

WORK BOOK (COMMUNICATIVE) - NEED OF THE HOUR

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Abstract

It is an accepted truth that language is basically for communication and it is realized as text. Further, language is more than vocabulary and grammar and the linguistic competence of a learner should lead to meaningful communication. In this context, the inability of the learners following the state syllabus in Andhra Pradesh calls for constructive support in the form of specific communicative workbooks which would aid in practicing the essential linguistic items in 'contexts'. This article suggests a few directions in bringing forth a communicative workbook which would make the learners better equipped.

The efforts to give due importance to language acquisition, specially English, and enhance learners' competence in view of its necessity in the global market, are not new to our education reforms at any level. The glaring gap between employable language skills and the educated youth's 'communication paralysis' is widening by the day, swinging the prospects of a demographic dividend into a burden!

It is worth noting that ,NCF 2005 reiterates the 'Centrality of language' in the all round development of a child, asserting that 'Proficiency in multiple languages including English should be encouraged in children'. Similarly, the UGC syllabus reform report opines "...At the individual level, English will still serve as 'the language of opportunity'; any individual seeking socio-economic advancement will find ability in English as an asset." (UGC Syllabus Reform Report, 1976-77:23)

In spite of our policy makers' reports and reforms, it is needless to say that at present, the deplorable state of affairs is such that a graduate coming out of a University is unable to express himself before an Interview board either in the aptitude or personality test to qualify himself for a reasonably good job. Where is the malady? Where are our educationists missing some of the crucial scaffolds? What could be a remedy? What can the designers of A.P State English text books do to lend a much needed support to the confused learner?

The malady lies partially with our vision which is short sighted and unhealthily competitive. To prove the point, a glance at the NCERT report (1983) would suffice. “Our Educational system is guided, controlled and directed by the Examination system to such an extent, that the energy of the teachers is single-mindedly aimed at enabling students to pass examinations and if possible, get good marks . . . A teacher’s efficiency is judged in terms of pass percentages shown by his students in the annual examination. In order to show good results, the principals and teachers are unable to resist the temptation of utilizing periods allocated to non-examination subjects for teaching examination subjects.”(cf. India Today, Feb.15, 1983) Unfortunately, this observation is true even today. Consequently, our students are not moulded to meet the needs outside the examination paper. A student who has studied English as a subject for 10 years is unable to express himself clearly in the language when the need arises in the real world. The reason is, the educators do not consider English language subject as a skill subject and do not focus on imparting language learning skills.

In this context, a study of the English curriculum in A.P state syllabus , which is undergoing healthy, need-based modifications, may be improved further with the objective of providing better communication skills from the school level itself. Mission –wise, in Andhra Pradesh the State Textbooks are seemingly designed in such a way that after the completion of the course, the students are expected to construct Discourses (oral or written) such as narratives, descriptions, essays, conversations, diary, plays, script writing, profile writing, dramas, posters, slogans, letters, etc. But the lacuna is, the course books do not allow a thorough practice in the ‘Discourses’ mentioned above. Though attempts have been made to bring the communicative approach together with the structural one, more emphasis has not been given on learner’s thorough practice. The imbalance is because of the embedded evaluation pattern.

In Andhra Pradesh, as elsewhere in India, the proficiency of ESL learners is assessed in terms of writing. In a question paper meant for measuring the language ability of the learners, 37.5% of the marks are allotted to Vocabulary and Grammar, 37.5% of the marks are allotted to comprehension and content and 25% marks are allotted to creative writing. In contrast with this, the content occupies much space in the Textbook and exercises to get thorough with Grammar and Creative writing are scarce. The inadequacies in the text books are evident in the following areas.

Writing is more than learning orthography of a language, or the grammar of the language in the written form. Neither the ability to construct meaning nor rich experience in a situation guarantees good writing in a second language. The reason is obvious; writing in a second language is not a process of constructing meaning out of experience, but constructing (or language) words from meaning, the movement or progression is from ‘meaning into words’. Sadly, the Textbook does not provide exercises in a way that improves the writing skills of a student.

Grammar is assessed in the question paper in discreet sentences and practice has also been given in discreet sentences to meet the ‘examination needs’ of the learner. The Textbook writers have given only one example for each structural item in context, and unfortunately the language teachers are not in a position to give more number of examples and exercises in context. And so, they simply follow the traditional method. This leads to the wrong notion in the minds of learners that grammar is full of rigid rules which are uninteresting and hard to grasp and assimilate. In fact this is true, if the input data is de-contextualized, isolated, unnatural and repetitive. Meeting and internalization of the grammar of a foreign language is not simply an intelligent, cognitive act. It is a highly affective one too.

Over the years, the term ‘grammar’ has meant different things to different people at different times.

“The instructional function of the language in the classroom leading on to the ‘communicative function’ outside the class should be the basis for presenting semantically and structurally related items in lively contexts.”
 (Krishnaswamy, 1981:1)

It is not possible for a foreign learner to pick up the essential devices of constructing sentences of various kinds and growing usages from the available course books which cannot give more than a casual treatment of the devices of the language and current usages. As teachers of second language users, therefore, our top priority is to help our learners engage with texts. The subject content through which language item is presented should be of direct relevance to the learner.

