

Integrating the Functional and Interactional Views - A Study from a Task-Based Engineering Classroom

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1. Introduction

If ever at the celestial gate we English teachers are judged by our classroom sins I think most of us will tremble and be afraid to answer, "Have you killed letter-writing?" Only a hope for final regard of truth and absolute forgiveness of sin will ever give us courage to answer "Yes"(Mish, 1928). Letters can be used as an instructional material to teach and bring about an understanding to write effective business letters. The article here is based on a classroom research, conducted on two batches of students who registered for a course 'English for Engineers' offered at an Indian Technical University. The primary design of this class-based research was to compare letters written by aboriginal and non-native speakers from the business perspectives and examine it. In summation, the task also showed to be an indicative to understand communication in terms of cross-cultural communication. The two batches of students registered and chosen for this research were students who were in their first semester of Engineering. They were between 17 – 19 years of age. These two batches comprised of scholars representing the diversity in India. Hence, the classroom had a multicultural and multilingual environment to it. There were about 60-65 students in each section. Learners want to increase their probabilities of finding an appropriate job, and proving their potential in it, they aspire to function more efficiently on the work floor, because they want to get better acquainted with their neighbor's, because they want to read certain books, articles, or magazines, etcetera.

2. Materials

The instructional system for the ESP course 'English for engineering', included parts of grammar, business letter writing, paragraph writing, and cross-cultural communication under different units. With an objective, set, to make learners, communicate effectively during business interactions. Hence, it was decided that the existing material from the text would be used; alongside found materials that would bring about interaction between the teacher –learner and among learners. The focus of the instructional material is to relate to the attained material and analyse it in terms of expressions and interpretations to gain an understanding of 'Business Letters', as "Materials come from the world of realia rather than from textbooks. The primary aim of materials is to promote comprehension and communication" (S.Rodgers, p. 188). Letters would serve as a teaching aid, and an analytical tool, to comprehend written and cross-cultural communication. In addition, the found material would offer prospects for the learners to progress through their study independently. In addition, the difference in the levels of investigation of the letters provided a scope for the learners to examine grammatical structures and develop their competency in letter writing (specifically business letters). Hence, the learners considered for this research were asked to collect samples of letters based on the categorization mentioned in the task below.

Task - Collection of letters

The learners were then instructed to collect four letters written by native and non-native speakers to serve as the material for analysis. These letters projected a rich cultural diversity in terms of both the native and non-native speakers of English.

3. Approaches and Methods

The instructional system's objective was set to help the learners to acquire knowledge that related to the communicative dimension and be successful during social interactions.

An analysis, based on what is required to be effective in written communication. As established, learning needs require appropriate use of vocabulary and grammar, and function as a communicative tool. Letters, function as an interactive tool and is important maintain interpersonal relationships between individuals in terms of acts, transactions and negations that may take place in a business scenario. Therefore, the functional and the interactional views of Anthony's, approach catered the need of this study. The functional view emphasizes on the learner's needs, which here, is to write effective business letters. According to, Littlewoods is perceptive, "One of the most characteristic of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language" (Littlewoods, 1981). In accordance, the communicative approach seemed to be the right choice to fulfill the learning needs. Further, the interactional view supplemented that learners need to realize interpersonal relationships. These two views seemed to facilitate, teaching and learning process without altering the structure of the syllabus, it promoted the scope to enable a learner-generated view of the found material through which business interactions were analysed. In addition, a Task-Based, classroom activity seemed to naturally support the objective at hand, which was to attain mechanisms of the target language, and comprehend the relationship between reader and the writer. In addition, it supported teacher – student interaction and student-student interactions. Moreover, it includes (Realia) proponents on CLT, through the authentic material found for analysis.

4. Procedure

The classroom teaching was designed to integrate Task-Based language teaching, and incorporating the 'Functional and the Interactional' views. Hence, the classroom task focused on the learners' being exposed to real-time business communication and encouraged to discover the functions that relate to successful communication. The tasks, targeted learners to comprehend letters written by the writer and analyse the possible misunderstanding that could inhibit, the reader's understanding in the found resource, and to trace the structure and interpretations that developed during business interactions. In addition, it fetched aspects of cross-cultural communication to create among the learners, an awareness of how miscommunications can take place while interacting across cultures.

The communicative framework planned was to enable learners to acquire knowledge about the level of formality that should be maintained during business interactions; while emphasizing on the need for awareness during cross-cultural interactions. Hence, the learners were assigned to tasks that involved:

- Collection letters written by native and non-native speakers of English
- Gather information on the cultural background, of the writers, whose letters were collected.
- Seek attributes in the letters that represent the culture.

