Exploring and Designing New Teaching-Learning Spaces and Materials Post-Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 changed the face of education, spurring teachers to forcibly shift from on-site to online instruction. However, with the ongoing Covid-19 vaccination drive all over the world, some schools/colleges have started, and others presumably will start, functioning offline soon albeit in a changed world of sanitization, masks and social distancing. The orthodox institutional strategy is likely to focus on short-term measures such as reconfiguring the classroom space by merely reducing/rearranging the existing furniture. But in order to effectively cope with the new-normal, we need to make imaginative use of institutional spaces, making them much more fluid with language materials being designed in such a way that multiple learning spaces such as playground/lawn, cafeteria and library are used by students for the same class simultaneously. In this paper, the authors build the case for exploring alternative institutional spaces and demonstrate some sample flexible English language materials designed by them for the same.

Keywords: Online instruction; language learning materials; learning spaces.

Introduction

In early 2020, a Black Swan event changed our personal and professional lives completely, especially the face of Indian education. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, schools were compelled to shut down and resort to the online mode of education. This sudden transition took us unawares as we gradually learnt the nuances of the new medium of instruction and suspended temporarily the traditional methods of interaction. However, with Covid-19 vaccination drive being underway, complete opening of schools/colleges seems imminent though it will be with Covid- 19 protocols firmly in place about expected changes in behaviours, interactions and ways of moving around in the institution. Therefore, in the "new normal" scenario, it would become imperative to best leverage the educational space apart from the classrooms so as to optimise learning in a safe and conducive environment. How would this objective be achieved? The orthodox institutional strategy is most likely to be focussed on reworking the classroom space by limiting its capacity and merely rearranging the furniture but this would by no means be a sustainable long-term solution. Students, after long months of house-arrest and physical solitude, would find it difficult to be confined in classrooms even if they were well-spaced (a remote possibility in the Indian context, given the teacher-student ratio, which is at best about 30 students per teacher and may go up to 60

students per teacher in government schools).

Of course, classroom space needs to be reconfigured immediately, but much more imaginatively keeping in mind not only the physical safety of the children but also their emotional well-being. For this, the separation between the academic and the play-areas must be blurred and spaces such as the playground, cafeteria/lunchroom, library, audio-visual room, etc. should be deployed for academic activities, putting less stress on the traditional classroom and in fact, encouraging students to curate their own spaces with the help of the teacher. This integration of habitats will provide for sustainable use of resources and lead to greater student autonomy as they themselves will also be creating their academic spaces.

The use of multiple spaces for the same lesson gives enormous opportunities for teachers to create tasks/activities/projects which factor in the multiple intelligences of the diverse children in her class as well as follow a cross curricular approach where subject teachers may be able to share their input, making learning more authentic and meaningful. In fact, robust multimodal learning strategies with a healthy combination of in-person and remote learning should also be put in place, thereby lessening student presence on campus. Constrained by large classes of at least 30 students going up to 60 students, teachers have so far, at best paid lip-service to the learner-centred approaches which must necessarily privilege each child's unique learning styles and intelligences. The post Covid-19 world will enable the teacher to create activities that use a multimodal-cross curricular-multiple

intelligence-approach which will truly bring about learner partnership in the teaching-learning process. Although a detailed discussion on language teaching approaches based on Multiple Intelligence, Cross-Curriculum and Multi-Modality is beyond the purview of this paper, we present a brief outline of each and subsequently demonstrate how we have endeavoured to amalgamate all of them in our activities.

Multiple Intelligences

Gardner (1983) who proposed the theory of Multiple Intelligence, challenged the narrow definition of intelligence as a unitary entity (a bane of so many students) with his proposal of 7 basic human intelligence types that make up a human being: linguistic, mathematical-logical, musical, spatial-visual, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic. Later he added two more to the list: naturalistic and existential (Gardner, 1999). This alternative definition of intelligence was based on a radically different view of the mind, which is pluralistic, recognizing many different and discrete facets of cognition. His theory also acknowledged that people have different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles (Christison, 1998). Gardner believed that all human beings possess the different intelligences in varying degrees and each individual manifests varying levels of these different intelligences. While an individual naturally possesses certain intelligences, others can be acquired through effort. He strongly believed that by applying the Multiple Intelligences framework we can improve the educational system (Razmjoo, 2008, p. 156). Unlike a teacher in the

traditional classroom, who mostly stands in front of the class explaining points of grammar or waits for students to complete their written work, a Multiple Intelligence classroom teacher would typically divide the class into groups, where she would give diverse activities to different groups ranging from linguistic, to musical to spatial to bodily-kinaesthetic, depending on the inclination and learning style of each group. She might often combine different intelligences in creative ways while keeping the educational objectives clearly in mind (Armstrong, 2008). According to Derakhshan and Faribi, multiple intelligence may be used by teachers effectively as "a tool to help students develop understanding and appreciation of their own strengths and preferred way of learning" (2015, p.69).

