

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SKILL: A LEARNER-CENTERED LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Productive skills of English language have become must-learnt skills for every graduate and professional student who aspires to attain successful career as well as employment. The productive skills like *Speaking* and *Writing* can be developed by activating learners' listening skills and through a variety of activities. The changes in the language teaching methodologies have to be changed to meet the expectations of the learners as well as today's employers. Teaching English language should be learner-centered and goal oriented to develop learners' skills but not the teachers'. The language teachers should shift teaching methodologies from teacher-centered/lecture-based teaching methods to learner-centered/skill-oriented teaching methods. The paper aims at highlighting the learner-centered teaching practices carried out in the English language classroom. The strategies or practices result in enabling the learners' communicative abilities in speaking and writing in a constant manner. The need of the hour is to teach English as a means of communication and a skill but not as a subject.

Introduction:

Learning to speak or communicate in English is to accommodate ourselves among the world of people where they are from various cultures with different perceptions and abilities. It is a must have skill for the professional students like engineering. "Despite our diversity and difference, We share the idea of a common, international professional academic identity, which is expressed in the way that, from our different backgrounds, we come together in faculties, projects, and conferences across the world. At a general level, we are all involved in doing the 'same thing', and share the same purpose of teaching English." (Holliday, p.2) One should learn to be adaptable and put up oneself to correspond among people with multifaceted talents and languages. Employers require the young minds with potential versatile cleverness including educators and employers from every part of the globe in the academic institutions. The productive language teaching strategies have to be applied to teach English as a skill. The

language teachers, who teach English at regional schools and colleges, need training in teaching-learning methods and strategies.

The Changing Scenario of ELT in India:

English education was introduced in India in the middle of the 19th century. The changing scenario of English language teaching throughout the world has resulted due to the advancement of computer and communication technologies. In 1917, the Calcutta University Commission took note of the rapid decline in academic standards in all subjects specially English and stressed the importance of the study of English as part of general education in India. According to the commission some of the causes of the deterioration in the quality of the teaching of English were lack of contact with teachers who spoke English as their mother tongue, unsuitability of the lecture method and a lack of systematic instruction in spoken English.

Communicative English language involves the language learners and it also aids in developing interpersonal communication abilities among its users. Using training based communicative language activities (which include conversations between and among peers, small and large group discussions, pair and team activities and individual and collective presentations and demonstrations) can support the learners. Communicative English broadly means English for communication. It means use of English (in speech/in writing) in a variety of situations with a variety of people as required by one's day-to-day living or as demanded by the nature of one's own job in Govt. or non- Govt. organizations. (Neena & Dash M., p 71 & 72)

Statement of the problem:

The nature and need of English language teaching has been principally recognized for the beneficial of trade and commerce besides the vast fields of science and technological fields of research in and around many developed nations. The teaching techniques and strategies have also been designed to meet the different requirements of a variety of categories of the language learners. In fact, the teaching of English now aims at developing (in the students) the communication skills. The Radhakrishnan Commission (1948) recommended the continuance of the study of English. "English should be studied in high schools and in the universities in order that we might keep ourselves in touch with the living stream of ever-growing knowledge." According to The Kunzru Committee (1955), the techniques of teaching and learning methods of the English language should meet the nuts and bolts of language proficiency at the professional/graduate level (university level), through which the learners can be employable.

The contemporary professional education system (of India) and professional students (engineering students) aim at the mastery of speaking skills, especially in the regional backgrounds. The learners need to focus on consequent evaluation and development of oral skills/spoken language proficiency. "...Oral skills have hardly been neglected in EFL/ESL courses (witness the huge number of conversation and other speaking course books in the market)..." (Richards, 1990). The corporate as well as public employers look or demand fresh graduates who are good at communication skills in English in both spoken and written. The language teachers and syllabus or course books try to make use of a variety of language teaching strategies – but they fail to produce effective communicators except distinctions in pupils' degrees.

Teacher-educators' Observations:

Pattison (1962) takes note of the fact that though the All Indian Seminar on the Teaching of English in secondary schools held at Nagpur in 1957 setup the objective that within a period of six years of the high school course the pupils should be enabled to attain a working knowledge of English...”Pattison is at a loss to find how one progresses from a working knowledge of English (i.e. 2,500 essential words) to these pieces of literature. According to the recommendation of the Official Language Commission (1956), English should be taught as “a language of comprehension rather than as a literary language so as to develop in the students learning it a faculty of comprehending writings in the English language, more specially those relating to the subject matter of their specialized fields of study.”

