

# Teaching to Speak without Materials: Some Techniques

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## ABSTRACT

*Indian classrooms are generally found to lack 'Teaching Learning Materials' (TLM), be it schools or colleges. Teachers often complain about the lack of resources in the classroom. This paper attempts to show how, using the creativity of a teacher, classroom activities can be made more learner-centric, without the help of any TLM. This paper tries to trace how teachers can step in with their creative techniques and help the students overcome their lack of confidence and fear of being judged. To find out the effectiveness of creative techniques, a study was conducted in 2016 on 75 students from the first year Computer Science Engineering department. The following were the techniques applied: 'Description-Nostalgia-Dream', 'Cornered', 'Divide & Reward', 'Story Telling', and 'Each One Teach Everyone'. The results showed that using creative and out-of-the-box techniques, a teacher can deal with the problem of lack of TLMs in the classroom.*

**Keywords:** Teaching-Learning Materials (TLM); developing speaking skill.

## Introduction

Indian classrooms remind us of our childhood: how we almost always wanted to go to school so that we could play with our friends or how we would stay back at school even after the final bell had rung, just to spend more time with our friends. However, not everything about school life was rosy. Some of us can never forget the horror of those English classes where the teacher would ask us to speak in English to give an account of ourselves in the classroom. We used to be nervous and shy, knowing well that even our classmates were not good at speaking in English.

## A Problem Teachers Face

Some English teachers often point out the heterogeneous nature of the classroom or

complain about the lack of Teaching Learning Material (TLM from here on) in the classroom as the reason for the lack of involvement of the students. Be it a government school or college or a private institution, the lack of TLMs is a harsh reality. Let us look at the definition of 'Teaching Aids'. According to Merriam Webster, a teaching aid is "an object (such as a book, picture, or map) or device (such as a DVD or computer) used by a teacher to enhance or enliven classroom instruction." According to Collins, a teaching aid is "any device, object, or machine used by a teacher to clarify or enliven a subject". Now what if the teacher does not have any 'device' or 'object' at his/her disposal? Can s/he still 'enhance' or 'enliven' classroom instruction? Possibly, s/he still can, by being creative.

## **Creativity**

Creativity is a special trait that is necessary for both the teacher and the students to possess. It helps the teacher pose intelligent problems to the students. The students can then come up with solutions to those problems using their imagination and innovation. Creativity can pave way for greater things to come as both the teacher and the learner need to adapt quickly to the daily goals and needs of a language classroom. Teaching is mostly common sense, with creativity taking up the most of the pie. This paper explores how any teacher can use his/her creativity and presence of mind to good effect and develop techniques to instruct students in the absence of teaching aids.

## **Research Design and Population**

This study was done by the researcher at Saroj Mohan Institute of Technology (Degree Division), in the year 2016, on 75 students from the Computer Science Engineering Department. All the students were from the first year and the study was carried out over five months. The researcher used to be an Assistant Professor of English Communication back then and was in charge of those students. They were from different walks of society and were mostly straight out of State Board schools; their 'First Language' was anything but English. Most of them were shy when asked to speak in English and even if some of them did try to overcome their shyness, they were preoccupied with the fear of being judged and mocked at. So, keeping that in mind, the researcher had to come up with ideas which would accommodate all their needs and interests. Given below are

five techniques, which systematically and gradually catered to the needs of all the students.

## **Techniques Used**

***Description-Nostalgia-Dream:*** This is a tripartite structure. In the first phase of this structure, the teacher would ask a student to describe an object first. Be it a chair or a blackboard, the student had to describe its physical features. In the next phase, the teacher would ask the student to talk about his childhood days or days at school. In the last phase, the teacher would ask the student about the latter's dreams or future goals.

Apparently, the whole process looks simple, which it really is, but underneath it there is a pattern. The 'Description' part deals in the present tense while the 'Nostalgia' part brings the past tense into play. When the student reveals his/her future plans and goals, s/he is practising how to speak in the future tense, which is the 'Dream' part. The whole process is controlled by the teacher as the students are beginners at this stage. Hence, the students get 'controlled practice', where the teacher intrudes (not interrupts) quite often as the students generally stammer and stutter at this stage due to lack of confidence and knowledge of grammar.

***Cornered:*** In this technique, students would be asked to go to each corner of the room and then communicate with each other. One student can ask another student, who is standing at another corner of the room, to give an account of himself/herself or ask general questions.

This innovative technique works well both

as a ‘confidence booster’ and as an ‘ice breaker’. Also, what helps is the fact that the students need to raise their voice in order to be audible from the other side of the room. As we often notice, beginners tend to keep their voice low as they are always preoccupied with the thought of making a mistake and do not want to be audible. The students are still getting ‘controlled practice’, but their role has increased significantly. The teacher is a ‘mediator’ to a certain extent at this point.

**Divide & Reward:** In this technique, students are divided into different groups and then asked to go through a brainstorming session. The session should be spontaneous and the teacher should try to keep himself/herself out of it. The session could be on which topic to discuss in the classroom or a particular topic can be given on which the brainstorming session could take place. Then debates over the topic(s) can be started among groups or even within a group. At the end, the best speaker or the best group is declared the winner by general consensus or by what the majority of students think. Then the teacher asks the group which has not done well to reward the winner by clapping and praising them so that the former can get the motivation to perform better.

