Universal Design for Learning: An Inclusive Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The present one-size-that-fits-all English language curriculums in India are based on pre-determined progression and standardized time frame. Our learners in the classrooms are from a diverse socio-economic background with varying levels of capabilities and vary on many dimensions of learning- LSRW Skills, vocabulary, curiosity, interests, motivation, memory, perception, mood and also biological state. However, our present curriculum assumes that every student learns and performs at the grade level. And the present paper is an attempt to reflect on the flaws in designing curriculum which ignores a large number of prospective learners- especially learners with disabilities. It proposes an alternative design which would be flexible enough to cater to the needs of our diverse learners including low proficient ESL learners, and learners with audio, visual, cognitive and motor disabilities.

Key words: Learners with disabilities, Universal Design for learning, Curriculum, English Language Teaching, Inclusion

Introduction

How inclusive is the educational system in India? Do we make all our learners participate in the general curriculum equally without ignoring the learners with learning problems and learners with disability? The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009 (NCFTE 2009) makes a strong plea for inclusive education so that it will lead to the equitable and sustainable development of the physically challenged learners. Most of the educational institutions including government institutions are not adequately equipped with essential institutional facilities and processes to meet the requirements of learners with special needs along with other learners in regular classrooms. So far it has been a mere ideological position of the Government and curriculum developers, without any constructive system to achieve it. By curriculum, we mean the learning objectives, means of assessment,

instructional methods and the materials of a particular course. The present one-size-that-fits-all curriculums are based on age-appropriate, pre-determined progression and standardized time frame. And those who fail to meet the standards within the stipulated duration are categorized as non-achievers. Another flaw in the present curriculum is that it assumes that every student learns and performs at the grade level.Not all students who progress to the next level has mastered the learning goals set by the curriculum due to various factors, including assessment, however they progress to the next level without acquiring requisite skills. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) for rural India which has been regularly documenting the deficit in learning levels among school children in their eleventh annual report of 2016 has reported that only 45.2% of students in grade eight were able to read simple English sentences.The recent budget allocation in 2017 to assess the learning outcomes of our school children shows thelong existing flaw inour education system.

Learner Variability

Our learners in the classrooms are from a diverse socio-economic background with varying levels of capabilities and vary on many dimensions of learning- LSRW Skills, vocabulary, curiosity, interests, motivation, memory, perception, mood and also biological state. The variability of our learners reveals very clearly that all individuals are unique and are bound to learn in ways that are, distinctive and comfortable to them. Typically achieving

learners are not adequately challenged are unable to endure the monotony of the system and lose interest in the process of learning itself. Stephen Krashen's Input hypothesis rightly emphasizes the fact that learner could improve only if the comprehensible input is one step beyond the learner's present level of linguistic competence.Vygotsky's (1962) theory of the zone of proximal development also specify the ideal challenge as a level just beyond easy reach, but that which is attainable with appropriate scaffolds.

Learners who underperform are labeled as slow learners and learners who are unable to adapt to the present learning environment due to some inability and who are unable to participate in the common curriculum are labeled as disabled. Our present one-size-that-fits all curriculum does not accommodate the learning needs of all types of diverse learners- typically achieving learners, low proficient ESL learners, and learners with audio, visual, cognitive and motor disabilities.There is growing need to take into consideration the variability factor and accommodate differences in learning styles and capabilities.

Universal design for learning

Universal design for learning(UDL),is a scientifically valid framework with a structured set of principles and guidelines, for the development of curriculum for any educational institutions or learning environments and provide all learners equal opportunities to learn. UDL is a concept that originated in the field of architecture but

has found application in the educational field due to the efforts of neuroscientist andeducational researchers. First formulated by Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the 1990s,Universal design for learning (UDL) "is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn". The goal of UDL is to reduce the unintentional barriers to learning and maximize the learning experience for a maximum number of individuals and enable them to participate in the general curriculum.The UDL principles, based on the three kinds of networks of the learning brain:Recognition networks, strategic networks and affective networks. UDL firmly believes that learning is both emotional and cognitive as humans we tend to think rationally and experience emotionally all the time.Based on the understanding of the above networks CAST designed three UDL principles to guide the design, selection, and application of learning tools, methods, and environments. And under each principle, it formulated three detailed guidelines to help the educators, teachers and curriculum developers to create lessons, curriculums, materials and assessments with UDL perspective

1. Provide multiple means of engagement (the "why" of learning)

2. Provide multiple means of representation (the "what" of learning)

3. Provide multiple means of action and expression (the "how" of learning) Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002)