The Cross-curricular Approach

Research proves that in real life children do not compartmentalise learning and educationists "recognise that the combined skills and disciplines of a number of subjects are used in solving real-life problems" (Barnes, 2015, p. 261). This essentially means that language learning is not confined to the area of the language class alone. Much of the language skills that develop at school/ college are within other subject areas. It is therefore important to expose the children to language tasks from various subject areas right from the beginning so that they are adequately prepared to engage effectively with more abstract versions of such tasks in their later school years, and of course in real life.

A distinction has often been made between two sets of language skills – Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979). The former refers to the basic interpersonal communication which enables social well-being, while the latter is concerned more with the abilities of thinking and learning effectively from the curriculum processes. There is no doubt that both these sets of language skills need to be nurtured and developed in students. In reality, however, it is only the BICS that receive some attention in the English language classrooms. Snow et al. suggest that "traditional methods for teaching a second language often disassociate learning from cognitive or academic development" (1992, p.38). Most of the time learners receive little or no help to make optimal use of their limited second language repertoire in the content subject classrooms. While most teachers concern themselves with presenting information in their subject areas, very few help students acquire the thinking strategies they need to actively construct meaning.

Halliday (1984) asserted that language learning is *'learning how to mean'* and described three kinds of language learning that happen simultaneously: learning language, learning through language and learning about language, the suggestion being that every activity, experience, or unit is an opportunity for both linguistic and cognitive development. Language and thinking develop at the same time that knowledge is developed and concepts and schemas are built. In other words, language serves as an instrument for learning content. The activities we have created suggest how language learning and content learning can be integrated.

Multimodality

Extending the cross-curricular approach, multimodality, too, questions the strict division of labour between disciplines on the grounds that different ways of meaning-making are not separated but almost always appear together. It recognises how different kinds of meaning-making are combined into an integrated multimodal whole. In fact, it talks of the need to move beyond the empirical boundaries of existing disciplines and develop theories and methods that can account for the ways in which we use gesture, inscription, speech and other means together. Examples are given of image with writing, speech with gesture, mathematical symbols with writing and so on. This fact has become even more noticeable with the introduction of digital technologies, which enable such an integration even more as well as allow the dissemination of it in more overt ways (Jewitt et al., 2016). The activities that follow demonstrate how a multi-modal approach can be adapted in classroom interactions.

Flexi-materials

According to Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018), the term "materials" may be "anything that can be used by language learners to facilitate their learning of the target language" (p.2). So, on the one hand, they may comprise a book, a picture or an authentic real-life dialogue and on the other hand, materials may also refer to an activity/task/project that is designed for language learning. ELT practitioners such as Prabhu (2000) and Maley (1998) have pointed out that very often published materials, especially textbooks, can have a constraining effect on teachers who may be forced to follow the prescribed textbook and its exercises

mechanically even though each teacher's context and her learners are bound to be different. Thus, the concept of designing "flexi-materials" may give teachers "greater flexibility in decisions about content, order, pace and procedures" (Maley, ibid, p.280). As materials developers, we have taken the prescribed textbook as a resource to generate new ideas and have designed activities that supplement the existing exercises provided in the textbook in the hope that more teachers may like to do so based on their learners' specific needs.

The prescribed text that we have considered for our activities is a short story titled "The fun they had" by Asimov, from *Beehive* (2020-2021), the prescribed NCERT textbook for IX graders. The story is set in 2157 with the system of education having undergone a complete transformation. Computers, tele books, robotic teachers and personalized pace of learning have taken over from the conventional teaching-learning methods (something that resonates so well with the current pandemic times). Two children, the protagonists of the story, discover a real book in the attic one day and find out about a physical school that existed years ago where children would sit together and would be taught the same lesson by a human teacher. The story captures a range of emotions that the children experience from disbelief to bewilderment to doubt and finally to envy when they think of all the fun that the yesteryear's children must have had.

