SPEAKING ACTIVITIES FOR ESL LEARNERS OF ODIA VERNACULAR SCHOOLS: PLANNING, MANAGEMENT AND EVALUATION

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CONTEXT

On 17 February, 2010 an MoU was signed between the British Council and the Government of Odisha to introduce the Connecting Classrooms programme in the state. Twenty-one schools from the cities of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar were involved in the programme. These schools had been partnered with schools in Wales, UK and the motto of the programme was to prepare the Odia vernacular school children to take their place in the 21st century. Today the programme is no more in place. In fact this type of token gesture to give an international exposure to our children by the government, school administrators and curriculum designers has failed to address the problem of passive learning by Odia vernacular students. The tongue-tied vernacular Odia students fail to communicate in English language. Now the genuine question is: "What is the solution?" Here are some responses to this question:

- "We require teachers' active participation in the different ESL programmes and an overhaul in the entire curricula of vernacular Odia schools." – Sujata Sen, Director, British Council, East India.
- "This requires evolving different strategies for different learners. For example, encouraging speaking up in class may be important for some children, while for others it may be learning to listen to others." – National Curriculum Framework 2005, NCERT (24)
- "Motivation is required with some specific Speaking Activities to supplement the existing curricula of the schools" – Sri Lalindra Amat, ELTI, Bhubaneswar.
- "The Odia medium student should be provided with certain expository activities by the schools which will be instrumental for that required exposure." – Sri Sanatan Panda, OES, Deputy Director, Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA), Bhubaneswar.
- "The curriculum should be functional" – Dr. Satyakam Mishra, Ex-President, Board of Secondary Education, Odisha.

The major shift from knowledge to skill-based education has given rise to the urgent need of the vernacular students to increase their fluency in English. Therefore, there is the need of some new type of Speaking Activities in the existing curricula which can cover up the emerging problem of passive learning by Odia-English learners. According to Qaiser Zoha Alam, "these are generally functional, communicational or notional and should be prepared bearing in mind the fact that English is now chiefly a 'service' subject and a library language. There is greater

concern now for the learner's needs: it is a case of shift of emphasis from the subject to the learner."(8) Unfortunately, "most states of India refuse to move beyond the good old structural approach of the 1950s and the 1960s, while they stress for communication skills to help the learner for an upward movement. This, in reality, reveals the paradoxical situations of an English language education which would further place the rural learner in a very disadvantaged situation." This is what says Rama Meganathan in an article submitted to British Council, India. Following a government resolution passed in August 2009, vernacular-medium schools now have the option to turn into semi-English in the primary sections in Mumbai. This means the institution will be allowed to teach Science and Mathematics in English, while the rest of the subjects will be instructed in the language followed by the school, such as Hindi or Marathi. The government's decision to allow this right from Std-I is an excellent idea. This type of idea has to be carried forward to make learners of all levels to communicate better in English to face the competitive world.

Planning Speaking Activities: Various task-based approaches (for example, Prabhu 1987, Long and Crookes 1991) have to be planned. These approaches are somewhat disparate, but they share a common idea: giving learners tasks to transact, rather than items to learn, provides an environment which best promotes the natural language learning process. By engaging in meaningful activities, such as problem-solving, discussions, or narratives, the learner's inter-language system is stretched and encouraged to develop.

The National Curriculum Framework, 2005, says that "learning tasks that are designed to ensure that children will be encouraged to seek out knowledge from sites other than the textbook, in their own experience, in the experiences of people at home and in the community, in libraries and other sites outside the school, communicate the philosophy that learning and knowledge are to be sought out, authenticated and thereby constructed, and that neither the textbook nor the teacher is an authority." (20) It implies that without involving the learners with issues outside their surrounding and comprehension, the trainers should involve them with their own surrounding and life. For example, topics like *Raja Sankranti*, *Konark Temple* and *Mahanadi*, etc. will help the learners take interest to speak and perform under certain interactive conditions. These are the topics which the vernacular Odia learners feel as their own and therefore, for these topics they will be naturally interested to deliver.

Managing Speaking Activities: The challenge for a task-based pedagogy, therefore, is to choose, sequence and implement tasks in ways that will combine a focus on meaning with a focus on form. Skehan (1996) has developed a theoretical framework for task-based teaching that claims to balance the development of fluency with accuracy and inter-language restructuring. Willis (1996) has produced a detailed practical framework for the task-based classroom in which learners are led through cycles of task planning, performance, repetition and finally, comparison with native speaker norms. There is already strong empirical support for some of these ideas. Foster and Skehan (1996) have shown that giving learners time to plan before they begin a task significantly increases the complexity, accuracy and fluency of the language they use, and that these effects increase in relation to the cognitive difficulty of the task.

To manage the task-based, Speaking Activities, the English and Foreign Language University (EFLU), Hyderabad maintains two broad categories of curricula or syllabi which can be discussed here:

- The Situational Syllabus- The syllabus designer has to identify situations (for example, *at the bank, at the post office, etc.*) where the learners are likely to use the language, analyse the transactions they are likely to make in those situations, and give them the language they need to successfully perform those transactions. This type of syllabus is especially useful for vernacular Odia students who use language in limited situations and for specific purposes. The learners will be motivated to study because it is based on their needs.

