

Linguistic Skills and Communicative Abilities

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Language is a means of communication through which we transfer out ideas, emotions, and thought; express our love, anger and get understood by other persons. It is language that distinguishes human being from other species. It has been the common experience of all human beings that language is acquired in proper surrounding or situation. Moreover the distinction can be made between acquiring and learning. This process of acquiring language is the ultimate result of mastering the four language skills – listening (understanding speech), speaking, reading and writing. Here we find that the division of these skills can be made under two broad categories – the aural medium and visual medium. Reading and writing come under the visual medium whereas listening and speaking come under aural medium. These skills are represented by the activity of the language user. “Thus speaking and writing are said to be active, or productive skills whereas listening and reading are said to be passive, or receptive skills” (Widdowson, 2011:57). In order to master the language skills some activities are to be performed by the learners.

What is that learners are expected to understand, speak, read and write? The obvious answer is: the language they are learning. But what exactly do we mean by this? We might mean a selection of lexical items recorded in a dictionary combined with syntactic structures recorded in grammar. In this view, the teaching of a language involves developing the ability to produce correct sentences (Widdowson, 2011:1).

Acquisition of language is not like learning other subjects such as mathematics, sociology, history, economics, anatomy or electronic engineering. It is the language itself to be acquired and get the information about it. Moreover, acquisition of language is not “a good deal of impressive language teaching material” (Ibid.). However, it can be acknowledged that “the ability to produce sentences is a crucial one in the learning of a language” (Ibid.). But it has to be kept in mind that “it is not the only ability that learners need to acquire” (Ibid.).

Knowing a language is more than understanding language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. As rightly pointed out by H. G. Widdowson, “Someone knowing a language knows more than how to understand, speak, read and write sentences. He also knows how sentences are used to communicative effect” (Ibid.). If anybody is capable of speaking and writing grammatically correct sentences such as ‘The rain destroyed the crops’ may be considered as a person having good knowledge of English language. But suppose he constructs sentences such as ‘The rain is destroy the crops’ or ‘The rain destruct the crops’ should be considered as having inadequate knowledge. Now let us consider a pair of sentences – if a stranger asks a man ‘Could you tell me the way to the railway station, please?’ and the man replies ‘The rain destroyed the crops’. Both the sentences are correct as far as the knowledge of English language is concerned but we would certainly say that the man in the conversation does not really know the language as his answer to the question is not proper. Does it mean that, when we acquire a language, we learn how to compose and comprehend correct sentences as isolated linguistic units? And the answer will be

negative. For “we also learn how to use sentences appropriately to achieve a communicative purpose” (Ibid. p. 2). Suppose, the stranger asks the man ‘What did rain do?’ and the man responds: ‘The crops were destroyed by the rain’ (the answer is grammatically correct) but the reply is wrong in some way as “it does not take on an appropriate form in the context” (Ibid.). That’s why it can be concluded that to give an appropriate reply to the question asked ‘is a matter of selecting a sentence’ that would suit to ‘the sentence used for asking the question’.

“The learning of a language,” Widdowson says, “involves acquiring the ability to compose correct sentences” (Ibid.). This kind of ability of the learner “depends upon a knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language being learned” (Ibid. p. 3). And then the learner may display his knowledge of the language being learned by constructing several sentences such as ‘Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall’, ‘Poor John ran away’, ‘He is my friend,’ etc. Here the learner produces such sentences in order to manifest his knowledge of the language system of English; “they are instances of English *usage*” but many times we have “to produce instances of language *use*” as we have “to achieve some kind of communicative purpose” and for this “it involves acquiring an understanding of which sentences, or parts of sentences are appropriate in a particular context” (Ibid.). While acquiring a language the learner does not simply go for the abstract system of the language being learned but he realizes it ‘as a meaningful communicative behavior.’ It is apparent that learning a language is the matter of *usage* and *use* aspects of the language being learned.

The distinction between the two – *usage* and *use* aspects – is related to Ferdinand de Saussure’s distinction between *langue* (the language system) and *parole* (the act of speaking) and Chomsky’s similar distinction between *competence* (the study of the system of rules) and *performance* (the study of actual sentences themselves). Simply it can be said that ‘the speaker’s knowledge of the structure of a language is his linguistic competence and the way in which he uses it, is his linguistic performance’ (For clarification, see J. P. B. Allen, 1975 and D. A. Wilkins, 1972). Further explaining Widdowson remarks:

The notion of competence has to do with a language user’s knowledge of abstract linguistic rules. This knowledge has to be put into effect as behavior, it has to be revealed through performance. When it is put into effect through the citation of sentences to illustrate these rules, as is done in grammar books, then performance yields instances of usage: abstract knowledge is manifested. When languages teachers select structures and vocabulary for their courses they select those items of usage which they judge to be most effective for teaching the underlying rules of the language system. Usage, then, is one aspect of performance, that aspect which makes evident the context rule. Use is another aspect of performance: that which makes evident the context of which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication (Ibid.).