Since the activities in the book focus primarily on the comprehension of the story or on basic language development, we have designed supplementary activities aimed at developing students' higher order thinking skills and providing them more opportunities

for being proactive in the teaching learning process. Thus, while teaching this story, we suggest that the teacher divides students into groups/pairs, uses the classroom as well as other spaces (as exemplified in the following activities) simultaneously through a range of activities thus providing students the freedom to choose any activity depending on her/his preferred learning style.

Sample Activities

Activity 1: The Storyteller-Singers!

Space: Music room/open space

Objective: To develop learners' reflective, analytical and critical skills by encouraging them to recollect the story creatively

Intelligences: Musical-rhythmic, verbal-linguistic, interpersonal

Nature of activity: Pair-work

Materials: Musical instruments or objects/ things easily available with learners with which music can be created such as water/ sanitizer bottles, keychains and belts.

Suggested Methodology

1. Learners decide if they wish to summarize the story or share a particular version of the story from a character's point of view/ their own viewpoint in a creative way. Alternatively, students may also like to focus on a particular theme, for instance, digital addiction.

2. Students discuss and write the lyrics of the song. Let them rhyme, write in free verse, rap or write slam-poetry if they wish to.

3. Let students explore the musical instruments and use the ones they are comfortable with. Else, they may be encouraged to create music with everyday objects that they carry to school such as water/sanitizer bottles, lunch boxes, belts, and pencil boxes.

4. You may ask them to share their summary/ story-song with the entire class. Also, learners like to record their performances which may be showcased at an appropriate platform in the school – this works as a great motivator.

5. Invite peer-feedback!

Prompts

1. If required, the teacher may share some self-prepared prompts such as these:

Prompt 1	**Prompt 2**
(Summary-song: Rhymed)	**(A rap describing a child's perspective during the lockdown period)**
Children in the past had a blast!Oh! The fun they had… (2)	
	I will be what I want to be…ah,
	And do what I want to do… ah,
Going merrily to school,	
Following all the rules,	No more of this life of isolation,
Reading from books that you can touch,	Frustration and desperation,
Writing on a paper that you can smudge,	Won't have myself tied to a computer-no, no
Chatting with friends throughout the day,	Won't hurt my eyes glued to a screen anymore,
Lessons from real teachers to take away!	It is friends I want and crave for,
	Crying, laughing and walking around,
Children in our age find themselves encaged!Oh! It is no fun now… (2)	That's the world I want to be in!
	Life's a battle I will win, I will win!
Sitting in the corner of the house,	
Clicking away on the mouse,	I will be what I want to be… ah,
All by ourselves we read and write,	And do what I want to do… ah.
Robotic teachers give us a fright,	
No company and no friend,	So, I quit this life of boredom,
When will our misery end?	And meaningless education, let ignorance be bliss!

Variations

1. Depending upon the language requirement of your learners, prompts can also be given in the form of words/phrases which the students may use in writing the lyrics and subsequently put to music. Also, adopting a cross-curricular approach, vocabulary may be taken from Science (on topics such as Evolution, Technology, Artificial Intelligence) and incorporated creatively while composing the song.

2. The story-song activity may be extended and made more creative by encouraging students to think of composing a song with an alternative ending: a happy conclusion, a sad conclusion, or an unexpected twist, etc.

3. Since lyrics as well as performance are important aspects of an activity like this one, students may be encouraged to pay attention to their body language, para linguistic features and attire while performing in front of an audience.

Activity 2: Redesigning the "new normal" canteen!

Space: Canteen/cafeteria

Objective: To develop learners' analytical and problem-solving skills

Intelligences: Bodily-kinaesthetic, verbal-linguistic, visual-spatial, mathematical-logical, interpersonal

Nature of activity: Group work (8-10 learners each)

Materials: Colour pencils, pens, markers, paper

Suggested Methodology

1. Establish the link between the story and this extension activity (a project) which is to equip students with life skills in facing unexpected challenges and finding solutions to them.

2. Discuss with students how the post Covid-19 world requires us to follow physical distancing and hand hygiene especially in a place like the canteen.

3. Encourage students to find a solution to a mini case-study that the teacher may prepare herself like the one described below:

Your school has decided to reopen the school canteen post Covid-19 albeit with complete safety measures such as social distancing, sanitizing and hand hygiene. It has also decided to reduce the seating capacity and rearrange the seating plan as well as the cash counter to ensure physical distancing. It is proposed that the canteen menu may be planned afresh to include more food items that students can take away. There is a need to constantly remind students visiting the canteen to take precautions for which posters indicating the SOPs may be designed and put on the notice-board of the canteen. The school also proposes to utilize the unused open area of the canteen, buy some furniture (if required), install a touch-free hand sanitizing machine and keep air-purifying plants in the canteen. The school has allocated a canteen refurbishment budget of Rs. 40,000 but wants the student representatives to explore the existing canteen and submit their recommendations so that the project may be taken forward. You are the student representatives and you have been asked to submit your suggestions in the form of a written proposal.

