

Developing English Language Skills through Laxman's Cartoons

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ABSTRACT

Every teaching material, teaching approach and technique loses its novelty after practising it for some time. Therefore it appears that the traditional methods of developing language skills fail to serve the purpose thoroughly. Hence, educators tend to explore new innovative methods to teach language skills listening, speaking, reading and writing; LSRW. There are many approaches and several pedagogies in language teaching. However, to add fun, humour, playfulness, novelty and innovativeness rooted in the familiar context, the present paper illustrates a few sample activities for developing the language skills through captioned cartoons of R. K. Laxman. Graphic in the cartoon provides a context and the caption provides a linguistic material to explore various teaching aspects of language teaching. The pedagogy of English language teaching with the help of cartoons as the teaching material makes the teaching – leaning process more active and enjoyable. Similar activities can be designed by using the cartoons with captions in other languages too. This paper illustrates eight activities on productive skills; that is writing and speaking using three cartoons of R. K. Laxman.

Keywords: cartoon, R. K. Laxman, activities, pedagogy, productive language skills, LSRW

Introduction

The significance of anything published in daily newspaper is rather temporary and most of us tend to ignore the cartoons as some picture commenting on socio-political scenarios and bringing smiles to our faces. But the uncommon perspective of life presented by Laxman through his cartoons as a form of art has everlasting importance. Laxman's common sense and huge canvas of cartoons cover almost everything in the contemporary period. Therefore, R. K.'s cartoons can be used as an effective teaching material at the tertiary level. An innovative teacher can dig into his cartoons which would be permanently significant for the generations to come. A brief caption of cartoon provides simple, witty and humorous linguistic context as the text and its content provide the clues to understand it. Any creative teacher can frame 'n' number of activities to teach various aspects of English language. This permanent appeal of Laxman's cartoons and the perspective to look at his cartoons as an important material for educational pedagogy and linguistics is a new approach which can add fun,

playfulness, humour and liveliness in the process of developing language, especially English language.

Language Acquisition:

Language is a species specific activity; which is purely human. The human civilization has travelled a long distance through the linguistic exchange of ideas, thoughts, skills and emotions. The linguistic performance of an individual depends upon several skills and competencies. The four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing occupy a seminal place in the context of language learning. All the four skills LSRW are inseparable from each other. We cannot think of those skills in isolation. They are interdependent. Listening and speaking are the two sides of the same coin. While reading and writing cannot be divorced from each other. None of these skills can be developed independently. As far as the process of language learning is concerned, Krashen (1987) has made an important distinction between language acquisition and language learning. When a child is born its mind is like a blank slate. As understood by Locke, 'tabula rasa' meant that the

mind of the individual was born blank. (1996 33-36) Any individual acquires his or her first language (mother tongue) through listening and speaking. Then this acquired first language can be further enriched through reading and writing. In the process of language acquisition the mind of the learner is like a blank slate at initial stages. When a child hears certain sounds and utterances and internalizes them, then it starts associating these words and utterances (i.e. signifiers) with the objects, things, people, events, etc. (i.e., signified). In the process of consistent association of particular signifier with the same signified again and again, it assigns a meaning to the signifier with reference to the corresponding signified. (Saussure 1959) Language skills can be developed through some interactive methods by providing more exposure to use language skills.

Language Learning:

Second or foreign language learners are already equipped with the first language which may accelerate and simultaneously hinder the learning process of the other tongue. The similarities between the two languages are facilitative for accelerating the Second language learning process; whereas, the differences are detrimental, creating hindrance in the process of Second language learning. However, through some creative techniques the learners can develop their second language by adopting the four skills, LSRW. We Indians belong to the outer circle of English in the three circle formula of English language suggested by Kachru (292). The Knowledge Commission of India (2009) focused on the need to prepare our students as global citizens. Of course, to be a global citizen one must know the global language, i.e., English.

