CHAPTER 1

Communication is Vital

Originating from the Latin word *communis*, which means “common,” communication can be defined as a transmission of an idea or feeling so that the sender and receiver share the same, common, understanding. The most frequently occurring ways of communication are through the spoken word, the written word, visual images and body language. With the advancement of technology, computer-mediated communication has also become another popular mode of communication.

Communicating effectively is an important life skill that can influence one’s career and personal life. There have been much focus on effective communication. What exactly is effective communication? Effective communication occurs when one manages to convey his or her point(s) across to recipient(s) so that he or she understands them and the objective is achieved.

In the communication process, language is the predominant tool used to convey meaning. Language consists of words which can be in forms of symbols in written language and sounds in spoken language. In addition, one may also use signs, gestures, facial expressions, body postures and other types of body language to deliver message(s) to other people. Effective communication demands that the sender and recipient of a message have the same interpretation of the language used during communication process.

Communicating using a language that is not one’s mother tongue can be complicated, especially for a learner. Language instructors continually
seek better ways to help learners communicate effectively. Since practice makes perfect, one of the best ways to improve communication is through communication itself; as exemplified by the following quote:

Communication is a skill that you can learn. It’s like riding a bicycle or typing. If you’re willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life. (Tracy, n.d.)

The following sections explain the role of communication in helping learners to acquire and improve their language through background and history, theories, recent developments, local context as well as its application in language classes.

1.1 Background of Communication and Language Learning

The famous Chinese proverb “learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere” emphasizes the importance of learning. Learning is interconnected with language (Barton & Lee, 2013). Thus, learning a language is particularly important for us, the social beings, who need to communicate with different people on a daily basis and learn different matters continuously.

In the nineteenth century, language learning emerged with a focus on grammar-translation (Matamoros-González, Rojas, Romero, Vera-Quíñonez, & Soto, 2017). This approach required learners to learn a language by memorizing new words or grammatical structure. Learners also learned through translations in reading and writing activities (Matamoros-González et al., 2017). These language classes were teacher-centered and learners typically played a passive role.

The “grammar-translation” method received criticisms because of its emphasis on impractical grammar rules and vocabulary. Many learners could not speak the target language naturally with intelligible pronunciation. Thus, a direct method was introduced. As the name suggests, the target language was used directly in its instruction and communication in language classes (Setiyadi, 2020). Translation and the use of first language were shunned. Language learners learned to speak everyday language by imitating their instructors, who focused on phonetics and applying visual aids such as pictures and objects. Then, in the 1950s and 1960s, an audio-lingual method was introduced. With this method, language learners were
expected to learn language skills in the order of listening, speaking, reading and writing through imitation and drills, with an emphasis on grammatical accuracy (Setiyadi, 2020). Even though the direct method and the audio-lingual method emphasized the importance of listening and speaking skills as well as exposing learners to the use of target language, they were still unable to communicate using the target language in real-world contexts (Dos Santos, 2019).

Therefore, the communicative language teaching method was introduced in the last decades of the twentieth century with the goal of developing learners’ communicative competence through meaningful tasks that required learners to communicate with their partner(s) to find out what they do not know (Dos Santos, 2020). These tasks provide learners with the opportunity to practice their communication skills immediately. This approach is still dominant today, although technology has changed how communication works. Nonetheless, with the communicative approach, language learners still face problems communicating within a speech community. This means that there is no method that is able to drive learners to learn a language successfully. An eclectic approach which calls for the use of different approaches, methodologies, techniques and activities depending on lesson objectives and learners has been created (Sarifa, 2020). Apart from that, there is also a need to understand communication and language acquisition theories; these are presented in the following section.

1.2 Theories on Communication and Language Learning

Communication, whether online or face-to-face, can be effective in establishing cooperative learning and introducing a new topic (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Smaldino, Lowther, & Russell, 2019). Communication that involves the exchange of messages is able to promote second-language learning. This is supported by popular theories such as Krashen’s input hypothesis (1985), Swain’s comprehensible output hypothesis (1995) and Long’s interaction hypothesis (1996). These theories explain the way a second language is acquired and how communication can play a vital role in second-language learning.