For example, if adjectives in degrees of comparison need to be practised, the teachers should have a number of ‘contextualized’ examples to let the learner get a better language experience. To ‘INTRODUCE DEGREE’, an example is provided here .

It’s always *quiet* in the country. Sometimes it is *quieter* than today. My grandfather says that our village is the *quietest* among all the villages in our district. (In these lines, the underlined words in italics are adjectives. But they are in different degrees of comparison.)

If a learner needs to understand that not all verbs, adjectives, etc can be modified by a degree adverbial, that ‘ Degree’ can only apply to ‘GRADABLE WORDS’, ie words whose meaning can be thought of in terms of a scale, that most pairs of words of opposite meaning, like quiet, noisy are gradable, and that there are two main kinds of gradable words: Scale words which indicate a relative position on a scale (eg large, small) and Limit words that indicate the end-point of a scale(eg black, white),the text needs to provide more than one example.

If the text crams the information that DEGREE specifies more exactly the scope and role of a gradable word, that ‘Scale of Degree’ is used to compare two things with respect to their position on a scale of degree or amount, (use comparative words taller, happier, etc or comparative phrases more careful, less careful, etc.) for an equal comparison, that to compare only two things, we use the comparative forms and when comparing more than two objects we use superlative forms, it’s not possible for the student to understand the usage . The experience would only strengthen the fear of English grammar .If, for example, the learner has some exercises on hand, like :

1. My pencil is small. I think it is ----- than Raghu’s. But, surprisingly it is the ----- of all my friends’.
2. Raghu’s drawing seems to be beautiful. But, Hari’s drawing is more beautiful than Raghu’s. And Anita’s is the most beautiful of all.

From the example and the exercises, the students can deduce the rules of usage and they are enabled to use ‘degree in context’.

In support of this suggestion, the opinions of some scholars in the field are included here. Allright (1979:167) argues for a minimal language teaching strategy. “If communication is the aim, then it should be the major element in the language teaching process. He says, “Linguistic competence is a part of communicative competence, but linguistic competence does not entail communicative competence. He adds, ‘if we focus on Linguistic skills only, or even primarily

we risk falling to deal with a large part of communicative competence, however, that may be defined”.

To accomplish the former, Allright advocates having the teacher’s management activities directed exclusively at involving the learners in ‘solving communication problems.’ In doing so language learning would take care of itself.

Henry Sweet opined that the sounds of a language having once been mastered, the main foundation of its study will be connected texts. Not words, nor sentences, but connected texts. It is only in connected texts that the language itself can be given with each word in a natural and adequate context.

So, lesser number of units with more language items and activities are the need of the hour in our L2 class rooms. From the curricula or pedagogic angle the subject matter of a language lesson is the language and not history, science or any other content subject. Content or subject matter gets included as it is not possible to present language in the abstract. But it is unfortunate that neither the textbook writers nor the L2 teachers nor the examiners give due importance to language exercises in the language classes. The curriculum forces the teacher to rush through the text to convey the information content in order to cater to the examiners who look for such information instead of the language ability of the learners. Thus, the real target which should be the linguistic skills gets deemphasized in our enthusiasm to convey the ‘information’ or ‘message’ from the prescribed texts. These materials and circumstances thus force the learners not to learn the language but to register the message in faulty English or in L1. L2 learning cannot be entirely a natural process nor can it entirely depend on the conscious learning of rules. As linguistic forms constitute the base and the fountainhead for any communicative activity, it is imperative to place emphasis on acquiring the grammar of the language before use. Contextualized exercises will interest the learners and they begin to make use of the opportunity and talk to each other in L2.

From an aesthetic, social or educational perspective it is the text which is the significant unit of language. Put simply, discourse is the way that language-either spoken or written – is used for communicative effect in the real-world situation.

The discussion reinforces the view that learning a language is more than learning of its grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. And that the ability to handle texts does not necessarily result from the ability simply to read and produce sentences. Some teachers have begun to realize the need for contextualizing the grammar to create interest for the learners. These teachers unfortunately form a negligible minority.

CONCLUSION

1. The State Government has been attempting to modify Textbooks often when it feels any modification needs. So, taking the opinions of interested teachers the state government must take the responsibility to design a workbook.
2. There are so many workbooks readily available in market do not suit our learners’ needs. Hence, The workbook must be Textbook specific, i.e. the workbook should be available with the textbook and it is compulsory complement to the textbook.
3. The workbook should be designed in a way that the learners are provided a challenge right from the beginning by giving them a variety of tasks which inspire them to greater efforts.
4. The activities could be designed according to the intellectual background and cognitive maturity of the learners, based on the structural item that they have to learn.

5. The difficulty level of the class room exercises would be so pitched that they are neither too easy nor too difficult but appropriately challenging. It is thus ensured that the learners get a sense of pride and satisfaction.

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