5. Discussion on the record of the classroom progress:

'Engaging learners in the task work better context for the activation in the learning processes than from-focused activities, and hence ultimately provides better opportunities for language learning to take place' (S.Rodgers, p. 223). Hence, with the basic resources, collected and segregated by the students the sessions were set to progress. However, an analytical tool was required to determine the students' learning. Hence, a pre-test was (S. Rodgers, 2012) conducted for the students. They were instructed to write a letter, on a given business scenario and these letters were corrected. The letters were then analyzed for their grammar, language, and vocabulary to a major portion. The pre-test indicated that most of the students had problems that pertained to: Vocabulary, Tenses, Subject and Verb agreement, Auxiliary (has, have), Influence of mother tongue (L1), Lacks clarity /style /presentation, chatty tone, capitalization and punctuations, spelling mistakes and sentence structure.

The details of the class were as follows:

Batch 1 – Slot A2

No of students registered – 64

No of students who took the pre-test - 55

No of students to work on letters as a part of their project – 50

No of students who opted for Blogging -14

Date of the test 1 – 01/ 08/2014

No. of Contact classes –15

Date of test 2 – 14 /10/2014

Batch 2 – Slot G1

No of students registered – 63
No of students who took the pre-test – 60
No of students to work on letters as a part of their project – 60
No. of students who opted for Blogging - 3
Date of the test 1 – 02/ 08/2014
No. of Contact classes –15
Date of test 2 – 15/10/2014

The basic focus, of the tasks was to involve the students in form-focused activities to help them participate in meaningful and purposeful communication. As far as, grammar was involved the target was to make the learners comprehend the use of the grammatical form through analysis of the gathered data.

6. Analysis of the found material

The learners', to gain a basic knowledge of communicative expressions, carried out an analysis of the found material based on:

- Context
- Grammar
- Vocabulary

In addition, a comparative study was carried out on the letters they had collected. The main idea, of the study was to help the learner identify the form of the language that is used and how the learner can improve his or her competence and communicate effectively. The next, focus was to make the learner, aware of any misinterpretation that could occur during the process of cross-cultural communication; through an investigation of the collected letters (obtained data). For instance, during the process of communication the sender would be more effective in communication if he/she, understands the cultural background of the receiver and formats it in such a way that the receiver could cognize at a correct interpretation of the letter. One suggestive key to solve this problem rests on the grammatical structures, (the class was not a grammar base) that would help the learner to understand the implications the letter conveyed and how, the language was used to convey the intended meaning.

The letter (acquired data) analysis focused on components such as:

1. Deixis - Contextual meaning of pronouns in a broader sense in order to determine the meaning it conveys in the given context.
2. Presuppositions - meaning of sentence.
3. Per formative - Implication of words that give information and subsequently have a response from the receiver.
4. Implicative - Words that may convey an indirect meaning differing from the context of the letter leading to misunderstandings, especially while communicating across cultures. (Suggest something that is true, although you do not state it, directly).

In addition, as the objective of the course also focused on cross-cultural issues in business negotiations and problem solving. Students were expected to use the principles of the above-mentioned aspects to perform each of their writing and speaking assignments during the course. In accordance to the task-based plans made for the classroom, it is worthy to recollect Skehan's notes on instructions, where he stated that "meaning is primary...the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome" (S.Rodgers, p. 226). Hence, the learners primarily analysed, on aspects of structural and functional modes that pertain to how one could get the right message across.

7. Discussion on the teaching and learning process based on samples collected by the students

7.1 Deixis: This infers to the contextual meaning of the pronouns in a broader sense, to determine the meaning it Conveys in the given context. Most English teachers would know that English permits the use of pronouns in the place of 'nouns', giving a space for the duplication of its nouns. The discussion that follows gives one clarity of how learning process occurred. Student Sample 1. A student on the internet found this specific letter and it was analyzed for the pronouns; the analysis is presented in the text below:

May 2010
Riddle M Pepper
Dear Ronnie,
21st Damascus Street
New South Wales

After our discussion on Wednesday, my business partners and I discussed the situation, and we concluded that we intend to purchase your business, Twice Over. We are willing to pay your requested purchase price of \$75,000, which includes both the business and all the equipment necessary to operate it, as per our discussion. We would like to meet with you next Thursday, June 3rd, to finalize the sale. We will bring all the necessary paperwork, signed and completed, and we will tender payment, as agreed. At that meeting, we will also set a date that will not exceed thirty (30) days for when we will take over the operation.