Productive and Receptive Language Skills:

Traditionally, language skills were classified as 'active skills' and 'passive skills'. In the process of 'speaking' and 'writing' the person is actively involved in producing spoken or written messages encoded in a language. Hence, 'speaking' and 'writing' are taken as active skills. When a person listens to spoken input or reads a printed text, he or she is physically inactive or passive. Hence these two skills were considered

as passive skills. But linguists started rethinking such classification after 1980. Specifically the post structural theories like 'Reader Response Criticism' added a creative perspective to listening and reading. But for the sake of convenience 'receptive' and 'productive skills' distinction continues. Another way to look at these skills is to classify them as 'receptive skills' (reading and listening) and 'productive skills' (speaking and writing). The two functions are associated with these language skills, i.e., 'reception' and 'production'. The skills through which we receive knowledge or the skills through which we are introduced to various facets of life are named as receptive skills. When we listen to people or when we read printed text we receive inputs and these inputs consist of ideas, opinions, attitudes, perceptions, etc. In this sense these two skills are called as receptive skills. The other two skills 'speaking' and 'writing' are used in creating messages. Hence, these skills are labeled as 'productive skills'. To some extent the quality of speaking and writing skills depends on the quantity and quality of listening and reading skills.

Approaches to Language Skill Development:

There are two approaches to the development of language skills. One is the 'process approach' and the other is the 'product approach'. In process approach the learner has to begin with simple things; and the skills can be developed in the process of its usage. The process approach looks at the growth of the skills as a slow but steady ongoing process which consists of several stages which take the learner from simple to complex, known to unknown and crude to sophisticated stage. It is aptly said 'Use it or lose it'. When we are exposed to optimum use of the language, we feel more confident and gain command over the language by mastering the four skills. The approach believes that language skills develop gradually through more exposure and practice. The 'product approach' does not consider the stages in between, such as evaluation of examination papers by an examiner, the answer written by the student, the product which does not show the stages in between and the mistakes are pointed out at the final stage. Students listen to comprehensible input which is

pitched at a level slightly higher than the competence of the learner. The reader is asked to read and is asked to answer questions at the end of the reading. If a person is asked to speak on ‘wonders of science’ without preparation then it is the ‘product approach’ to speaking. Yet another way to classify the approaches is ‘bottom-up’ approach and ‘top-down’ approach. In the ‘bottom-up approach’ the learner has to start from the bottom or basic things. Then the learner ascends step by step towards the top level of the skill. However, in the ‘top-down approach’ the learner is brought in contact with a full-fledged text at the top and they proceed from the whole to the parts. For example, in the classroom we ‘listen’ to the lecture by a teacher but ‘hear’ the sound of the fan in the class. Hearing happens automatically, and effortlessly; on the other hand, when we listen we make effort. Hence listening is an intentional and deliberate activity. Out of these four basic language skills, listening is the first. It is essential to make distinction between hearing and listening. We hear the sound created around us but do not always pay attention to those sounds stumbling on our ear. The hearing is done without concentration and intention. The listener concentrates upon, what the speaker is saying and comprehends the utterances of the speaker.

Developing Language Skills using Laxman’s Cartoons:

It is well-known that cartoons are set in relevant and recognizable structural and situational contexts of perceived social, political or economic problems. Necessary deictic features (pointers to the current context) are readily available in cartoons. Various socio-economic, political, literary and other important situations are depicted in cartoons and the clues of their interpretation are readily available in current reality and embedded in methods of depiction and explanation. One way or another, therefore, cartoons employ particularly effective means of communication. Consequently, they lend themselves to language teaching in different situations.

Concrete graphic of the cartoon enable students to remember things better and longer. This is true

particularly in case of language teaching. Cartoons provide both the aspects necessary for complete understanding of the situation because they provide the necessary context in the form of graphics so as to understand the entire meaning of the caption and what exactly the cartoonist wants to convey. As it is often said that ‘a picture speaks thousand words’ the picture (graphics) helps the observer to remember it. The classroom discussion, pair work, and working out various activities actually involve the students in teaching-learning process. They understand things faster and better through their own active involvement.

A teacher can frame several activities for English language teaching by carefully choosing the cartoon and the aspect of language to be taught. Eight activities are illustrated below on the basis of three cartoons of R. K. Laxman.

Activities on Language Skills

Activity I

Guided Composition

Cartoon 1



It is safer to sleep in the middle of the road than on the pavement these days (Laxman, 2002:1)

For EFL learners guided composition is traditionally chosen as the most preferred method of teaching the writing and the speaking skills. In this activity some questions are framed for the primary and secondary level learners. The learners have to simply answer those questions leading to a composition. However at the tertiary level some points can be given to the students. The students will cover those points and expressions in this composition exercise. Cartoon 1, below can be used to trigger speaking as well as writing activities. This cartoon may be used to appeal to the imagination of the learners. At the initial stages of writing and speaking activity the learners should be encouraged through some feelers about social, political and cultural background.