- The Functional Syllabus- In this syllabus, the criteria for the selection and organisation of the content is functions. A list of functions is made and graded in terms of its usefulness to the learner, and the language necessary for performing these functions is provided to the learner. These function oriented tasks are listed in the following page :

Activity	Function(s) [1]	Standard(s) [2]
Role Play	proper body language	P/S/SS
Picture Reading	skill to establish judgment	S/SS
Dumb Charade	non-verbal communication skill	S/SS
On the Spot	readiness to speak	S/SS
Interactive Stories	proper response to questions	P/S
Micro Presentation	group behaviour	S/SS
Story- Building	skill to analyse situations	S/SS
Debating	skill to establish judgment	S/SS
Crossfire	skill to agree and disagree	SS
Press Conference	public exposure	SS
Public Speaking / Extempore	skill to handle stage-fright	S/SS
Instant Translation	proper use of vocabulary	S/SS
Forum	group behaviour	SS
Description (objects, process, etc.)	analytical skill	S/SS
Brainstorming	problem-solving skill	SS

These activities are supposed to be conducted with clear-cut objectives. The teacher has to be one of the participants to provide a real-life situation to the language learners. Again, stress must be given on the overall outcome of the language than the form of the language. A number of researchers (Prabhu 1987, Krashen 1985) have stressed that language is acquired when attention is focused not on language form, but on the meaning of messages.

[1] Here 'function' implies the learning outcome of conducting a particular activity in terms of skill.
[2] Here 'P' stands for 'Primary', 'S' stands for 'Secondary' and 'SS' stands for 'Senior Secondary'.

Evaluating Speaking Activities: "Language evaluation need not be limited to 'achievement' with respect to particular syllabi, but must be reoriented to measurement of *language proficiency*." (NFG, NCERT, Teaching English, 15). "Evaluation in case of effective classroom teaching should include better student-student interaction, providing more opportunities for skills, practice, and devising more efficient evaluation procedures." (Rama 1997) Therefore, Speaking Activities should be evaluated with assignment of certain grades to different areas of the performer. Such areas can be body language of the student, language proficiency of the student and the content of the speech of the student, etc. All these areas are to be graded.

For example, one may assign 'C' grade for 'Very Poor', 'B' grade for 'Poor', 'B+' grade for 'Average', 'A' grade for 'Good', 'A+' grade for Very Good' and 'O' grade for 'Excellent' performance.

RESOURCES

Many books and articles on Speaking Activities for ESL Learners of Vernacular Schools have been published during the recent years. A discussion of some prominent among them may be undertaken here.

English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad, in its *Post-Graduate Certificate in the Teaching of English* has published a lot of literature on Speaking Activities for ESL Learners. The Block II of the "Materials for the Teaching of English" under the chapter *Types of Syllabus and Materials* specifically deals with the topic. It focuses both on the designing and implementation aspects of the curriculum for Speaking Activities.

IGNOU in its B Ed. Course has two specific books on Speaking Activities for ESL Learners. One such book is *Instructional Planning in Teaching of English* and the other one is *Curriculum Planning.* These books assume special importance as they focus on the vernacular students those who are poor communicators in English.

Under the patron of British Council, a number of articles and books have been published in the recent past focusing on Speaking Activities for ESL Learners. A few examples are here. *Issues in the implementation of Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL): A Case Study of Two States in India* was published by Garnet Education UK, in 2009. This article emphasizes the matter related to the problems and practices of young English learners. The article is edited by Dr. Rama Mathew and Dr. S. Pani. Another book, *English Language Teaching: Principles and Practice,* edited by V Saraswati and published by Orient Blackswan in 2004, looks at the practice of ELT from an Indian perspective. It has a training-oriented approach and can be used as a manual by teacher trainers, students at the undergraduate and graduate levels in B.Ed. and allied programmes. Another important work, *Primary Languages in Practice: A Guide to Teaching and Learning,* addresses an impressive range of relevant issues regarding what effective practice involves with Speaking Activities for ESL Learners and how it can be fostered. The authors wisely position their discussion of these issues in the context of overall school improvement efforts, the changes that are occurring in the primary curriculum, and overall national policies, not least the 'every child matters' agenda. The book is edited by Jane Jones and Angela McLachlan, and published by McGraw-Hill International.

English Language Teaching In India: Problems and Issues is a very useful book in this regard which is edited by Qaiser Zoha Alam and published by Atlantic Publishers & Distributors in 1998. The book introduces some of the major areas that students and teachers of English in India should understand in order to follow a scientific approach.

David Nunan's book *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1989 provides a balanced introduction to both the theoretical and practical aspects of communicative task design, and is aimed at all second and foreign language teachers who want to develop their own tasks and adopt or adapt those of others.

Second Language Pedagogy by N.S. Prabhu is a book that goes into the details of the practices required to be followed for successfully imparting training for ESL classes. It also notes down the role of the teachers in such classes. The book was published by Oxford University Press in 1987.

Alemany Press has published the masterpiece of Stephen D. Krashen, *Inquiries & insights* in 1985 which highlights the theory of second language teaching in different problematic situations and remedial measures for those situations.

A major ELT project was conducted in India at secondary level in the year 1993 to 1998. This was a DFID (Department for International Development (UK)) funded curriculum renewal project known as the CBSE-ELT Curriculum Implementation Study. The project aimed to evaluate the different aspects of a new English curriculum with a communicative framework introduced at Class IX and X levels, in 1993 by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in about 3000 schools in the country. This project is a rich source of knowledge for carrying out research work on ESL Speaking Activities.

A Framework for Task-Based Learning by Jane Willis is a complete guide to the methodology and practice of task-based language teaching. For those who wish to adopt a genuinely learner-centred approach to their teaching, it offers an alternative framework to the "presentation, practice, production" model. The book is published by Longman (1996). It explains and exemplifies each component in a typical task-based lesson, from setting up a new task, through the task cycle, leading into language focused work.

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