With regard to Krashen’s input hypothesis (1981, 1996), Krashen claims that language can be acquired by receiving input at \( i + 1 \), where \( i \) is the existing proficiency level, while \( +1 \) is the language just beyond the
current level. Since every learner is an individual who acquires linguistic competence at a different pace, Krashen (1996) suggests natural communicative input in the design of a curriculum to ensure that each learner can obtain $i + 1$ input. Therefore, communicative tasks which contain natural communicative input should be included in a language class.

In the affective hypothesis, Krashen (1987) argues that comprehensible input will not lead to language acquisition if the input is filtered out before reaching the learner’s language acquisition device (LAD) in the brain. The filtering or “mental block” may happen when the learner is anxious, stressed, or has low self-confidence or low motivation (Krashen, 1987). Learners who have a low affective filter are believed to be better at learning a second language as they are more motivated, less embarrassed to make mistakes and tend to interact more with others to acquire more comprehensible input (Krashen, 1987).

Emphasizing the idea of comprehensible input at level $i + 1$, Krashen (1994) has argued that one-way comprehensible input is the only requirement for one to acquire a second language. However, Swain (1995) does not find Krashen’s idea of comprehensible input to work for her students and believes that comprehensible output is also important in the learning of a second language. She asserts that output can help learners to enhance fluency, notice the gaps in their linguistic knowledge and afford learners the opportunities to try new or unfamiliar language forms and structures, as well as receive feedback from others about their use of language. In other words, comprehensible output enables learners to convey messages with some challenges in producing the second language as they notice their linguistic problems from the feedback of the listener. Noticing a problem “pushes” the learner to revise his or her output and consequently may be led into “a more syntactic processing mode than might occur in comprehension” (Swain & Lapkin, 1995, p. 2b).

Following Swain’s comprehensible output hypothesis, Lightbrown and Spada (2013), Long (1996), Pica (1994) and others postulate the interactionist view of second-language acquisition which recognizes the role of two-way interactions. They believe in the importance of learners being given the chance to negotiate meaning through clarification in meaningful activities. Communicative tasks such as discussion is one of the meaningful activities that can enable learners to work together to negotiate meaning for mutual understanding by modifying and restructuring the discourse when difficulties in comprehending message occurs (Guo, 2020; Pica, 1994). Modification and restructuring include simplifying linguistics,
repeating, clarifying and doing conformation checks (Ariza & Hancock, 2003). According to Long’s interaction hypothesis (1996), when learners negotiate meaning, their comprehension of the input increases and they usually take cognizance of salient linguistic features. This is deemed beneficial to the learning of a second language.

Generally, communication which encourages two-way interactions entails “comprehensible input” which enables one to understand the message, and “output” which enables one to express and negotiate meaning (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996; Swain, 1995). The input and output produced during interactions provide learners with opportunities to be exposed to the target language and practice what they have learned about the language. Group discussion is one of the interactive tasks often carried out in classrooms and meetings at the workplace. It is deemed to be more interesting than listening to a teacher’s presentation, as it gives students the opportunity to be challenged to think about the topic and share new ideas (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Smaldino, Lowther, & Russell, 2019).

1.3 Communication, Language Learning & Technology

There have been many changes in language classrooms. The most obvious include the blackboards that have turned white and have now even become computerized and smart. We have more technical tools such as projectors, LCD screens and computers in the classrooms too. With the advent of the Internet, there is an even bigger shift in language learning and communication styles.

Technology is playing a crucial role in the way language is learned. It offers learners more flexibility and freedom in learning at their own pace, comfort and convenience (Bower, 2017). With the vast information available online, learners can even acquire any useful skills they wish to be equipped with on their own. In addition, learners are empowered to monitor their progress in learning. Therefore, it is not surprising that technology has been found to enhance learners’ motivation and progress (Bower, 2017; Coker, 2020).

With the rapid changes in technology, the learning process is transformed (Coker, 2020). Computer-mediated communication and “new” forms of language have emerged. Discussions can now be held face-to-face
or online. The potential of online discussions and the differences between face-to-face and online discussions will be further discussed in Chap. 3.

Although technology has opened doors to many learning opportunities, the mere application of technology itself is not found to be fruitful. A recent study showed that teachers, especially in Finland, do not see the value and benefits of using digital tools (Lavonen, 2017). This shows that the use of digital tools alone may not reap positive outcomes. There is a need to understand the good practices that should come hand in hand with the integration of technical tools in lessons (Lavonen, 2017). Moreover, language learning is dependent on human factors or individual differences (see Chap. 4).