Thus according to Widdowson there are two aspects of performance – *usage* is one and *use* is another. For effective communication both these aspects of performance are absolutely required as “linguistic performance involves the simultaneous manifestation of the language system as usage and its realization as use” (Ibid.). But it

is also possible to separate these two manifestations. For example, in case of conversation we never concern ourselves to the usage but to the use. Ultimately it leads to the conclusion that “the manner in which language is manifested” is called the usage and “the manner in which language is realized as communication” (Ibid. p. 58) is called the use.

Widdowson points out that though it is good for our convenience to represent language skills considering their usage but it is not helpful and to represent them considering their use, it is misleading. For, according to him “the terms aural/visual and productive/receptive refer to the way language is manifested rather than to the way it is realized in communication” (Ibid. p. 57). According to Widdowson, the terms *speaking*, *reading* and *writing* are vague. For example, let us take two pairs of sentences: ‘He speaks clearly’ and ‘She speaks slowly and distinctly’, and, ‘He speaks persuasively about the need to economize’ and ‘She speaks frankly about her marital difficulties.’ Here the verb *speak* is not used in the same sense. In the case of the first pair the term is referred ‘to the manner in which language is manifested’ whereas in the case of the second it is referred ‘to the manner in which language is realized as communication’; thus in the case of the first the verb *speak* is applied as ‘a usage verb’ whereas in the case of the second it is applied as ‘a use verb’. As in these pairs of sentences ambiguity occurs, in the same way it occurs in the application of the noun *speech*. As a mass noun *speech*, it refers ‘to usage’ and as a count noun it refers ‘to use.’ We can come to the conclusion that “the study of speech is the business of phoneticians whereas the study of speeches is the business of politicians” (Ibid. p. 58). Likewise ‘His speech was clear’ is a very deceptive and ambiguous statement as it may mean ‘his delivery was distinct’ or ‘what he wanted to say was easy to understand’. The term *writing* is also ambiguous. Let us consider the two statements: ‘His writing is illegible’ and ‘His writing is logical’. Certainly these two statements are different from the statement ‘His writing is clear’ where the term writing refers either to the handwriting or to the style.

It would be quite necessary here to discuss activities associated with ‘spoken’ language and ‘written’ language, the two forms of language. In the phonological system of the language we find clarity or distinctiveness of speech. In the same way in the graphological system we find the clarity or legibility of writing. The expression ‘He speaks correctly’ is being referred to the grammatical system of the language as it is related to the accepted rules of sentence formation. That’s why it can be said that “speaking in the usage sense involves the manifestation either of the phonological system or of the grammatical system of the language or both” (Ibid.). Further Widdowson brings forth that “the term used for variation in phonological manifestation is *accent* and that used for variation in grammatical manifestation is *dialect*” (Ibid.). In both the cases, speaking is considered as the physical embodiment of abstract system. So for the reference to usage is concerned, speaking is active or productive and it makes use of the aural medium. But in term of the use, speaking is rather different. Speaking as an instance of use becomes reciprocal exchange and it plays a role as reception and production, and, hence the skill of speaking involves receptive and productive participation. As far as phonological and grammatical features of a language are concerned the skill of speaking is associated with the aural medium. But in the natural communicative interaction “the act of speaking involves not only the production of sounds but also the use of gestures, the movements of

muscles of the face, and indeed of the whole body” (Ibid. p. 59). Here the speaking takes the form of visual medium.

To understand a piece of spoken language we require “either that we understand it as usage or that we understand as use” (Ibid.). In this case we recognize the signals received by the ear relating to the phonological and grammatical system of the particular language and also understand what the sentences in that language mean. Here understanding means the recognition of the signification of sentences, which may be called as *hearing*. It is the receptive aspect of talking. Listening is the receptive counterpart of saying. Moreover it depends on the visual as well as the aural medium. Thus Widdowson makes it clear:

that saying something necessarily involves speaking sentences and listening to what is said necessarily involves hearing sentences. But talking does not simply mean making use of the aural medium to speak. One can speak a sentence without saying anything and one can hear a sentence without listening to its communicative import. Speaking does not include saying and hearing does not include listening. .. speaking and hearing are distinct and independent activities whereas saying and listening are aspects of the one activity: talking (Ibid. p. 60).