Sincerely,
Pepper

In a normal situation, the statements will be considered right if, in accordance, to the grammatical rule, the duplications of the 'nouns' are replaced by the noun mentioned earlier. In the selected letter, there is no mention of 'nouns' that preceded the use of the 'pronoun'. However, analysis by the student showed his awareness as to whom, the pronouns referred too. The student analysis of the pronouns is given in the text box below.

The five pronouns are used in the above letter are described below.

1. My- It is used in the first person. It addresses the partners of the writer Riddle M Pepper.
2. I - It is used in the first person. It addresses the writer Riddle M Pepper.
3. We- It addresses the group of partners including Riddle M Pepper.
4. Your- It is used in the second person. It addresses the addressee Ronnie.
5. Our- It addresses the group of partners, Riddle M Pepper and Ronnie.

a. Case: Regardless of this awareness, the learner goes wrong with the use of pronouns most of the time while writing independently. Hence, to resolve this issue an educator can opt to take the student further into the use of pronouns and discuss the pronoun cases with them. Let's consider the first sentence of the letter analysed by the student:

After our discussion on Wednesday, my business partners and I discussed the situation, and we concluded that we intend to purchase your business, Twice Over.

b. Possessive case: The sentence to a major extent reflects that the sender of this letter begins with the words 'our' and 'my' indicating a possessive case to project a sense of ownership and authority.

c. Nominative case: The sentence also bears elements of the nominative case where 'I' and 'we' were used as the subjects. For instance, a part of the statement indicates how the pronouns were used as subjects.

I discussed the situation, and we concluded that we intend to purchase your business

On a basic level, subjects come before the verb and the objects come after that. As verbs indicate, the relationship between the subject and the object, indicate the action it conveys. Fundamentally, analysis of the pronoun helps learner understand the 'word order' that English demands. As most of the Indian languages, tend to use a different structure to convey the same idea. For instance, the student may attempt translating the sentence from his L1 to English; ending up constructing the sentence in terms of: Subject- Object- Verb.

1A. I discussed the situation. (L2).

1B. I situation discussed. (L1).

Here, as shown in 1A the pronoun functions as the subject and considered to be in the nominative case. However, it is important to make the learner aware of the fact that the function of the pronoun may change in accordance, to the case and that they may function as an objective, possessive, or a nominative case.

1C. we intend to purchase your business.

The fragment of the sentence, as seen in '1C' shows that the pronoun 'we' established itself under the nominative case functioning as a subject, whereas, the pronoun 'your' indicated a possessive case. Here is yet another example, of a letter, which has been analyzed in the context of the pronouns. Letters in particular help instructors; regulate the conventional problem that exists between speech and writing. For instance, the concluding lines of the letter selected by the student was analysed in terms of the use of 'conditionals with the pronoun' and 'prepositions with the pronoun' as depicted.

2 A. If I don't hear from you by the end of next week I will follow up with you and see if we can set up a meeting at your convenience.

2B. If I don't hear from you by the end of next week I will follow up with you and see if we can set up a meeting at your convenience.

In these sentences above, the prepositions ‘from, with and at’ relate to the pronouns ‘you and your’ and to the rest of the clause. However, it can clearly be seen that the ‘from, with and at’ need the pronouns to express what is explicitly implied to complete the idea. The analyses would show that:

2B. If I don't hear from you by the end of next week

‘From’ involves a notion of separation from the point it indicates.

2B. I will follow up with you.

‘With’ happens to be a point of association in the sentence here.

2B. a meeting at your convenience

‘At’ denotes the ‘time and place’ of the suggested meeting mentioned in the letter.

7.2 Relationships of the preposition.

From you with you at your

As indicated, ‘with’ happens to be a proximity preposition which indicates the relationship between the preposition that specifies the place and separation. Taylor (1993), indicated that the relationship between two entities is inherently asymmetrical, in which one is selected as the foreground while the other serves as the background. At the same time, this would also correspond to the analysis that derives from Driven (2001). Adapted from Driven: learners gain an understanding that the preposition can be used to describe both stative and dynamic relationships. Moreover, become aware of the polysemous, nature of the prepositions’ where they tend to convey various meanings that relate to space, time, degree, and other idiomatic usages. In addition, the student correspondingly became mindful of how the pronoun was understood in a given context. Where ‘I’ may indicate the sender and his intentions, whereas ‘you/ your’ indicates the kind of responses the sender expects from the receiver and conveys the proposed mode of action of the sender.

