
IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE SKILLS AND THE WAYS OF TEACHING THEM

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Abstract: Language acts as a fine thread to weave communities. It is the prime source of communication. Human beings communicate themselves with the others in distinctive forms. It is natural creativity. They arrange and rearrange phonemes, morphemes, words and phrases to create new modes of expression. They also use their linguistic resources to produce new expressions and new sentences. Moreover, human language is a symbolic system. It is not only uttered but also can be displayed by writing with the help of certain symbols called alphabets of a particular language. The primary responsibility of a language teacher is to provide the students with opportunities for the development of language skills. As the language is never learnt, it is always acquired. Language acquisition is attained only when the natural way of learning is followed. The importance of language skills lies in learning of the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening is the ability to receive and comprehend the messages accurately the communication process. It aims on two basic concepts: Casual Listening and Focused Listening. Speaking is a natural skill that describes expressions of thoughts and ideas. It plays a vital role in the oral communication. Reading is a process of extracting meaning from a written or printed text. It consists extensive reading; intensive reading; skimming; and scanning. Writing is a medium of communication that represents the language through the inscription of signs and symbols.

Keywords: Communication, Language, Language Skills, Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing.

Introduction: Language determines the capability of a person. A good learner is one who has the ability of understanding the communicative signals whether it be verbal or non- verbal. When a child is born in a community, he/she hears the language spoken by at community. The very first experience learnt by the child is from the language of his/her mother, other members of the family, neighbors and so on. So, it can be rightly said that the language starts with the ear. Thus the most important and natural language skills are 'listening' and 'speech'. These two skills are inter-related. A child that is incapable of listening to spoken language is not able to speak. In other words, a child born deaf will be dumb. This confirms the fact that practice is essential for the development of proficiency in speech.

The spoken language is marked on paper or on the surface of something hard using visual symbols. This graphic representation of the spoken form of communication is known as writing. Each language has its own writing system. There are languages which are written exactly like they are pronounced. For example, most of the Indian languages like Hindi, Malyalam, Tamil etc., belong to this group. But in the case of English there is lack of consistent relationship between sound and spelling. The spelling of English words has undergone very little change since the 15th century whereas their pronunciation has undergone noticeable changes. This makes writing of English words more difficult than the words of many other languages. Training and practice are necessary to develop this language skill in the learners.

The visual representations of ideas are converted to sounds when a person looks at them and reads aloud. Reading, thus, is the decoding of the visual representation of experience. Reading can be categorized into two types----silent reading and loud reading. Both these forms of reading make the reader share the experience of the writer. Writing and Reading are not natural process. So training and practice are essential to be a writer and a reader.

It may be concluded that there are four language skills---listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Of these the first two are natural. A person who hears will listen and one who listens will speak. But the other two: writing and reading--- are artificial. Specific Training is necessary to make a person write and read. Formal teaching of the above mentioned skills is quite essential to develop one' personality. A native speaker can listen and speak his language without any formal training. But writing and reading require formal instruction. This shows that teaching is essential for all the four language skills.

The ways of teaching the four important skills: Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading are described in the following manner:

1. **Listening:** A child who is born in a society is exposed to its mother tongue. This constant exposure to the mother tongue enables the child to speak after a certain period by imitation. This natural process of mother tongue acquisition is not the case of a person who learns a second language. The constant exposure to the language and the immediate need for communication is absent in the case of a second language learner. Besides the firm basis of the sound system of the mother tongue may interfere with the learning of the sound system of the second language. The second language learner must get the opportunity to hear the language. For instance, a boy who learns English as a second language in India, it may not be possible for him to hear English as it is spoken by the native speakers in a natural manner. But modern inventions like films, radio, TV, tape-recorders, gramophone records, telephones, mobiles, computers, etc. will go a long way to provide him with opportunities to hear English spoken. But just hearing is not enough, he must listen to it. The learners must be trained to listen to it not for its meaning, but for its sounds. They must listen carefully and thereafter imitate. For this purpose it is necessary to repeat the sound. This repetition of sound helps them to gain confidence.

Careful listening of correct English spoken by the teacher or played from the voice recorder or tape will give a model for the learner. This helps the learner produce the sound or the model of sound he has in his memory. This sound produced by the learner may be recorded, played back and listened to afterwards. This helps the learner to compare the sound system of English spoken by him with the model, where necessary corrections can be made.

Teachers of English must understand that for most of the children, the only chance to listen to English is in the classroom. The teacher should speak using familiar vocabulary and ideal pronunciation in front of his/her students. Discussions and directions regarding TV and Radio programs in the upcoming classes can ensure whether the learners have listened them seriously or not.

It is good in this context to mention what Eugene A. Nida says about selective listening in his paper of the same title. According to him, language is essentially a motor- auditory phenomenon and our auditory sensitiveness and assimilative capacity must be developed. For this purpose he puts forward a technique which he calls "selective listening".

'Selective Listening' means selecting certain features and listening in a concentrated manner. Its general principles are:

1. Selective Listening must begin from the beginning of language learners.
2. One should listen for only one feature (or set of features) at a time.
3. One should listen successively to all the features of a language.
4. The order of listening to different features should be systematic.
5. One should concentrate particularly on those features which cause the learner difficulty in understanding or speaking.

The order of features, according to Nida, is:

- a) **Phonetic Features:** The learners must first listen to and make familiar with the principal intonational characteristics. After intonation one should listen to the important consonants following listening to vowels. Thus one masters the sound system of the language before one master the lexical and syntactic patterns. Correct listening will help correct speaking.

