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Beating Mundanity in a language class ...with Innovation, Interaction and Experimentation

Pooja Khanna

“Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and reading a perfect man”

When Francis Bacon echoed this immortal quote in the 16th Century, little did one know that the edifice of language teaching even in the 21st century would be built on the four pillars of the skills mentioned in the above quote: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In fact, two more skills, namely grammar and vocabulary have, ever since, come to enjoy a prominent place across universities teaching English Language Skills. The need for innovation, interaction and experimentation arises from the fact that the language class today is different from that of the mid to late 20th century. Technology has evolved and computers have become an indispensable tool of teaching and learning. It is time to audit the role of both-traditional and modern teaching methods in fulfilling the task to satiate the needs of the learners. It also brings into question the teaching methodology while transacting language beyond the realms of mundane grammar exercises and essay writing techniques. It is time to reinvent, rejuvenate and reassess the pre-existing system of teaching language as isolated, compartmentalized skills of Reading, Writing, Speaking Listening, Vocabulary and Grammar and to address these skills collectively and innovatively by breathing in a new life into the methodology. Current emerging trends clearly indicate that language learning is no longer restricted to its ability to help you acquire extra ordinary skills for work, citizenship and self-actualization. It fulfills a larger role of enabling learners to gain competence in English which will enable him/her to hold the master key to success in the contemporary world.

The teaching of English language has acquired a lot of importance in the context of its position as a global language. The resultant off-shoot of this scenario has been the growing need to polish one's communication skills. The state and methodology of teaching English is at a crucial juncture and at the helm of many academic discussions. The stakeholders i.e. the learners demand being taught communication skills that will actually impart an impetus to their careers instead of simply fetching them good marks in examination. It is here that the role of innovation, motivation and commitment in language teaching becomes paramount. The focus in teaching language is no longer on memorization or rote learning; instead language is now an indispensable tool of communication across the globe – a passport for success and employment.

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in the Convocation Address delivered at the University of Pune on 27th January, 1955 had said:

“I would have English as an associate, additional language which can be used not because of facilities, but because I do not wish the people of non-Hindi areas to feel that certain doors of advancement are closed to them. So I would have it as an alternative language as long as people of India require it.”

When these sentiments found a place in Nehru's speech, little did one wonder that soon this language would become the language of communication in almost all sectors of society. This brings us to the vital question – how should this skill be imparted to the learner in a way that it helps in grooming his/her personality?

It has been rightly said, “If you give an individual a fish, you feed him for a day, but, if you teach him to fish you feed him for life”. So, the emphasis should not be on what is “taught” but what is “learnt”. A language class is said to be successful only if the learner is able to imbibe the skills that have been taught in his/her day to day experiences in speaking or writing as the situation demands. The growing culture of innovative pedagogical strategies and technology aided language learning platforms are only leaving the learner confused and distracted with pictorial quality and audio video inputs that momentarily sustain interest but the actual learning outcome remain a subject of study. The role of a good language teacher in a face to face interactive and motivational environment viz a viz self-learning e-material cannot be undermined. Linguistic robots with a mind stuffed with ten thousand odd vocabulary words can hardly be labeled as language experts nor bookworms (with a book uploaded on the grey cells) but zero communication skills claim to be wizards of language. Learning is only said to be successful if you are able to use its knowledge to comprehend real life situations and handle them with the competence required.

“If language is knowledge then learning it will share some of the characteristics of learning, say Chemistry; if it is skillful behaviour, it will be something acquired through practice, if it is an object we may get to know it through descriptions or through use, while if it is a social event, we shall wish to participate in the social interactions in which it is manifest” (Error Analysis and Inter-language Oxford University Press p2 1973).

Reading Skills: Why teach the art of reading only through unseen passages?

