in his communication, to improve his vocabulary. He should also find synonyms for words that give him trouble; and should also make use of such synonyms while communicating.

Furthermore, podcasts are available on the internet. These are audio and video files; and many of these can be downloaded for free. These are a great way to practice listening skills and develop an understanding of different accents.

The speakers are suggested to cultivate the habit of going through Tongue Twisters for voice fluency. They should also try to speak loudly in front of mirror.

So far English Language Learning is concerned, when presenting tasks, teachers should tell learners about the language function to be produced in the task and the real context(s) in which it usually occurs. They should provide

opportunities for interactive practice. Teachers should also be careful not to overload a speaking lesson with other new material such as numerous vocabulary or grammatical structures; for, this can distract learners from the primary speaking goals of the lesson. Assessing speaking can take many forms, from oral sections of standardized tests such as the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) or the English as a Second Language Oral Assessment (ESLOA) to authentic assessments such as progress checklists, analysis of taped speech samples, or anecdotal records of speech in classroom interactions. Speaking is key to communication. By considering what good speakers do, what speaking tasks can be used in class, and what specific needs learners report, teacher can help learners improve their speaking and overall oral competence.

As a young professional in today's global business world, it is imperative that one is competent in both oral as well as written communication. Important forms of oral communication at the workplace include:

- Building interpersonal relationships; and

- Giving presentations, and debating viewpoints effectively.

One needs to master oral skills for both in-person and over-the-phone interactions. Similarly, important written communication includes:

- Writing professional e-mails,

- Putting together concise reports; and

- Creating visually powerful power point presentations.

To spruce up one's writing skill, he is advised to read more and more. Just one has to read what interests him. The basic goal is to read as much as one can. People tend to forget basic grammar when writing e-mails. An e-mail is nothing more than a letter which is sent electronically. In an e-mail, one is advised to use special phrases while attaching documents. For example, "Please find attached with this e-mail a report on…" This helps one sound professional.

Actually, for a second language learner, writing is an extension of listening and speaking. Therefore, the student must be provided opportunities to build, extend, and refine oral language in order to improve written output. Since writing involves some risk-taking, it is important for students to be comfortable taking risks. They need to know that their efforts are appreciated, and that the message they are trying to convey is valued over the form. An approach that is ideally suited for a second language learner should have the skills of listening, speaking and reading, naturally integrated with it. Pre-writing is essential for the writer whose first language is not English. Especially, at the lower level of proficiency, students have a limited lexicon; and therefore often have difficulty expressing their ideas. Therefore, teachers or other students may need to assist second language students to generate vocabulary and grammatical structures relevant to the topic. Some helpful suggestions are being discussed below:-

- Brainstorming has to be done depending on the students' level of language-attainment. Writing down of ideas can be done by the teacher, or by the native English speaking students; and the teacher may need to provide some guidance by asking questions to elicit vocabulary and grammatical structures associated with the selected topic.

- Word banks are to be generated by the students, or as assigned by the teacher.

- Drawing and sketching enable students to illustrate ideas for which they do not have the language.

- Discussion with native English-speaking peers or with the teacher facilitate the whole process

- Note-taking (often with the use of charts) is helpful.

- Graphic organizers are to be used for eliciting, organizing and developing background knowledge.

- Learners may be given some alternative models for addressing a writing task.

At the drafting stage, students write their ideas down using some of the notes, language and structures generated during the pre-writing activities. Second language students especially need to be aware that their first draft does not have to be perfect and that the purpose of this activity is to get words on paper. During the revising / editing stage, the second language learners will need assistance from the teachers and from other students. Changes in writing will need to address word usage and clarification of ideas, as well as grammatical accuracy, punctuation, spelling and capitalization.

There is often a wide discrepancy between what students can express in their first language and what there limited foreign language lexicon enables them to do. They frequently take resort to using a dictionary to look up every word; and end up with a literal translation that may be completely incomprehensible and even embarrassing. As such, practice through the process of "translation" is in question so far learners with English as a second language is concerned. However, "transliteration" might surely be of help at the initial phase of teaching-learning process.