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1. Plan out a strategy with the learners about preparing the final recommendations beginning with a brainstorming session, in-depth discussions and then preparing the final draft.

2. Learners interested in mathematical problem-solving may be encouraged to give a detailed break-up of their plan to use the Canteen Refurbishment Fund of Rs. 40,000/-. Similarly, students interested in arts may be asked to focus on creating posters/quotes with SOPs.

3. Group discussion techniques such as expressing an opinion, endorsing a point, disagreeing politely and arriving at a consensus may be reinforced.

4. Since this activity will be time-consuming, ample time must be given to students to finish it along with timely feedback at every stage.

5. Help in drafting the final written proposal-preferably share a template, or encourage students to devise one themselves.

6. Learners draft a proposal and present it in front of the class.

Prompts

1. Learners may be encouraged to visit the school canteen and details may be added/deleted from the case study accordingly.

2. Alternatively, draw and share an imaginary map of the canteen detailing the arrangements such as the one given below:
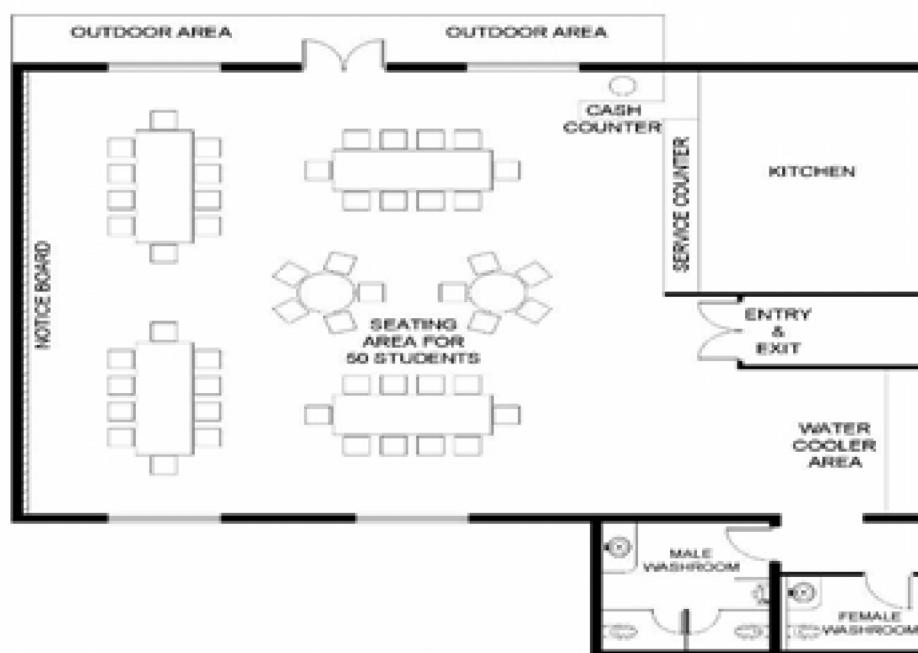
Variations

1. Any institutional space dynamics may be used to design a problem-solving case study, for instance, the school library. Students may be given a project regarding rearranging the reading rooms and the issue-counters keeping the post Covid-19 norms in mind.

2. You may also brainstorm about other unforeseen contexts with students such as a minor fire outbreak in school and design a case study based on it.

3. This activity lends itself to a cross-curricular approach where interventions from subjects such as mathematics (to teach mathematical concepts, logic and reasoning) and environment studies (to discuss cleanliness, hygiene and collective

responsibility) may be done by the respective teachers.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper argues that Covid-19 was an unprecedented event that confronted us with unforeseen challenges, particularly in the field of education. Just as transitioning from face-to-face education to online education was not easy, reverting to the physical mode of teaching and learning in the "new normal" times will not be easy either. Thus, we must think of out-of-the-box, sustainable solutions. Abandoning the conventional notions of a classroom with four walls and reimagining creative use of alternative institutional spaces for the teaching-learning process is one such solution to tackle the space crisis thrown up by the pandemic. And in order to make learning plausible in those spaces, we need to design flexible materials that can be adapted according to the specific needs of the learners in different contexts and promote learner autonomy.

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