

Exploring Opportunities of Authentic Engagement in the English Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

English language teaching in Indian classrooms seems to be a tedious task. Though children express great motivation and interest in learning the English language, their proficiency in this language is not up to expected standards. The present article focuses on the real classroom context and analyzes a routine classroom discourse. It highlights how English is taught as a subject in classrooms. Further, taking examples of two exemplary English classrooms, the nature of pedagogical approach is discussed and analyzed. Focusing on the active role of students and the constructive vision of the teacher, the article highlights the need for creating opportunities for students' authentic engagement with the language.

Keywords: Authentic student engagement; ESL classrooms; classroom observation.

Introduction

English language is an official language of our country. English, as a language, not only assists us in communicating with others but also enables us to access several available resources, services and opportunities. Widely used at several places in our country, English indeed turns out to be a significant medium of communication. The NCERT position paper on the teaching of English (2006) highlights the importance of English language by describing it as “a symbol of people’s aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life (p. 1).” However, irrespective of its multiple use in multiple avenues, the teaching of English language in schools is generally found to be a tedious task. Teaching and learning English are largely seen as challenging and students’

competence in English language is often unsatisfactory.

The present article is based on my experience as a teacher educator who has observed several English language classrooms in government schools and witnessed the struggle of both school children and their teachers in learning the English language. This article is a result of several hours of observation of English classrooms and associated reflections. The article is divided into three sections. The first section will discuss the pedagogy observed in several regular English classrooms. The second section will report the experience of two exemplary English classrooms have observed, specifically focusing on the nature of resources used. The last section will discuss the need for student engagement in English language classrooms.

A Regular English Classroom

I have been observing English classrooms for almost a decade. One significant factor that I have observed in most of the schools and across most of the grades is the ‘fear’ involved in English language learning. This fear associated with English can be identified as the fear of speaking incorrectly, the fear of committing mistakes, the fear of being punished by teacher, or the fear of being mocked by fellow students. This factor is in children’s mind because somehow the pedagogy of English followed in our classrooms is problematic and students tend to focus on avoiding errors rather than on engaging with the language.

The significant, and regrettably the only, resource I have observed in most of the English language classrooms is the textbook prescribed by “competent authorities.” The textbook is assumed to be the sole resource available and hence the entire teaching-learning of English revolves exclusively around the textbook. The objective of an English classroom is several times limited only to completing textbook chapters and associated exercises.

A common routine I have observed in most of the English language classrooms is as follows:

1. Teacher gives instructions for opening a specific chapter or page in the English textbook.
2. Reading of the textbook chapter is generally done in the classroom in two ways: first, teacher reads and students read the same lines together in chorus after her,

or second, selected students read one by one and others follow by finger tracing. Noticed errors, if any, are corrected immediately.

3. Line by line explanation of the English text is given in Hindi or any other language which is the medium of instruction. For instance, I observed a classroom where the teacher read the line ‘I am planning to visit my parents in the coming summer season’ and explained ‘*Lekhika (author) ne apne abhivhavakon (parents) se garmi ke mausam me milne ki योजना banayi*’.
4. The moral and summary of the chapter are given by the teacher.
5. Textbook questions are answered. Most of the time, answers are written on the board and students are expected to copy them down. Several times I have observed teachers using guidebooks and help-books for writing the answers of the questions given in textbooks.
6. Similarly, other textbook exercises are done, such as word meaning, fill in the blanks and ‘who said this to whom’.
7. Notebooks are corrected with exclusive focus on mechanical aspects of writing, such as handwriting, spelling and grammatical errors.

The above description clearly highlights the dominance of the Grammar Translation Method in our English classrooms. It is assumed that the students will not be able to understand the text in English on their own and hence line by line translation of the English text in Hindi has to be provided by the teacher. It is also assumed that

students cannot answer any question on their own and, as a result, use of guide books is legitimized. The dominant pedagogy justifies the passive role of the students, who are merely expected to follow the teacher's instructions; otherwise, they may commit errors. The students' mistakes or errors in spelling and grammar are assumed to reflect the inability of the students to acquire the language and thus is an indicator of failure.

If we analyze the above classroom routine closely, we will find that the opportunities of authentic engagement with the English language text for the student are almost nil. The textbook is the 'only' resource used in the classroom, but even this 'only' resource is also not completely explored by the students. The explanations are given by the teacher and answers for textbook chapter exercises are provided by guidebooks, thereby leaving no space for students even to attempt to understand the chapter on their own. The fixed, ritualized structure of such classroom work can never create space for true language learning. Such classrooms can only result in three things: dependence on adult confirmation, fear of failure, and avoiding engagement with the language.