7.3 Presuppositions - The meaning of the sentence.

The glossary of linguistic terms defines presumptions as:

A presupposition is background belief, relating to an utterance, that

- Must be mutually known or assumed by the speaker and addressee for the utterance to be considered appropriate in context
- Generally, will remain a necessary assumption whether the utterance is placed in the form of an assertion, denial, or a question, and
- Can generally be associated with a specific lexical item or grammatical feature (presupposition trigger) in the utterance. (Levinson S. C., 1983).

In accordance, to this context if one was to consider a part of the letter which states: ‘After our chat at last week's meeting, it occurred to me that with Riviera approaching its 50th anniversary, it would be the perfect occasion to produce a Corporate History to celebrate your company's first half-century. It so happens, that these are exactly the types of corporate publications that we specialize in here at Final Edition. In fact, we have produced corporate histories for a number of companies’.

The sender of this letter ‘presupposes’, that the receiver would be able to identify the reference of, ‘our’, i.e., the conversation they had during a meeting in the past week. At the same time, it is seen that the sender also ‘presupposes’ that their companies would collaborate and the offer to work together would be understood by the receiver through the use of pronouns: “you’re and we”. At the same time, it’s worthy to note the usage of the temporal prepositions, in the selected passage from the letter. In so doing, awareness was created among the learners on how they could use temporal prepositions as they tend to be a part of their most simple and natural form of expression in communication in terms of time and event.

7.4 Projection

While discussions on presuppositions took place, it was realized that learners could be interested to discuss the ‘projection problem’ which Langendoen and Savin(1971), addressed. This problem, related to the behavioral pattern of the presuppositions in a complex sentence. According, to Langendoen and Savin(1971), the projection principle for presuppositions, therefore, followed: presuppositions of a subordinate clause do not amalgamate either with presuppositions or with assertions of higher clauses; rather they stand as presuppositions of complex sentences in which they occur.

If either the assertion or presupposition contain, a variable which stands for subordinate clause (say, an object of complement), then it follows that, the variable is replaced only by the assertion of the subordinate clause (Savin, 1971, p. 58).

The classroom instruction, explained this through an example, through lines selected from the letter, which was as follows:

A. If I don't hear from you by the end of next week, I will follow up with you and see if we can set up a meeting at your convenience.

In this case, if the conditional clause mentioned above is considered, the presupposition of the object complements for 'she' would be:

B. I don't hear from you by the end of next week I will follow up with you.

The statement, in this case was suspended and it required the use of the conditional to be complete. However, the statement could not be fully accepted as the conditional clause had the property of expressing a possibility (imaginary) as in this statement.

However, in this sentence drawn from the letter; the sender sincerely implied that the receiver should be able to accept the fact that, he was likely to be contacted if he didn't reciprocate his offer within the end of the particular week (date can be noted from the letter) to fix up a meeting. Hence, the receiver was likely to assume the possibilities that related to the following:

a) If he responded to the letter, he would be contacted and should attend a meeting to see how they progress with the proposal. (Salient and identifiable)

b) If he failed to get back by the end of the week with some sort of response he would be contacted and the sender of the letter will convince him to accept the proposal. (Salient and identifiable)

c) A meeting with regard to the proposal is inevitable, whether the receiver responds or not to the letter, the meeting is inevitable. (Salient and identifiable)

d) Probably the sender is indirectly seeking an appointment to discuss a possibility to collaborate and work for mutual business benefits. (Evidential modal, probability adverb)

e) Can they have a meeting? (Question)

f) The sender believes his proposal can't be turned down. (Belief operator)

g) Maybe the receiver will decide upon the dates for the meeting and inform the sender about it. (Possibility modal)

These statements, above, are all presuppositions of the learner, based on the lines taken from the letter. These project the fact that one of these utterances should be acceptable to the receiver. In addition, the statements only project the various meanings that operate within the context of the statement. However, the receiver of the letter would find himself in an awkward situation if he fails to identify the actual embedded meaning, which the sender intends to convey.

Through 'projections', the learner developed an awareness of the various underlying meanings a sentence could project. In this case, how, he/ she could word the statement in such a manner to enable the receiver to understand without misinterpretations.

7.5 Per formative

A per formative perspective was the next component introduced to learners. It was to enable the learner to comprehend the information of a word in a specified situation. The meaning of the word in the specified context subsequently had to have its response from the receiver. The learners acquired knowledge of how the language, conveyed, varied perspectives through letters, in terms of informing, complaining, clarifying, requesting, informing, ordering, demanding, etc. Thereby, satisfying the required need to communicate. The verbs identified in the passages were analysed, for these implications.