From the perspective of theme or subject-matter; that is, the content and the treatment, there are various kinds of writing: narrative, descriptive, expository, argumentative, analytical etc. In dealing with all such types the writer should have a clear idea of the topic. He / She should know how to approach the topic from various angles. The actual art of writing, so far the English language learners are concerned, may pose a number of problems regarding how to begin, what the language of expression should be, how to gather confidence during writing, how to be objective in writing, how to leave a mark of individuality, how to consolidate and organize the ideas during the very process of writing etc. Effective writing depends upon the writer's word power, the active vocabulary, the usage, the knowledge of various sentence patterns, the experimentation with the words and their connotations and syntax; and also with the rhythm of words in combination and cluster. Writing also provides one the opportunity to be precise and to the point by calling a spade a spade; and choosing words and expressions that have less sound and more sense. The following points ought to be kept in mind to make English writing skills more effective:

- Grouping of ideas in paragraphs.

- Composition of paragraphs.

- The paragraph length.

- Transition from one paragraph to another paragraph, from one sentence to another sentence--using appropriate overt and covert connectors.

- The topic sentences in each paragraph.

- Proper beginning and ending of a paragraph.

- Proper sentence-building.

- The length of sentences.

- The pattern of sentences

- The capital letters and appropriate punctuation.

- The agreement of subject and verb.

- The tense of the text.

- The sentence texture.

- The problems regarding adjectives and adverbs.

- The right jargon or the appropriate expression.

- Brevity and precision.

- Clarity of expression by removing vagueness, loaded words; and by avoiding abstract nouns.

- Spelling.

- Simpler and shorter word; new words and their meanings.

So far the comprehension in 'reading', of an English language learner is concerned, the ability of a reader to read between the lines is the most appropriate single statement to visualize comprehension. For qualitative comprehension, we must remember the following points:

- Associating experiences with meaning.

- Reacting to sensory images.

- Interpreting the connotations and denotations.

- Realizing the role of context in understanding words, sentences and paragraphs.

- Developing the ability to enlarge the meaning of what has been read.

- Inculcating the ability to enlarge the meaning of what has been read.

- Sharpening the ability to anticipate while reading; and connecting with what precedes.

    A learner-reader has to pay attention to the following details to be good at comprehension:

- To visualize the points or ideas he or she is going to find out in the specific reading task.

- To be ready to identify the various stages concerning these points or ideas.

- To ponder over such stages of progress.

- To make inferences out of the details read.

- To be alert when the convert connectors like "The main point is," "finally", "consequently," "depending on that," "but on the contrary," "therefore," "thus," "however," "hence," "subsequently," "analytically," etc. pass by in the process of reading.

"Listening strategies" are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening output. Listening strategies can be classified by how the listener processes the input.

"Top-down strategies" are listener-based; the listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that helps the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. "Top-down strategies" include:

- Listening for the main idea,

- Predicting,

- Drawing inferences, and

- Summarizing.

"Bottom-up strategies" are text-based; the listener relies on the language in the message; that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. "Bottom-up strategies" include:

- Listening for specific details,

- Recognizing cognates, and

- Recognizing word-order patterns.

Strategic listeners also use "meta-cognitive strategies" to plan, monitor and evaluate their listening:-

- They plan by deciding which listening strategies will serve best in a particular situation.

- They monitor their comprehension and the effectiveness of the selected strategies.

- They evaluate by determining whether they have achieved their listening comprehension goals; and whether the combination of listening strategies selected was an effective one.

To extract meaning from a listening text, students need to follow the following basic steps:

- Figure out the purpose of listening. Activate background knowledge of the topic in order to predict or anticipate the content, and to identify appropriate listening strategies.

- Attend to the parts of the listening input that are relevant to the identified purpose; and ignore the rest. This selectivity enables students to focus on specific items in the input, and reduces the amount of information they have to hold in short-term memory in order to recognize it.

- Check comprehension while listening and when the listening task is over. Monitoring comprehension helps students detect inconsistencies and comprehension failures, directing them to use alternate strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

The English communicator has to try to speak fluently; and at the same time try to make sure whether people can hear him when he speaks. Furthermore, he should not over-praise himself in front of the audience. He should also remember that people will perceive him as nervous and unsure of himself if he talks fast. The most important thing is that he should speak clearly and should not mumble; and should articulate himself in a better manner.

So far neutralizing one's accent is concerned, by inculcating such practices in one's daily lifestyle, as discussed in this article, the communicator will get closer to sounding like a native English speaker; and can best Endeavour to equip himself with a global accent--and he will speak not American or British English, but 'correct English'. As such, by listening, speaking, reading and writing English in a manner that ensures enhanced English communication skills; and above all, by practising incessantly with confidence, a communicator is surely to develop the competence, readiness, aptitude and attitude necessary to communicate effectively in English.

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