Work in pairs/groups and discuss various issues pointed out in the given cartoon. You can use the following points and expressions.

- A) Points
- i) Homelessness
 - ii) Rash and drunk driving
 - iii) Accidents
 - iv) Poor people in metropolitan cities
 - v) Law and order
- B) Expressions
- i) Curiosity
 - ii) Enquiry
 - iii) Warning.
 - iv) Irony.
 - v) Helplessness
 - vi) Safety of Pedestrians
 - vii) Don't you think it's a good idea to?

Activity 2

Dialogue Writing

The teacher can ask the students to write a possible dialogue between the person sleeping in the middle of the road and the policeman. The writing activity will prompt the students to search for new words and it may lead to some interesting, funny or even macabre expressions. Speaking and writing are the productive

skills which provide ample scope for creativity of the students. However, certain stimulus is needed to channelise the process of learner's imagination.

Activity 3

Group Discussion

The same cartoon along with its caption can be used for an open discussion to co-relate the caption with the graphics in the cartoon and to understand entire humour and satire suggested by the cartoon with its caption at tertiary level. It will throw light on the issues of homeless people using Pavements as night shelters, the issues of rash and drunken driving, increasing pressure on the capacity of cities to hold and accommodate lower income group population and many other related issues.

Activity 4

Guided Composition

Cartoon 2 can be used to trigger speaking as well as writing activities. This cartoon may be used to instigate imagination of the learners. At the initial stages of writing and speaking activity the learners should be supported with some points and expressions. This should be a guided writing and speaking activity.

Cartoon 2



No, it's not an early monsoon sign. Some taxi with adulterated petrol must have arrived in the neighbourhood. (Laxman, 1999: 40)

Exercise : Work in pairs/groups and discuss the various features causing pollution. You can use the following points and expressions.

A) Points

- i) air pollution

- ii) water pollution

- iii) littering

- iv) industrial waste

- v) vehicular smoke

B) Expressions

- I) that's right!

- ii) I agree.

- iii) I couldn't agree more.

- iv) I see what you mean.

- v) Let's plant more trees.

- vi) Why don't we care for our children?

- vii) Shall we?

- viii) Don't you think it's a good idea to?

Activity 5

Dialogue Writing:

Exercise: Read the cartoon 2 carefully and prepare the probable conversation between husband and wife (man and woman) shown in the cartoon.

Common man: What are you doing?

Wife: Can't you see?

Common man: Oh! Sorry you are drying the clothes but don't you think it may rain today!

Wife : Don't be a fool, instead of staring at the smoke, you can help me.

Common man: I must tell you they are the early monsoon clouds, or might be smoke. O God! I am confused.

Wife: Stop talking all this nonsense. You should come here to help me. I still remember, you used to help me in

chores for a few days after our marriage.

Common man: Yes I would help you but due to my illness I could not help you since last year.

Wife: You need to take rest now.

Common man: Why?

Wife : The smoke could be harmful to your health.

Common man: You know we used to wander wantonly in the town years ago, in clean and healthy weather. Everything has changed now. I don't know. What will happen to this earth?

Wife: Pollution will destroy everything in future.

Common man: We must do something to save this planet.

Wife: We alone cannot do anything.

Common man: Why not? At least we should plant trees and can create awareness among our neighbors. It may help to control pollution. Come! let us go to our neighbor, Mr. Sharma.

Wife : I am not going to come. I have to do a lot of chores.

Common man: Okay. I shall go to Mr. Sharma this evening; and shall tell him to plant trees in his yard.

Wife: I think that's a great idea. Charity begins at home.