Gone are the days when shoes were synonymous with Bata, Colgate signified brushing teeth, TV meant Doordarshan and language teaching was represented by the Bible of Grammar called Wren and Martin. The teaching of English Language has evolved out of that mundane arena and stepped into a totally new world dominated by ICT and Innovative teaching. I realized this fact when a class packed with sixty students looked amused at my idea of teaching the art of comprehension. Strangely for all sixty students the word comprehension signified ‘unseen passage’ usually dealing with weird themes from *Dinosaurs* to *Dragon flies* or *Kimonos* to *Red Indians* - containing some statistics that would always be important as one of the answers to the questions asked at the end of the passage. That day I decided it was time to move on and breathe a new life into language teaching methodology. My aim was to ensure that they understand what they read, so I tried to gather a few pictures of signboards- some clicked from my mobile -and put them before the class to identify the errors and correct them. The curiosity, excitement and learning came in naturally and interestingly. I moved on to larger clips from Newspapers – like an interview with Amitabh Bachchan – they were still interested. After that, the so called ‘passages’ were picked up by students and then taken up as comprehension exercises to be done as Reading Tasks for language teaching. It worked wonders and teaching the *Art of Reading* became lively as never before.

Writing Innovatively

Writing, for most students is limited to the concept that there is an ‘Introduction, Body and Conclusion and evaluating writing skills hovers around CFA i.e. content, fluency and accuracy. Where and how are we teaching the art of writing? I felt that the most effective way to *teach* writing is to actually take the students through the process of writing. We picked up a common topic “The day I will never forget ...”, I suggested the following seven ways in which they could begin writing about a horrific experience of travelling by a private bus.

Option I: Beginning with a belief or an opinion

Most people were of the opinion that Bus No. 716 was probably the best way of getting to Connaught Place (CP) from Dwarka for the residents of Dwarka commuting to CP. However, since Dwarka is a relatively new sub-city, the transport is not very satisfactory. People have to wait for a long time if they are rigid about travelling only by the DTC (Delhi Transport Corporation). I was one such traveller but I decided to break this rule for once and hopped on to a private bus for a roller coaster ride to CP that day...

Option II: Creating a sense of anticipation

The bus moved around shakily before coming to a jerky, bumpy halt. The oil tanker was dangerously close to the bus and there was an extremely narrow space between the two vehicles. The bumpy jerk made everyone scream with fear and everybody tried to grab at something or the other to lessen the impact of the sudden braking. There was a deafening screech and the bus overturned so quickly that one of the passengers was half thrown out of the window. What followed was an eerie silence...

Option III: Using a dialogue

"Having this bus on this route is very convenient. Without it, we would not be able to get to work on time", I overheard a passenger say, but the speed and carelessness with which the driver was driving made me wonder whether I had done the right thing in boarding this bus rather than waiting for a DTC. But I seemed to be the only one thinking thus. The others seemed to be finding this as the only way to reach their workplace cheaply...

Option IV: Using flashback or recalling an event

As I stood on the pavement and looked at the badly hit bus, I was reminded of that fateful day when I had had a similar experience. I could almost visualize the clouds of smoke emanating from the engine. Arms and legs of many of those on board sticking out of windows and the eerie sounds of people screaming still echoed in my ears...

Option V: Beginning with a proverb or a quotation

The truth of the proverb "haste makes waste" unfolded before me, the day I decided to travel by a private bus in spite of my mother's advice against it. In an attempt to reach the college in time for my exam, I boarded this death on wheels. The driver was driving at top speed ...

Option VI: Beginning with a question

Have you ever wondered what it is like to see death staring at you? Imagine the fear that goes through the minds of the passengers when they realize that the vehicle on which they are in is no longer in the control of the driver...

Option VII: Describing the setting

The bus was packed with people who were travelling to their workplace on the fateful Monday morning. The people were packed like sardines. There was no room to move but the people seemed to be used to travelling like this every day.

This was followed by another topic where they had to apply the same techniques of writing an introduction. Similar methodology was applied for building on the introduction and drafting the body of a given topic. In this case, students were taken through two samples or suggestive writing options and then encouraged to think and write on their own. The result was innovative

thinking, newer ideas and minimal repetitiveness because there was originality in the piece of writing. The use of metaphors and similes was blended in this process and writing was ornamented. However, I felt what the students lacked was a vocabulary bank to express themselves. So, my next challenge was building on a word bank on various common themes so as to enhance the vocabulary of my students.