The Study Group I (1965) has emphasized the importance of first rate research on the teaching of English in India and has also taken note of the fact that the younger lecturers are almost as incorrect in their use of English as the pupils themselves. A talk given by R. E. Underwood, the British Council expert, at the Nagpur session of the All India English Teachers' Conference. He discussed – university education in India and identified three main problem areas. They are inter-connected and concerned:

- a. The college students
- b. The college text
- c. The college teacher

Underwood went on criticizing the blind practices of teaching-learning techniques and described each one of the above briefly as mentioned below:

The average college student is though aware of the role and need of English, fails to understand spoken or written English, fails to write acceptable English and very slow at reading. But he/she poses problems to the teacher and causes various solutions to be proposed in dealing with such underachievers in language learning. It is may be due to the textbook(s) (The average college text) design which may aim to meet two different sets of students – the good ex-English medium (ex-vernacular medium) and the average-to-poor (ex-English medium) ex-vernacular medium. And it contains passages to develop reading skills and contains no glossary and no text-based remedial language exercises. Then the average college lecturer studies hard for M.A. in literature and unwilling and unprepared to teach language, prefers lecture to the dialogue, reluctant to prepare his own language teaching materials and may not speak or write correct English him/herself.

Most of the language teachers at fundamental level as well as college level academic institutions may agree Underwood's observations of teaching and learning practices in Indian public academic institutions. They have still been being practiced by many of the second language teachers. “In hundreds of classrooms in India today, Shakespeare, the first poet in the world ...is perishing ...For ...not being understood.” Says Nagarajan who has gathered a number of interesting excerpts from the annotated editions of the plays of Shakespeare published for Indian students...

As English has been being taught as a literary form in most of the Indian classrooms, and as English is said to be as the library language, the English language has been received and learnt as a subject and as part of academic curriculum by most of the learners. The learners develop no language skills – no receptive skills or productive skills developed by the professional graduates. Developing oral and written communication (productive) skills is the need of the hour, because the contemporary employers require the fresh graduates with the productive language skills besides multiple intelligences. Due to the stage fright, language learners often do not try to come

forward to communicate or be part of language activities. The English language learners should grab the opportunity to boost his or her communication skills with specific result-yielding tools and strategies.

Some of the productive language teaching practices being followed by the researcher is highlighted below:

The teaching of English methods has to be changed and the teachers should design their own language teaching materials based on the textual lessons besides examples from real life situations. There are many possible strategies and activities which can be practiced to enrich the productive skills of the English language learners and engage a number of 50-60 students.

1. To deal with a textual lessons in the language classroom:

- The teacher has to prepare some lesson-based discussion questions
- The students can be organized in the class and asked to sit in pairs or as small groups and discuss for 5-10 minutes
- Allow the learners to skim(read) the lesson for 10-15 minutes
- Learners can be allowed to identify the tough words and find underline
- Permit them to use their mobile dictionaries to write down the meanings of the underlined words
- Firstly the learners can be given lesson's paragraphs and read and explain in their knowledgeable way.
- The teacher as a facilitator has to give the key ideas of each paragraph after the student's explanation and at the end summarize the lesson.
- The language teachers can plan each lesson and spend 4 to 5 hours (periods) to deal with each lesson.
- Exercises followed by the lesson to be done by the students in the class & the teacher should discuss the answers and make the learners write more lively example sentences related the grammar topic or vocabulary building.

The students can be facilitated time and resources for demonstrating their ideas orally or in the written form.

2. Academic institutions should consider using some facilities in modern/contemporary classrooms to enhance more learning flexibility. For example...

- Using mobile phones or PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) – which lends a hand in learning quickly by every individual. (PDAs are user-friendly accessories).
- Independent learning is possible with PDAs and learner autonomy can be developed and learning, unlearning and relearning.

3. The role of the teacher will be different from the traditional classroom methods when teaching English in this method:

- The language teacher has to prepare language comprehension questions based on the lesson or topic he/she is going to teach and students can be asked to prepare answers for the questions and present their answers to the class.
- The rest of the students can be allowed to prepare and ask some possible questions to the presenters based on their presentation.
- All the students can be engaged in learning the language and teachers' tasks can be made easy and teacher can be a facilitator.