Activity 6

Productive Skills: Speaking and Writing

Speaking and writing are the productive skills which provide ample scope for creativity of the students. However, certain stimulus is needed to channelize the process of imagination of the students. Moreover, if

certain hints could be given to the students to think upon any topic where there would be ample scope for difference of opinion then the activities like group discussion, reading and writing could provide enough practice to develop the language skills of the students. For example, cartoon 3, below comments upon the present day party politics. It is the headquarters of the congress party where a new politician is willing to join the party. The smiling photograph of Mahatma Gandhi also provides some hints. The photograph is garlanded by the office bearers and now they are free to do anything in the name of Gandhian ideology. It also suggests that the party politics has nothing to do with the ideological mass movements today. The major issues before the political parties are only to establish the government of their own party alliance and to topple down the government of other political parties. They have nothing to do with corruption and other major issues related to the life of common people. They just create fake ideological issues to befool the people. They use all corrupt practices to achieve political power based upon the Machiavellian principles. However, the substantive nature of democracy has been shattered and the power politics is being run in the name of procedural democracy. This cartoon can stimulate the imagination of language learner and can instigate them to speak and write on similar topics.

Activity 7

Group Discussion

The same cartoon no. 3 along with its caption was given to the class for an open discussion to co-relate the caption with the graphics in the cartoon and to understand entire humour and satire suggested by the cartoon with its caption at tertiary level.

Cartoon 3



*No, not to fight corruption, I promise.
I want to join you to fight for secularism!*
(Laxman, 1995: 136)

(Rahul, Leena, Shafiq , Uday, Rekha, Rajashree, Deepak, Tejal, Salma, Kajal, Kushal, Raju and Amit participated in this group discussion)

- Rahul :** What is shown in the picture?
- Leena :** I think it's a Congress Party's head office.
- Shafiq:** How do you know?
- Leena:** It is obvious.
- Uday:** There is a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi on the wall of the office. Hence, it must

be the office of the Congress Party.

Rekha : Hey Uday! You can't say like that. In India, Gandhi's portrait is used as a showpiece to decorate the walls. Anybody can use it.

Rajashree: Yes! It can be used anywhere.

Rekha : Correct! You can't conclude that it is the office of Congress Party merely on the basis of Gandhiji's portrait.

Amit : That's true! Gandhism and Gandhian thoughts have become the fashion of the day.

Deepak : Obviously, there are other things to prove that it is the office of the Congress Party.

Kushal : All of you are squeezing the lemon unnecessarily. Can't you see the board clearly written in the picture as Congress HO, meaning Congress Head Office?

Salma : Okay. We agree that it is the office of the Congress Party. But what is the subject of the picture?

Raju : The office bearers are talking to an outsider.

Khushal : Why?

Tejal : For induction of newcomer in the Congress Party.

Kajal : Who wants to join the Congress Party?

Raju : I think the man sitting in the chair.

Kushal : How could you say that?

Tejal : From the expressions on their faces.

Kushal : That's true.

Leena : The man in the chair is quite nervous and frustrated while others are confident.

Salma : Yes Leena, it shows that the people on the other side of the table are party bosses having a strong hold in the party.

Leena : And the new comer is obviously frustrated. He might have been expelled from his previous political party.

Kushal : I agree with you.

Leena : Did you mark one more aspect in this picture?

Tejal : What is it?

Leena : There is a bag on the floor near the chair.

Tejal : It indicates that probably there are the wads of currency notes brought by the person in black jacket to bribe the party bosses.

Rahul : Maybe!

Tejal : I am sure.

Uday : Why are you so confident?

Tejal : The word 'corruption' in the caption of the cartoon!

Uday : but the politician does not want to fight corruption.

Tejal : That's the point. He suggests that he is ready to bribe the party bosses to join the party. Well, that's our country! God save the country from the politicians!

Activity 8

Elocution Competition

Cartoon 3 is the best sample for speaking activity too.

Wherever there is a contrast or dichotomy in the subject matter, people have so many things to say. This cartoon can trigger the imagination of the students and a teacher can declare an elocution competition on the basis of above cartoon. Above cartoon can provide material to organize an elocution competition on any topic related to the politics in India.

Conclusion:

Developing language skills through cartoons is thus a new approach in English language teaching. It is an

unconventional material to be used for the teaching of English. The teachers of other languages can develop many activities in their own language with the support of cartoons published in the respective languages. It invites laughter, playfulness, novelty, and attentiveness in teaching-learning process and creates liveliness in the classroom. Moreover, the creativity and soft skills of the learners also develop simultaneously through this approach. However, along with English language teaching the social awareness, general knowledge, and overall understanding of the surrounding also grows side by side because this cartoon as a text has a socio-culturally rooted context. This approach therefore can be extended to teach other subjects in humanities and social sciences as well.

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