Taking Malaysia as an example, the next section explains the language learning scenario in Asia, where much focus is placed on the learning of English as a second language (ESL).

1.4 COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

In Malaysia, emphasis has always been put on teaching English as a second language (ESL). This emphasis is heightened by globalization, which has encouraged the use of English as an international language (McKay, 2018). English language has also become very important in enabling Malaysians to access sources in critical fields such as science, technology, trade, business, commerce and media, and to be more competitive in the knowledge-based global society (Asha, 2012). Apart from that, the need to increase the command of English language among citizens is also due to the worrying scenario that English language standard in Malaysia has deteriorated (Sani, 2018).

In attempts to improve English language proficiency among ESL learners, the Malaysian government has introduced a policy of “Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language”. Some initiatives under this policy include allocating an extra period for English language lessons in schools and implementing Dual Language programme (DLP) which allows the use of English in the teaching and learning of science and mathematics in selected schools and classes (Suliman, Nor & Yunos, 2017).
Despite various efforts, Malaysian graduates and school-leavers still face difficulty getting jobs due to their poor English communication skills and a lack of critical thinking (Samuel, Tee, & Symaco, 2017; Singh, 2018). The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has thus developed “The Roadmap for English Language Education” (2015–2025) to plan for effective ways to improve the standards of English language among Malaysians (MoE, 2015). The Common European Framework of References (CEFR) is employed due to its international standard and its focus on producing learners who can communicate and interact in English (Sani, 2018).

The need for better communication skills and collaborative skills is further sparked by the Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0) (A. S. Md. Abdul Haseeb, 2018). IR 4.0 refers to the digital transformation through digitization and automation (Götz & Jankowska, 2017). With IR 4.0, many entry-level jobs will be replaced by robotics. To face the challenges posed by IR 4.0, we need to become more specialized, in possession of critical thinking and equipped with sufficient digital and data literacy; apart from good communication and collaborative skills (A. S. Md. Abdul Haseeb, 2018).

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has long recognized the importance of ICT or the use of technology in education through various projects such as Smart Schools, Educational web TV, MySchoolNet, Frog VLE and Google classrooms. Schools are also equipped with Internet access and computers to help learners to learn more effectively and be prepared to be the future workforce of the technology-driven world, albeit some rural areas still waiting for these facilities. All these efforts show that Malaysia recognizes the importance of integrating technology in lessons.

However, are teachers and students ready for the change? Most of the students who are digital natives are (Rahman, 2016). Based on a study by the United Nations, Malaysia is the champion among the developing countries and number four worldwide for the proportion of digital natives—online users with more than 5 years of experience. Therefore, “If we (educators) teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow.” Language educators need to think like their learners and design meaningful learning experiences for them to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century (Amin Embi as cited in Rahman, 2016).

Generally, teachers are found to be competent in basic ICT skills and other internet-related applications (Umar & Mohamad Tarmizi Mohd Yusof, 2014). Thus, utilizing technology to promote communication in language lessons is achievable, though there are still concerns on the
availability of suitable and sufficient devices, speed of internet connection, the time factor, appropriate strategies, etc. With pushed change from the global Covid-19 pandemic, it is high time that we equipped ourselves with a better understanding of the use of technology in communication and language learning.

The next section explores the potential of discussion activity in promoting communication and language learning among learners and the changes brought about by technology.

### 1.5 Communication in Group Discussions

In language classes, one of the most popular communication tasks is discussion. This is to be expected since students usually like to socialize and interact with each other (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; So, Choi, Lim, & Xiong, 2012). Therefore, discussions can be effective in generating interest, introducing a new topic and establishing cooperative learning (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Smaldino, Lowther, & Russell, 2019). Collaborative discussion is found to be more interesting than listening to teacher’s presentation and it also gives students the opportunity to be challenged to think about the topic and share new ideas (Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Smaldino, Lowther, & Russell, 2019). Apart from that, discussions can also enhance learners’ second-language learning proficiency (Loewen & Wolff, 2016; Saaed & Mohammed, 2020; Mehrabi & Homapour, 2018) especially when the situation encourages low filter or less anxiety among learners (Krashen, 1981). Discussion is therefore one of the main elements for successful teaching and learning (Pollock & Squire, 2001). Its importance as a learning strategy is widely acknowledged (Ellis & Calvo, 2004; Loewen & Wolff, 2016; Salomonsson, 2020).