Student Response:

The letter given above is a proposal letter written by Raymond Gaudet to a Ms. Champion. In the letter, Raymond tries to convince Ms. Champion to have his company (Final Edition Publications) publish a 'Corporate History of Rivera' to mark its 50th anniversary. The letter is written in an informal manner, it includes various complements, and because both Ms. Champion and Mr. Raymond studied together in the same university is mentioned in the letter makes it feel as a personal letter written between friends.

This class activity engaged learners, to have a discussion as to how they could determine the purpose of the letter and the performative perspective of the verbs that indicate the function.

7.6 Implicature

Words could convey an indirect meaning that is contradictory, to the context of the letter leading to misunderstandings, especially while communicating across cultures. The following tasks were assigned to learners; to enable them to detect the cultural differences between a sender and a receiver and realize the importance of cultural understanding to avoid miscommunication.

- Make a brief study of the cultural background of the person who writes the letter.
- Mention the cultural background of the receiver if different from that of the writer

A sample written by a student for the task mentioned above is given below:

Cultural influence on the letter. There is a close relationship between America's political and economic traditions: that the individual pursuit of self-interest leads to the best result, both for the individual and for society is believed to be a successful formula for both economic success and optimal political function. The precise amount of individual economic freedom that Americans should have is often debated, with the (usually slight) differences in opinion marking the major differences between political parties. The result, however, is that the U.S. economy has become the largest on earth, with most of its citizens enjoying comparatively high living standards. The fact that the United States is the largest English-speaking marketplace allows firms to compete across the country and to enjoy economies of scale (cost reductions that arise from the huge scale of manufacturing) that reduce prices and benefit consumers. The relatively uniform commercial culture--with many large stores or "chains" operating nationwide--produces a commercial atmosphere that is relatively homogeneous throughout the country. Through this task, learners were encouraged to write short paragraphs after a brief study about the cultural and interaction patters. The study had a follow up in the classroom where the learners engaged in a discussion on the possible misunderstandings and miscommunication that could result due to varied cultures. The comparisons between the native and non-native writers turned out to be effective as learners discussed the manner of how letters could be written and presented rather than being judgmental about its context.

8. Discussion

Educators need to remember how, to coordinate teaching with appropriate sections of tasks and activities to supplement the learning process. As well as, guide the learners were through every step towards progress. This study, teaching through the found material proved successful, as response to the content wasn't the only objective of this experiment, their development in accuracy in writing was a focus too. The ultimate task, involved a final assessment where the learners had to write a business letter, which was evaluated later to test the progress of the learners. It was rewarding to note that most of them had accomplished to improve with better scores in comparison to their initial test.

This improvement, which recorded the evident change was brought about by test 2 was conducted on 14/10/2014 for G1 and 15/10/2014 for A2 slot respectively. The results indicated that the students had improved on grounds related to vocabulary, sentence structure and had adopted a formal tone in writing. Most of them, attempted to imitate the native speaker's manner of addressing the receiver. They had learnt to write with accuracy; probably the outcome of being involved in the process of drafting their assignments which at times they had to re-draft after reviews. However, problems related to capitalization and punctuations remained.

9. Conclusion

The outcome of this Task Based project was that the learners felt rewarded. They expressed that their learning was enriched when put through a practical process. Especially, in aspects which related to their workplace communication. They were on a great level motivated when they understood the purpose of their learning and its application. The other rewarding outcome was that, when those with different skills were put together, into study groups, they developed through peer support rendered during the learning and so grew their mutual respect. As an instructor, it became essential to tackle issues that related to the syntax and concord. It also, became essential to step into the shoes of an assistant, helping learners, and guide them as they analyzed their resources', to structure and organize their content and format their presentation. In addition, they had the aid of technology to gather information and to bring about an effective dialogue as they discussed and analyzed the found material. In addition, reviews and constant feedback from the teacher helped them to strive towards perfection.

It would be worthy to mention some students like Adithya Somnath, K. M. Mathew, Shane Mathew, whose writing has been used in the student samples and others like Sreejit Dutta, Aadhis Khosla and Siddhartha who developed their work further and posted their views about letter writing in their blogs that related to the format of letters and common errors. This can be looked up at - <http://lettersmeanbusiness.blogspot.com/>. While, a few others have begun posting on several other aspects that related to vocabulary and emergence of Indian English with a collection of exclusive terms used and accepted in India. It was quite an interesting to observation to see how the learners were motivated through task-based learning. This particular study reminds one of the analogy in the Bible concerning the 'potter and the clay'. In a similar fashion, the task-based language teaching adopted demonstrates how business communication can be improved if the potter decides on how to utilize the clay to fulfill its purpose.

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