- b) **Vocabulary:** Usually vocabulary items, which are listened to, come in some structural context. The learner must be provided with opportunity to listen again and again with the help of recordings. It helps to enhance the vocabulary practice.
- c) **Morphology and Syntax or Grammar:** The learners must listen to common and simple structures. So the teacher should try to anticipate what forms the learner will have to use and identify them. These grammatical or syntactical patterns may be repeated using a record player so that the learners can listen carefully.

2. **Speech or Speaking:** Speech is the natural form of language. In speech we make use of oral signs which are addressed to the ear. A child acquires the power of speech by responding to the sounds made by the people around him and imitating them out of his need for verbal communication. In the teaching of English as a second language this situation may be created in the classroom. After having given the learner a chance to listen to the language, he/she must feel the need for communication.

The following techniques may be implemented to train the learners in speech:

- (a) The learners may be introduced to the sound system of English. Phonetic script also may be introduced to them. Their attention may be drawn to the difference between the phonemes in their mother tongue and the target language. This is not always the case with English. So the use of phonetic script may be very useful to the learners to overcome this difficulty. Ear training facilitates speaking. Articulation is dependent upon hearing sounds accurately and discrimination among sounds.
- (b) The second language learning situation in India does not provide the learners with situations to speak the language. So the teacher must create situations in the class. Group activity may be used effectively. The class may be divided into groups consisting of ten or twelve in each group, along with a leader who is to control the group activity. A topic is given for discussion by the group and each member may be encouraged to contribute or share his/her ideas in the discussion. Questions are framed on the teaching material. By question/answer rounds, the group gets practice in speech. Grammatical patterns may also be used for this practice. For advanced classes, seminars and symposium may be arranged to give opportunity for the learners to speak.
- (c) The use of oral composition can give the learners a chance to speak. This is very useful in lower classes. It represents conversation practice among the learners.
- (d) Dramatization may be used to train the learners in the art of speech. This makes the students active and the class interesting. Each student may be assigned to play the role of a character.
- (e) Dialogue pattern drill approach can be used to give the second language learners experience in listening and practice in speaking. Properly prepared dialogue or as interesting story or incident is prepared. The difficult words are explained to the students. Then the dialogue is read. It is done in a manner of presentation, acting out various roles. It is repeated a number of times so that the second language learners memorize or internalize the dialogue. After this speaking practice begins.

The significance of pattern practice while speaking is the combined effort of the material basis of the dialogues, mimicry practice of the dialogue, performance of the dialogue in front of the class with changing roles and last but not the least, guided by conversation closely paralleling the situation. This helps to look at language as a social behavior which is to be learnt by practice.

3. **Reading:** Reading is the decoding of the graphic representation of a language. It is “sight-sound-sense” process. In reading meanings are attached to written symbols to get the message. It is a process of thinking under the stimulus of the written page.

There are two aspects of Reading Skill:

(a) **Word Recognition Skill:**

- A sight recognition vocabulary i.e., familiarity with a sufficient number of words so as to “pass the over” if they are encountered in reading.

- Phonetics i.e., the sense of sound-letter correspondence.
- Skills of word analysis and structural analysis.
- Reading in sense groups rather than by individual groups.
- Also at this level of reading the learner has to strive to overcome the following common faults:
- Pointing the words with fingers or pencil.
- Unconscious head movement.
- Vocalization, mumbling each word as it is read.
- Lip Movement.
- Sub vocalization i.e., mentally---but not audibly---pronouncing the words.

(b) Skills Of Comprehension:

- *Locate or Identification of the following things*
 - Facts- name of characters, the time and place of the story.
 - Main idea of the paragraph.
 - Sequence or the order of incidence or action.
 - Comparisons and differences in characters and places.
 - Cause- effect Relationship of the happenings or actions.
 - Character traits, explicit statements about a character, event, etc.
- *Recall:* The readers must be able to recall certain important points of the selection they have read.
- *Reorganization:* The learners must be able to reorganize what they have read systematically and logically.
- *Inferential Comprehension:* This involves the skill of informing and supporting details, main ideas, sequence, comparisons, cause and effect relationship and character traits.
- *Evaluation:* Evaluation deals with judgment on qualities of accuracy, worth, or probability of occurrence.

The best way to teach a language is to expose the learners to the language. In the teaching of a second language, the best method to give this language exposure is to read the language. Fast Reading with appropriate understanding is the skill to be developed among the students.

4. **Writing:** Writing is the graphic representation of ideas and experience. This is an artificial skill and so a lot of training as well as practice is required to develop this skill. This is the last of the skills to be introduced in the teaching of a language. There was a time when language teaching began with the teaching of writing the letters of the language. But modern studies have shown that this is a wrong procedure. It is meaningless and useless to waste the valuable time of language learning on teaching the writing of the letters of the language which have no significance for the learners.

The modern technique is to teach words orally and practice them with simple structures. After sufficient practice in oral exercise, the learners are initiated to writing. The names of familiar objects, animals and things are introduced to the learners and they are helped to write them. It is also important to see that the learners do not consider the alphabet as the unit, but the sentence or word as the unit.

In advanced stages composition exercises are introduced to teach the art of writing. There are two types of composition--- free composition and controlled composition. First, the learners are introduced to controlled or guided composition. When they have been trained in this, they are introduced to free composition.

Teaching and Learning are two basic processes underlying the activity of students and teachers nowadays. Teaching has at its center the method of communication, task-based methods, functional methods and situations as real life etc. These methods are realized through various strategies and techniques, according to language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). In contemporary teaching teacher does not only play the role of teachers, but also plays the role of supervisor. Together they establish cooperative relations in the process of learning.

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