Many research studies have been conducted in line with UDL principles and reveal how it could be used to guide learning of all individuals not just the students with learning difficulties or disability.UDL initially was formulated to optimize the learning opportunities of students with disabilities and learning difficulties and eventually researchers found UDL principles were useful for all kind of learners.Kennedy M. J., Thomas C. N., Meyer J. P., Alves K. D., Lloyd J. W. (2014)used content acquisition podcasts (CAPs) to deliver vocabulary instruction for 32 Students with disabilities and 109 students without disabilities for eight weeks. At the end of the study, they found both students with and without disabilities performed really well in the post-test after using the CAPs. Proctor & Grisham, D. L. (2007) found in their research study that Spanish-speaking English language learners of 4th-grade made use of digitally embedded features like coaching avatars and hyperlinks to enhance their vocabulary and reading comprehension. Even though UDL emphasizes the role of technology to enhance the teaching and learning process it is not only about the use of technology.

Howard Gardner's Theory of multiple intelligence is concurrent with the discoveries made by the neuroscientist about the learning brain "that students do not have one global learning capacity, but many multifaceted learning capacities, and that a disability or challenge in one area may be countered by extraordinary ability in another." Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., &

Gordon, D. (2014).Sweller, J., Tindall-ford, S. K. & Chandler, P. A. (1997) in their experiment found that using two sensory modes in instruction is better than one and their study revealed the importance of multimedia instruction. The participants who were made to learn using audio text and visual diagrams or tables showed greater improvement compared to the participants who studied using visual-only format. UDL principles guidea conscientious teacher to exploremore routes to succeed in learning (Rose D. H., Gravel J. W. 2009). A teacher who follows UDL techniques needs designs lessons, materials and classroom activities that are accommodative and are not disabled. And curriculum designers need to design courses "to the margins" (Meyer, A., & Rose, D. H.,2005) and not just the "mythical average learners." (Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D. (2014).

Conclusion:

The Indian government has enacted various legislation and policies to bring about an inclusive educational system. But it is time to redesign the existing curriculum to create an inclusive educational system which caters to the needs of all learners including learners with disabilities. It is essential for all the stakeholders like the teachers, curriculum developers, syllabus designers, and administrators to be aware of the social dimension of inclusion to understand the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in the present educational set up.

"A critical element in the social perspective is the firm recognition of the inherent non-accessibility of the curriculum-in-transaction to a range of socially-culturally differentsegments of society. The mainstream curriculum almost inevitably has children from a certain class and culture as its addressees. This implicit and unexamined point of reference comes from those who dominated the exclusive schools of an earlier era and established the norm of quality –set the 'standards' we are always so anxious to uphold"

Dr.Tharu (April 2014)

The physical ability or mental ability should not hinder the learning experience of a learner. The curriculum should ensure that each and every learner goes through the same experience in all the stages of a course. In terms of materials, it is more important to provide materials that are accessible. To be specific, textbooks and instructions should be digital and accessible.

Our curriculum prescribes books as single most important material to be used in the classrooms. Books in print medium are not ideal for a lot of learners like visually impaired learners, hearing impaired learners, dyslexic learners and low proficient English language learners. Whereas if a book is available in a digital format it could be adapted to the learning needsof varied learners. Bookshare is a good platform particularly forpeople with disabilities to get their materials in a more accessible digital format (DAISY).For learners who are blind, graphs, maps or any graphical structure could be provided in a tactile format.

Engaging people with disabilities in a classroom activity or an assignment serves as an amazing motivating factor for them to learn.

The goal of education according to UDL is not to merely acquire knowledge but to nurture the individual potential of all students and transform them into "expert learners" who will "know their own strengths and weaknesses; know the kinds of media, adaptations, strategies, and external technologies they can use to overcome their weaknesses and extend their strengths" (Meyer, A., Rose, D.H., & Gordon, D. (2014). To achieve this goal, it is very important to design materials, methods and curriculum that reinforce the participation of all learners that includes learners with disabilities.

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Recantation

This is to inform the subscribers/readers of the *Journal of English Language Teaching* that the piece "Re-thinking language pedagogy", published in the September-October 2017 issue of the journal (JELT Vol.59/5, 42-3) as an article, was not an article but a note of clarification sent by Dr NS Prabhu on a talk he had given at a conference in Chennai in response to a request from some participants of the conference. The editor, who was not at the conference, received a copy of the note from a participant, found it interesting and published it without the knowledge of the author.   Later, the editor realized that such unauthorised publication amounted to copyright infringement and apologized to Dr NS Prabhu for it. The article has now been deleted from the digital version of the Journal and subscribers/readers are requested to refrain from citing or referring to it in either digital or printed mode.

- Editor