English Language Teaching: Problems and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Solutions to the problems related to English language teaching have been a topic of research and discussion the world over, which paves way for innovative solutions and novel ways of experimentation. Since the language is going through changes and adaptations, it is obvious that the process of searching for solutions towards effective, innovative, and result-oriented teaching and learning of English must also be pragmatic and learner-centric.

English language teaching is becoming a challenging task for the teacher especially when the orientation is meant for the students of other languages. What can a language teacher do when there are multitudes of problems to deal with? Well, if you have thought this question at any point of time during your teaching career, you are a part of the solution, since identifying the problems is the first step towards solving them. Once we identify all the stumbling blocks in achieving our target of making the students learn English, brain-storming for problem solving is going to bring out a number of solutions. At least it will keep you going – though it may not solve all issues at once. If your 'bad' result becomes a 'not so bad' result, and a sign of relief appears on the face of both the teacher and the learner, it is an achievement!

Key words: ELT; motivation; needs and wants; fear factor.

PROBLEM # 1: Lack of interest to learn

SOLUTION: Inspire your students! Success *brings more success*

Since people are interested to do what is beneficial to them, show the learners the benefits of learning English. Similarly, show them the problems attached to the lack of effective communication skills – of course, in English. Show them the examples of successful people with a lot of confidence and communication skills. Show them live examples – videos, recorded speeches, photographs of smart people. On the other hand, discuss issues where lack of English language skills could possibly be a

stumbling block in one's higher studies and career.

Needs and wants: '*Necessity is the mother of invention.*' *(Plato, The Republic, Book II).* So is the importance of learning English language as it is a key of necessity that opens many doors of knowledge and career options. It is the duty of the teacher to link the needs and wants of the students – career growth, economic benefits, social status, need to have easy communication with the outside world, leadership skills, easy access to the world of literature, easy access to science and technology, etc., in order to motivate the learners for facing the challenges of learning the language.

'*The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires' (William Arthur Ward – American scholar, author and teacher). It* is the prerequisite of a teacher to inspire students and ignite a passion for learning English – by making them aware how important it is for them – for their own academic, social, career, and technological advancement.

Motivate through 'need-based' activities and exercises

'*One key to increasing motivation is to use activities matched to the personalities, learning styles and characteristics of the learners as often as practically possible.*' (Lynch 2008)

'Actions speak louder than words.' Similarly, actions and activities have the hidden power to influence and motivate learners – without

any words of encouragement and motivation. Nothing can be more powerful when it comes to motivation than the self-realization of the learner that he is unable to do a particular task – which he is expected to do for his own personal benefits. Such a realization by the learner that '*I must learn English at any cost'* can do wonders in acquiring the LSRW skills by taking all necessary and effective steps.

However, the teacher must observe and ensure that these tools and activities should not 'de-motivate' the leaner – which is possible to happen if not encouraged and pacified whenever the learner faces any difficulty in achieving a target, or when he compares his language skills with those of others who have done the activities more successfully.

Personalize goals: Encourage learners to set career goals and make them realize the importance of English, which is going to play a very crucial role in their attaining their dream career. It is said 'your talent can get you a job but it's your communication skills that will get you a promotion and make you a leader.' Let the students realize that getting the job depends not only on their subject knowledge but also on their communication skills. The realization that their communication skills are going to be the deciding factor in getting them successfully through the interviews and group discussions can motivate them in working hard to improve their English language skills.

Prepare activities related to their personal

needs, learning styles and individual requirements. Writing an attractive resume, preparing an eye-catching objective as per the requirement of the job profile, writing an impressive application for a job, preparing an appealing personal profile, a letter of self-introduction, etc., are examples that need to have a personal touch and are need-based, which is also practically required for the learner during his study years and career search thereafter. How about introducing activities that make the learner meet these requirements on their own? How about helping them identify their mistakes and improving their writing skills? How about teaching them sentence construction and basic grammatical rules? How about conducting a Classroom Action Research (CAR) to identify the additional requirements of the learners? Now the time is ripe to motivate them because learning English is now a part of their need.

PROBLEM # 2: Fear of making mistakes

SOLUTION: Create an atmosphere where mistakes are welcome

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,

The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:

Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,

And waste its sweetness on the desert air"

– Thomas Grey, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Not having an atmosphere where one can speak without being afraid of making mistakes, not having an opportunity where the learner is supported and encouraged by co-learners and teachers, many students have lost their confidence and eventually given up English language learning. It is a fact and instances of this happening are numerous.

The fear of making mistakes in front of friends, colleagues or peer learners stops many students from talking in English. Success is thus delayed in the process of protecting one's (false) 'prestige' or (social) 'image' in front of others.