Saying and listening are reciprocal aspects of the one basic activity of talking. But reading and writing cannot be considered as reciprocal activities. It is a fact that most spoken discourse takes the forms of an exchange as the participants say alternately something. This interaction makes ‘a close inter-relationship between the productive and receptive activities’. So for the written discourse is concerned ‘this close inter-relationship does not exist’. Therefore it can be said that “reading and writing are not typically reciprocal activities in the same way as are saying and listening” (Ibid. p. 61). We have written and spoken interactions but the most part of written discourse does not take the form of an exchange. Saying and listening are not the distinct activities whereas writing and reading are typically distinct activities. Is it possible to say that writing is a productive ability and reading a receptive activity? If reading is receptive activity then writing as use is partially receptive. Reading is the ability to recognize sentences. It is the ability to recognize how the linguistic elements function as part of a discourse. We may come to the conclusion that “the ability to read and the ability to write are the same and it is neutral with regard to production or reception” (Ibid. p. 63).

The linguistic skills and communicative abilities are used here interchangeably. Speaking, hearing, composing and comprehending are linguistic skills. These skills are defined with reference to the medium. The skills which are defined with reference to the manner and mode are communicative abilities. In other words the reference of a language system as usage is the linguistic skill and as use, communicative ability. “Communicative abilities,” says Widdowson, “embrace linguistic skills but not the reverse” (Ibid. P. 67). On one hand, Widdowson differentiates between skills and abilities and on the other he states that “this complication has some bearing on the learning and teaching of languages” and further he asserts that “the ultimate aim in language learning is to acquire communicative competence” (Ibid.). So simply the language learning is made overt in talking or corresponding or it remains covert as a

psychological activity, which is related to the ability to say, listen, write and read. What remains here is not the issue of the aim of language learning but how this aim is to be achieved. So far tradition is concerned the focus is on the linguistics skills, if these are acquired in reasonable measure, the communicative abilities would follow automatically. But this has not also been approved by Widdowson as he says: “the acquisition of linguistic skills does not seem to guarantee the consequent acquisition of communicative abilities in a language”. And he makes it clear that “the abilities include skills: one cannot acquire the former without acquiring the latter” (Ibid.). For, the development of communicative abilities is the result of an overemphasis on the drills and exercises for the production and reception of sentences. It is apparent that the nature of the communicative abilities is found in “ways of creating and re-creating discourse in different modes” (Ibid. p. 68).

Language, as we know, is a social-cultural-geographical phenomenon. Ultimately it is sociolinguistics as the study of language is a part and parcel of culture and society. Varshney points out:

There is a deep relationship between language and society. It is in the society that man acquires and uses language. When we study a language which is an abstraction of abstractions, a system of systems, we have to study its further abstractions such as dialects, sociolects, idiolects, etc. That is why we have to keep in mind the geographical area in which this language is spoken, the culture and the society in which it is used, the context and situation in which it is used, the speakers who use it, the listeners for whom it is used, and the purpose for which it is used, besides the linguistic components that compose it (2007-08: 294).

If we do so then the study of a language can be complete. Sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics are coming closer. For, we know well that, for acquiring a language, just the realization of the grammatical competence is not sufficient; it requires the communicative competence as well. Psycholinguistics presents the theories of language acquisition and language use and, therefore, some psycholinguists argue that “learning is entirely the product of experience” while others suggest that man “has an innate language learning mechanism which determines learning or acquisition of language” (Ibid. 207-08). In order to learn a foreign language, learners have to make use of their communicative abilities they have already acquired from their native language in relation to the linguistic skills have to be associated with the foreign language they are learning. But this is not an easy task. And so Widdowson suggests:

We can make use of the learners’ knowledge of non-verbal aspects of discourse, and of their ability to interpret them, as a means of linking their communicative abilities in their own language to a realization of these abilities in the language they are acquiring (74).

For that, suggests Widdowson:

We need to remove these abilities from a dependence on linguistic skills in the mother tongue and associate them with linguistic skill in the foreign language, we thereby represent (without misrepresenting)

foreign language learning not as the acquisition of abilities which are new but as the transference of the abilities that have already been acquired into a different means of expression. If this is done successfully, of course, the learner can go on to extend the range of his communicative abilities through the foreign language without reference to his mother tongue (74-75).

Here we come to the conclusion that acquiring is referred to the mother tongue whereas learning to the second, third, fourth of the foreign language. As Robert Lado puts it “learning a second language is more than learning a description of it” (1986: 32). While learning a foreign language, learners have to go for the process of speaking and listening, which have been marked as the productive and receptive skills in the aural medium. And this process involves linguistic and psychological as well as other elements, for, “learning a second language is defined as acquiring the ability to use its structure within a general vocabulary under essentially the conditions of normal communication among native speakers at conversational speed” (Ibid. p. 38). Whether it is learning, acquiring or mastering, all these terms may be taken to certain extent as synonymous though not completely. All these are some or the other way related to each other.

Works Cited:

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