This creative technique brings in a sense of competitiveness to the fore as almost all of them want to get noticed. By now, most of the students must be capable of making meaningful sentences and speaking their mind, to a certain extent. The teacher here has less to do as this practice is ‘semi-controlled’ in nature.

**Story Telling:** Using this technique, the

students are asked to complete stories with minimum clues at their disposal. The student with the most unique idea and style would be declared the winner. The teacher can start a story and finish it abruptly to give his/her students a chance to continue as they like.

For example, *Ravi opened the door and he was shocked to find out...*

Also, the teacher can give the students enough clues to develop a story.

For example, *Ravi was a rich man... He was proud of his wealth... He lost his family in an earthquake... He was still rich but heartbroken.*

This technique is helpful because by now most of the students have learnt to string a few meaningful sentences together. It also induces some creativity among the students. The students feel the need to improve their vocabulary as well in order to embellish the language used while telling a story.

**Each One Teach Everyone:** In this final technique, the teacher would ask a student to use the blackboard and teach. The student can deliver a short talk on any topic s/he likes, but preferably, the teacher would ask the ‘student-teacher’ to deliver a short talk on a topic known to him/her and then over time, difficult topics can be discussed as s/he gains confidence.

This technique tests the confidence of a student, since, to teach, one needs to have a certain command over both the content and the language. The talks can go from ‘known’ topics to ‘unknown’. The best thing about this technique is the variety of topics which can be discussed in the class. With this, the

teacher gives the students ‘free practice’ in which minimum or no intrusion from the teacher is needed. The students, most of them at least, are confident by now.

## **Results**

The whole experiment spanned over five months. The author had to consider the holidays and other co-curricular activities which intermingled with the regular classes. By the end of the fourth month, 73% of the students started to display a remarkable change in the way they spoke English. Though they were not uttering grammatically correct sentences, they became more fluent. By the end of the fifth month, 65% of the total number had gained confidence to speak with each other in the classroom. The author noticed a sense of elation among the students as they grew confident in speaking English. Eighty-seven per cent of the total number of students were participating in classroom activities more often and they were the ones who were coming up with new topics to discuss in the classrooms. Fifteen per cent of the students went ahead and delivered speeches on the occasion of ‘Teachers’ Day’ and 8% of the total number of students continued to soar higher and mustered the courage to participate in the debate competitions held at the college and outside. Overall, nervousness regarding speaking in English was gone and what took over was the zeal to explore further. Thirteen per cent still could not develop either fluency or accuracy and needed more time and care. Though the whole process tried to include all the students, 4% of them kept skipping the classes initially, but over a period of time, their attendance picked up.

## **The Role of a Teacher**

So far, what we have discussed mostly concerns the students. It is the learners who are at the forefront. But the teacher also has a role to play at every step of the whole process. “There’s nothing wrong with teachers getting involved, of course, provided they don’t start to dominate. [...] Sometimes, however, teachers will have to intervene in some way if the activity is not going smoothly” (Harmer, 2007, p.132). Initially, s/he functions as a guide and intrudes in the learning process quite often. During the ‘controlled practice’, s/he guides the students with pertinent questions and tips at every step. While doing the ‘semi-controlled’ practice, the students are more in charge and the teacher works as a mediator. During ‘free practice’, the teacher takes a passive role, as the students are more in command; therefore, the ‘student-talking-time’ increases and the ‘teacher-talking-time’ decreases over time. Throughout the process, the teacher has to bank on the teamwork of the students. In any language classroom, gadgets and TLMs are great for the initial part, but what sustains is the bonding among the students. According to Scrivener (2011, pp. 15-17), ‘Rapport’ is important in order to attain a sustainable teaching-learning process. The rapport between the teacher and a student also matters as the whole process needs patience from both.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, the researcher has mentioned only five techniques, whereas there can be 100 more if a teacher is creative. TLMs cannot replace teachers, as teachers are capable of more innovations. Nothing

'programmed' can ever completely replace a teacher, as it can hardly cater to the needs of all the students in a heterogeneous classroom. Therefore, it is up to the teachers to shoulder the responsibility and be confident enough to inspire the students to explore their limitations and overcome them.

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### Letter to the Editor

*As a reader of the journal, I have been fascinated by the contents which are notes on action research done by the authors more than otherwise. This issue [Vol.62, No.3, May-June 2020] particularly deserves my appreciation and congratulations for the special vocabulary used in connection with Covid -19, which forms a summary of the new words coined by all concerned compiled by the author ['Social crisis and lexical innovation: The context of the Covid-19 crisis' by Arun Behera]. Hats off to the author and to the editor and publisher too, as a humble reader presenting compliments.*

*As a person who joined ELTAI after having been associated with Prof. Rajagopalan and Prof. Elango, I feel proud of you all and the progress of ELTAI. May this trend continue forever!*

*Best wishes,*

**M. Mahadevan**

*(Retd. Principal KVS, formerly Gen. Sec. AMTI)*