Some Different English Classrooms

In this section, I will be sharing examples of two English language classrooms, which were observed in some government schools. These examples show how the teachers identified the significance of 'authentic engagement' and how they designed tasks which focused on student's engagement with the tasks.

Example A

It was a Grade VI classroom in a government boys' school. The teacher had brought a collection of articles on mobile phones mentioning different models and details about the processor, camera, memory, and so on. The students were given these articles and the details were shared. Then the teacher gave them the task of deciding which model mobile phone would be best for her. They were also required to write why they decided a particular model was best so that she could buy it. She told them that in their written responses she would not be focusing on mechanical errors but would focus more on the shared ideas.

The assignment generated tremendous energy in the classroom as soon as it was given. The students were reading the article and making comparisons based on various parameters. They were discussing their ideas and also asked the teacher questions such as whether she liked photography, or whether she downloaded games on the mobile. The written responses were submitted to the teacher. She read the responses and wrote elaborate notes thanking the students for the advice.

Example B

The teacher collected interviews and articles on significant achievers, such as Kalpana Chawla, Malala Yousafzai, Priyanka Chopra, Virat Kohli, Sachin Tendulkar, Shahrukh Khan, APJ Abdul Kalam, Aishwarya Rai, and Mary Kom. Five copies of each reading material was kept in the classroom. Students of Grade VII were instructed to read any three articles or interviews and share which one

they found the best. Adequate time was given for reading the stories and, later on, discussions were held in the class.

In the discussion, exclusive focus was on understanding the stories and associated thoughts. The students were asked to participate freely without focusing on their errors or pronunciation.

These two classrooms were observed for a period of three months and remarkable changes in the students' competence and confidence were noticed. It cannot not be said that the students became completely fluent in the English language, but what was surely noticed was that the students' fear was getting overpowered by enjoyment and authentic engagement in learning the language.

These examples highlight a few basic principles of practice.

1. The reading material must be according to the interest and level of the students. Hence, the teachers selected reading materials on mobile phones and popular achievers, which were according to the level of the students.

2. Students must be given opportunities to engage with the text on their own. Unless students take an active role in reading, comprehending, writing, and sharing their views about the text, they cannot acquire competence in the language.

3. The teacher should play the significant role of a facilitator and introduce students to the designated activity. The teachers in the classes observed did not provide the answers, but rather assisted the students to read the texts on their own and

attempt the required task on their own.

4. In these classrooms, the primary focus was on expression and thinking rather than highlighting the mistakes of students. When teachers value thinking, students value it, too. They try to think on their own and express their ideas. We define language as an expression of ideas, thoughts and views. These classrooms focused on nurturing the students' ability to think, reflect and express themselves in the English language.

5. Errors in spelling and grammatical structures are not to be perceived as failure or the student's inability to understand the language. Errors have to be seen as students' attempt to engage with the language. Though in the classes observed mechanical aspects of students writing were discussed, these discussions by the teacher were done later. Students' ideas were given the centre stage rather than their errors.

6. The materials used by the teachers were not some specialized, graded, high-priced English language learning kits. The materials used were collected by the teachers from their surroundings. The teachers collected the material from daily newspapers and some magazines. The teachers chose the texts which they thought would be easier for the students to read and designed the tasks accordingly.

Discussion

Cambourne (1995) described engagement, employment, approximation and feedback as significant factors of language learning. According to him, engagement with language involves, "active participation by the learner,

which in turn involves some risk taking” (p.185). Teachers must encourage students to take this risk and must not sacrifice it for the sake of accurate mechanics. Approximation must be accepted. The presence of errors is not a symbol of failure; rather, it indicates that the student is making an attempt to understand the language. Hence, it must be valued as a window to their thinking. As teachers, we often feel that unless and until we correct the students, they will not learn the correct language. This understanding is entirely false. When children engage with language, they make hypotheses about the language. Sometimes, the hypothesis can be correct or incorrect. Children are active learners and hence, they soon identify the problem and correct it. However, this correction happens when children get opportunities to use language freely as active learners. Lastly, the nature of feedback is extremely important for a language learner (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986). The quality and direction of feedback provided by the teacher will determine what students will focus in their work. If the feedback is limited to errors and grammatical mistakes, then students will also be restricted by these parameters.

To conclude, it must be emphasized that providing opportunities of authentic

engagement is the key for generating students’ interest in the English language. Our pedagogical approach must value the active role of students, the appropriateness of resources, and the constructive vision of the teacher.

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