Speaking without hesitation

By now, the otherwise silent class was eager to speak. So I grabbed the opportunity to sharpen their speaking skills. Again, all wanted to speak, speak fluent English, but words and sentences would not come easily. For an ice-breaking session I asked them to introduce their partners after gathering a little information about them. They staggered, needed a lot of help-but did manage 4-5 sentences. So for the next class I asked them to read up about their sun signs, its characteristics, famous personalities under that sun sign -and I was amazed at the class bursting with enthusiasm about who wanted to speak first. I encouraged them to first silently read what they had written and then share with the class the five things they found most interesting. I realized that they needed a thought impetus to help them frame their own sentences. In the next class, I picked up an interesting story (provided in the box) about the five points that a pencil maker wants a pencil to remember when it puts it in a box in order for it to become the best pencil. Then I asked them to replace themselves with the pencil in the story and speak about what rules God would want them to remember in their journey called life -and the attempt was laudable. What I learnt from these classes was that if you want students to speak and come out of their cocooned existence pick up a topic that they are passionate about and then move on to complex issues. Bargain and you will get a good deal.

Short Inspirational Parable of The Pencil – Pencil Story

The Pencil Maker took the pencil aside, just before putting him into the box.

“There are 5 things you need to know,” he told the pencil, “Before I send you out into the world. Always remember them and never forget, and you will become the best pencil you can be.”

“One: You will be able to do many great things, but only if you allow yourself to be held in Someone’s hand.”

“Two: You will experience a painful sharpening from time to time, but you’ll need it to become a better pencil.”

“Three: You will be able to correct any mistakes you might make.”

“Four: The most important part of you will always be what’s inside.”

“And Five: On every surface you are used on, you must leave your mark. No matter what the condition, you must continue to write.”

The pencil understood and promised to remember, and went into the box with purpose in its heart.

Now replacing the place of the pencil with you. Always remember them and never forget, and you will become the best person you can be.

One: You will be able to do many great things, but only if you allow yourself to be held in God’s hand. And allow other human beings to access you for the many gifts you possess.

Two: You will experience a painful sharpening from time to time, by going through various problems in life, but you’ll need it to become a stronger person.

Three: You will be able to correct any mistakes you might make.

Four: The most important part of you will always be what’s on the inside.

And Five: On every surface you walk through, you must leave your mark. No matter what the situation, you must continue to do your duties.

Allow this parable on the pencil to encourage you to know that you are a special person and only you can fulfill the purpose to which you were born to accomplish.

Never allow yourself to get discouraged and think that your life is insignificant and cannot make a change.

(Sourced from http://www.indianchild.com/parable_of_the_pencil.htm accessed on 15 September 2017 at 5:00 pm)

Vocabulary: Building up your word bank

Merely memorizing five new words a day rarely works well in developing your vocabulary. You might be richer with this treasure of five new words in your word bank but when it comes to putting them into use you are at a loss because you have memorized them out of context. So, I decided to go theme wise. For the first class the students picked up the World of Computers and we jotted down ten words with their meanings. This was just the beginning – using a software called ‘Hot Potatoes’ within minutes six different exercises were generate easily. All I had to do was to type in the words and their meanings. From *fill in the correct blanks/true-false/crosswords/mix and match/complete the spellings*- I had before me multiple exercises using the same set of words. This repetitive task helped to reinforce the learning of ten words by different ways in a manner that the students felt empowered at the end of the class. There was a sense of ‘actual’ learning and the confidence to use these words in their day to day conversations and writing. Next class, the students were ready with a new theme and a new set of words which they wanted to learn. The idea of carrying a mini thesaurus also worked well with students who by now had become keen learners.

Similar experiments in ‘Grammar through Games’ and ‘Listening for Fun’ were well received by the class. This innovative thinking was fostered by the Institute For Lifelong Learning (South Campus), University of Delhi, where emphasis was not on what to teach but how to teach. The able and seasoned mentorship of its advisors helped to generate freshness in language teaching.

To conclude, the technique and methodology of handling the skills of Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, Vocabulary and Grammar demand a metamorphosis. It demands experimentation, innovation and motivation so that the end result leads to better communication skills. The entire process has to be made enjoyable so that the mundanity associated with a language class becomes a thing of the past.

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100 | Beating Mundanity in a language class...with Innovation, Interaction and Experimentation

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BIO-NOTE

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