Discussions can serve three important roles for participants: to ask for information, clarify matters and share information (Stapa, 2007). Discussions are also a form of social practice which is believed to be an essential part of learning, since the presence of human beings means having to engage in all sorts of different pursuits which require interactions and having to learn from social practices (Davis, 2013; Salomonsson, 2020). The exchange of ideas or communication that takes place during discussions can promote second-language learning. This is supported by theories such as Krashen’s input hypothesis (1985), Swain’s comprehensible output hypothesis (1995) and Long’s interaction hypothesis (1996). These theories (explained in Sect. 1.2) explain how discussions can play an
important role in second-language learning based on a hypothesis of how a second language is acquired.

However, not all learners have the chance to talk during discussions. Discussions in a language class are usually led and dominated by teachers (Warschauer, 1997; Williams, 2001). In other words, learners’ participation in discussions is limited by teacher’s talk. Therefore, the current trend is for learners to play the central role in discussions, whereas language teachers are positioned as facilitators (Brown, 2003; Evans, Ward, Shaw, Walker, Knight, & Sutherland-Smith, 2020). Apart from teacher’s talk, the discussion settings can also affect learners’ participation; as reported by Chew and Ng (2016, 2021), Fitze (2006), and Warschauer (1996).

In an attempt to encourage learners to play a more active role in class discussions, learner–learner discussions are encouraged. Learner–learner discussions refer to interactions between or among learners in pairs or in groups (Mathew, 2020). Peer interaction has been analyzed and found to be effective in affording language learning (Loewen & Wolff, 2016; Salomonsson, 2020). There are a number of benefits in promoting learner–learner discussion: firstly, it creates a community of peers and create opportunities for collaboration, scaffolding and social construction of meaning (Rovai, 2001); in addition, learner–learner interaction may make learners more satisfied and interact more frequently (Loewen & Wolff, 2016; Mathew, 2020; Salomonsson, 2020). With more production from learners, learners’ attitude and achievement may become more positive (Sherman & Klein, 1995). Based on this premise, language classes should be designed to promote interactions between learners. Teachers meanwhile should play the role of facilitators.

With the advent of technology, discussions are not limited to face-to-face settings. Nowadays, discussions can also be held online through networked devices. Online discussions differ from face-to-face discussions in that they provide an opportunity for ongoing conversation between a group of users who can enjoy more unrestrained and flexible participation (Hsu, 2020; Saaed & Mohammed, 2020). With no limitation by class hours and physical classroom, online discussions are widely appreciated and commonly used (Hsu, 2020; Zhao & Lei, 2017; Hew & Cheung, 2012). It is also believed to be useful in developing learners’ critical thinking, teamwork and reflection (Piskurich, 2003; Zhao & Lei, 2017). Online discussion can occur through e-mail exchanges, bulletin boards, forums, chat rooms, social media, instant messaging etc. Most discussion groups
are text-based and allow users to insert website links, images, audio and even video files.

Figure 1.1 is an example of online discussions held at forummotion.com whereby forums can be created for free.

In online forums, participants can communicate and discuss about different topics by posting their messages online. The messages are usually presented in chronological order and look conversational. This serves as a good platform to share ideas, discuss important issues in depth and foster relationships through social conversation (Chaka, 2020). However, such linear discussions lack coherence and may be difficult for consensus, resolution or conclusion to be reached (Chaka, 2020; Rochat, Hauw, Gür, & Seifert, 2018). Apart from that, online text-based discussions may also be unappealing to those who lack familiarity with technological tools and have limited reading and writing skills.

Further discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of computer-mediated communication compared to face-to-face discussions are presented in Chap. 3.
Chapter 1 explores the importance of communication in language acquisition by looking at developments in learning approaches and the reasons why communicative language teaching is popular. In addition, the relevant theories which support the role of communication or interaction in language learning are discussed. The important theories include Krashen’s input hypothesis, affective filter hypothesis, Swain’s comprehensible output hypothesis and Long’s interaction hypothesis. The changes and development brought about by technology in communication and language learning are also explored and linked to Malaysian context. Lastly, the potential of discussion activity as a communicative task in a second-language classroom is highlighted.

Before moving on to compare discussions held online and face-to-face, the communication processes that occur in discussions need to be understood so that they can be facilitated more effectively. Models of the communication process are described in the following chapter.

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