

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Let me first congratulate you on bringing out our journal that is rich in content for the benefit of teachers and researchers. The September-October issue carries two informative articles - one by N.S. Prabu on 'Re-thinking Language Pedagogy' and the other on 'The 'Scientific Language Teaching' by Richard Smith.

As one who has been a teacher at different levels and also a teacher trainer for a number of years, I would like to share my thoughts and experiences with our readers on the issues raised by the two learned authors.

It is true, as Prabhu says, comprehension and speaking cannot go hand in hand in L2. But at the same time we cannot forget our children even at the kindergarten level do easily learn to use certain expressions such as Good morning, Thank you, Please etc; and parents too want their children learn to speak English right from the kindergarten stage. Thanks to the use of technology, children may now quite easily be exposed to a quite a lot of listening experiences in English through well-graded exercises in podcasts. They would help them to speak English albeit sometimes incorrectly. But the point is even young children do learn to speak using at least limited vocabulary after their listening.

Our language pedagogy may be based on the theories of the Behaviourist school of Psychology or the Cognitive school. For a number of years it was the former that influenced the teaching of second languages like English in our country. Based on it the structural syllabus was introduced for the teaching of English in our schools. It listed the English structures to be taught - listed as 'teaching items' - in each class or grade. W.S. Allen's *Living English Structures* and A.S. Hornby's *A Guide to Pattern and Usage in English* were of great help in framing the structural syllabus. Of course, it led to most teachers providing only mechanical drill to their students in the use of structures. What was known as the Substitution method came to be used resulting in the pupils learning the structures without understanding the meanings. In Chennai we had F.L. Billows, English studies Officer - British Council, who, through his Madras Language Teaching Campaign (MELT), trained quite a large number of teachers in using the structural syllabus. Later Alan Maley, too, of the British Council, brought out a number of lesson plans for the teaching of important structures in English

As opposed to the Behaviourist school, the Cognitive school psychologists such as Piaget, Bruner and Noam Chomsky—just to mention a few—are of opinion it is the *mind* that plays an important role in learning. It processes the information from any activity taking place in some situation or context and, as a result, thorough understanding follows. This is the basis of what are known as the communicative methodologies such as ‘Task-based teaching’ (TBT). According to them, no ‘meaningful learning’ can take place through any amount of drill or repeated practice

It is true that any activity-based teaching of English would interest our learners more than any other method and motivate them to learn the language better. At the same time we should not forget that our teachers are best told what exactly – in other words, which ‘teaching items— should be taught to their students. It is here a structural syllabus would be of great help to them. Such a syllabus, apart from listing the different teaching items (structures) may suggest a number of communicative activities, too. So I would advocate a combination of the ‘structural approach’ and the ‘Task-based approach for adoption in teaching English in our schools. Our teachers should be told ‘what’ language items they have to teach and also ‘how’ to teach them i.e through given ‘tasks’ or activities. In effect, it is nothing but the ‘contextual or situational’ teaching of given structures through activities.

As regards the teaching of grammar, Prabhu rightly says it should not be in the nature of ‘medication’ but nutrition’. This is possible if we teach ‘functional grammar’, not ‘formal grammar’ i.e. definitions of grammatical terms and rules. At the same time, the teaching of remedial grammar too is necessary and it is to be resorted to after a piece of free composition or independent writing has been done by our students. We have to deal with the common mistakes made by them and do remedial teaching. So, in such cases ‘medication’ becomes necessary. Don’t you agree?

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