A learner who does not care about 'what others are going to think of me if I make a mistake' can surely learn things better and reach success faster. The learner must get rid of this self-created 'false prestige' and 'what others will think' type of attitude. One must realize that in the long run people around you, may it be your peer learners, friends, colleagues, or teachers, will move on. So is your valuable time. The sooner the learner realizes this fact and the teacher enlightens the students and creates a conducive atmosphere where all can speak without being worried about 'what others are going to think' and makes them realize that 'making mistakes is not a mistake when it comes to learning', the sooner is going to be a turning point which can change the classroom atmosphere positive enough for all learners.

Identify the levels of learners: The teacher as well as the learner must identify, and be aware of, the presence of different levels of learners. An English classroom may include advanced learners, quick learners, and

beginners as well. In such a mixed group, there is a possibility that the beginners and the-not-so-quick learners may start thinking negatively about their ability to learn. On the other hand, the quick and advanced learners can get into the trap of "I am better than everyone else" type of overconfidence.

A classroom with students having mixed levels of learning has certain merits as well as demerits. If the beginners and the-not-so-quick learners feel comfortable to interact and clarify their doubts with the advanced level learners and if the advanced learners are willing to support and guide the beginners, such an atmosphere is going to be ideal. In case the interaction is not possible due to any reason, such a mixed group can damage the confidence level of the-not-so-quick learners and that of the beginners.

Make the best use of a mixed group - Divide teams under the care of the advanced learners: Dividing the teams that include both advanced level learners and slow learners could be a solution to deal with the possible problems that may arise from a mixed group. This is going to provide a buffer for the beginners since they are guided by someone who is better than them. A small group is again a better platform for easy interaction and correction. Activities conducted in small groups give more opportunity for every participant to air their views and ideas.

The grammar fear factor: This can be another possible reason that makes English learning difficult and complicated. Different reasons like lack of proper foundation, lack of support from co-learners and from teachers, and ineffective teaching can make English learning a nightmare. The solution is to simplify grammar – step by step. Give priority to functional grammar rather than theoretical grammar teaching. Appreciate the effort of the learner in spite of the mistakes he makes. Some steps like simplification of grammar teaching, interactive doubt clarification sessions, and not dumping too much of grammar rules at a time can gradually make the fear factor disappear from the minds of the learner.

PROBLEM # 3:Lack of exposure

SOLUTION: Create an English-speaking atmosphere

The prerequisite of creating an atmosphere where everyone can confidently communicate in English – without the fear of making mistakes – is to implement the first two steps discussed above.

Creating an English-speaking atmosphere is a complicated step which needs a good coordination and understanding among the learners, and between the learner and the teacher. Speaking English should not be forced upon the learner; instead, the learner must feel the importance of speaking in English on his own. In this aspect the main role in the early days is to be played by the teacher.

Start with stories and interesting topics: To grab the attention of the students and to create an atmosphere of English

communication, there is no better way than telling interesting stories or discussing general topics that interest the learners. To make the session interactive, the teacher or the group leader must ask questions – easy-to-answer type – frequently while narrating the story or discussing the issues. In group discussions, the teacher/group leader can ask for the opinion of all participants in order to make sure that everyone gets a chance to express his views.

Activities to make the students speak:

1. Read aloud. To begin with, encourage students to read stories, news articles, etc. aloud in the classroom. At the end, they can add why they have selected that particular story or news item.

2. Make students speak about their childhood or school days. (These kinds of topics are easy for the beginners.)

3. Speak about one's favourite movie, book, place, friends, sport, etc.

4. Retell a story, if possible with a different ending.

5. Recite a poem or sing a song in English.

6. Ask the listeners to solve a puzzle.

7. Explain a proverb or an anecdote.

8. Express one's opinion about any topic of social relevance and ask the opinion of the listeners.

9. Give a topic for group discussion and ask the group leaders to collect opinions from everyone in the group and then share them in the class.

10. Give a puzzle or ask the group to find solutions to a serious problem.

11. Conduct a speech activity on topics given one day in advance. Allow students to choose from a number of topics.

12. 'Just-a-minute' talk on interesting topics – decided by the teacher or peer learners.

13. 'Volte face' talk on topics decided by the teacher or peer learners.

14. Ask students to share a joke, a memorable incident, etc.

15. Conduct a debate on topics that are easy and interesting to discuss.

It is always better to give a number of topics to the students they can choose from. It is also important that the teacher or peer learners should not point out any mistake in syntax and choice of vocabulary at this stage.

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