4. English language classes should aim in learning the four language skills:

- An oral presentation and feedback session can also be planned after dealing with the entire lesson.
- The learners will get a chance of exploring their knowledge of the lesson(s).
- Identifying new and interesting words from the lesson based on the theme and learners can be asked to develop a creative essay or story and present it to the class. (the choice of vocabulary can be left to the learners)
- Gap filling exercises can also be developed based on every lesson.
- Teachers can facilitate some time for the learners to express learners own experiences related to the theme of the lesson(s) if any. It makes the learners understand and remember the lesson or topic easily.

5. Many possible vocabulary building and comprehension exercises can be made by the teachers as well as students:

- Learners' comprehension levels can be tested orally as well as in written mode while dealing with textual lessons in the language classrooms.
- Exercises on grammar, vocabulary, comprehension and many language games can be designed by the experienced language teachers.
- Learners' learning as well as academic performance will be augmented when they are engaged and their performance in examinations will also be resulted exceptionally.

As the statement goes "...the teaching of English now aims at developing (in the students) the communication skills." a language is a communication tool where the learners aspire to explore language productive skills to be effective communicators to meet the expectations and requirements of employers besides the society. The Radhakrishnan Commission (1948) recommended the continuance of the study of English. "English should be studied in high schools and in the universities in order that we might keep ourselves in touch with the living stream of ever-growing knowledge." Advances in discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and corpus analysis in recent years have revealed a great deal about the nature of spoken discourse and how it differs from written discourse (McCarthy and Carter 1997). These differences reflect the different purposes for which spoken and written language are used. Jones (1996, 12) comments;

In speaking and listening we tend to be getting something done, exploring ideas, working out some aspect of the world, or simply being together. In writing we may be creating a record, commenting events or moments to paper.

More Ideas from the Expert Teacher Educators:

English has to be practiced to communicate in a variety of needs or settings. The language used in an informal conversations or settings totally differs from the language which is used in workplaces or professional settings. The both again are different from its use in demonstrations or learners' individual presentations.

Speaking in a variety of contexts or according to the situations in a foreign language is an uneven process or problem which most of the present professional students encounter. "Research has also thrown considerable light on the complexity of spoken interaction in either a first or second language." Richards. Some important features of spoken discourse were also proposed by

Luoma in 2004. *English language teaching in Indian schools and colleges should have a basic purpose of developing learners' speaking and writing skills.* The one, who is going to be part of communication in global contexts, should need to enhance the above mentioned industrious skills, for example, the students of engineering students. The graduates aim at employment immediately after their graduation and they may be part of organizations throughout the globe. Richards states that “numerous attempts have been made to classify the functions of speaking in human interaction.” For example, Brown and Yule’s (1983) interactional functions of speaking (in which it serves to establish and maintain social relations), and transactional functions (which focus on the exchange of information) made an effective classification of speaking.

The contemporary researchers besides many professors/language teachers or teacher-educators use the expanded three part version of Brown and Yule’s framework (after Jones 1996 and Burns 1998) – *talk as interaction, talk as transaction and talk as performance* in their planning and designing lectures or classroom materials.

In the English language classrooms, ongoing conversations which aim at the speakers and how they present and organize their talk or information (talk as interaction). The students should also develop a kind of polite and interpersonal communication which will be essential for them to adapt themselves at workplace and for maintaining formal communication links between the company and its customers (talk as transaction).

In interactions “... talk is associated with other activities. For example, students may be engaged in hand-on activities (e.g. in a science lesson) to explore concepts associated with floating and sinking. In this type of spoken language students and teachers usually focus on meaning or on talking their way to understanding.” Jones 1996, 14.

Most of the learners face a lot of troubles during the education period – they can be asked to present/perform/demonstrate as part of their academic tasks. That will help them to develop their performance or presentation skills even after their education and (talk as performance) that lends a hand in doing their projects and demonstration well to lead successful academic and professional careers. Pair and small group talks (activities), demonstrations, discussions, hand-on activities and many such practical activities which involve learners enrich productive language skills.

As Steven Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* states, “Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best in people. But it takes time and patience...” The language teachers should motivate the young learners and go to the class with unfailing lesson plan and language teaching materials which can reach the learners’ standards to meet their expectations.

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