



Classroom Challenges in English Language Learning: The Teachers' Priorities and the Learners' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The book *Basic Communication Skills* is prescribed for the First Semester Bachelor of Commerce students. A teacher reads out the conversations in Chapter 2 section (B) as there is no facility of playing the CD accompanying the book in the classroom. The students follow the conversations word by word in the book (only those who have the book and their immediate neighbours!). They underline the expressions used for denying permission with her help. She also helps the students to fill the blanks in the conversation on page 25 and asks them to practise the same.

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Introduction

What is presented in the above case study is not the experience of just one Aruna Kumari but that of many Aruna Kumaris and Ashok Kumars. We are not interested as much in the methodology of the particular teacher or its output as in her overall approach to the idea of 'communication' and also her priority— completing the text based exercises so that her students are not handicapped for the examination.

In addition to appreciating the concern of the teacher one must also assess the validity of applying the notion of 'practice' to an area of learning like language functions, where variety is the pivotal factor.

In the light of a thrusting demand by the job markets for a near native command over English language and its pronunciation, it is imperative that we dwell in detail on the challenges faced by the learner and the teacher in English Language Learning. The key-word is 'learner' because all the research being carried out in ELT is certainly of no use unless it enhances the learnability levels.

Challenges faced by the Learner in English Language Learning:

- The prejudiced view held by the learner about the language that it is difficult to acquire.
- Lack of opportunities to put into practice whatever they have learned in the English class resulting in the low levels of intrinsic motivation with the absence of external compulsion as well.
- Not so dedicated efforts and conventional approaches of the teachers
- A stepmother attitude towards this 'Uncle Tongue' treating it as a subject that is secondary in importance to the core subjects
- A kind of belief, pseudo-confidence that it is possible to 'manage' even without a strong base in English.

Challenges faced by the teacher in English Language Teaching:

- No proper mechanism to ensure learning by students
- Poor expression levels of students

- Even the examinations test only the written skills reducing English Language Learning only to a mere reproducing of what is learnt by heart.

- A perceived mismatch between classroom input and market demands forcing the students to depend and spend on the Spoken English Courses mushrooming in the market.

- Undue emphasis on completion of syllabus reducing the language learning activity to mere exercises like 'fill in the blanks', 'true or false' etc.

A clear analysis of the challenges presented above tells us that they are spread across the areas of methodology, materials and evaluation, each linked with the other, having an established role in language learning.

Further, a point has to be made about teacher's way of treating the book on communicational skills as no different from any other book for completing the syllabus. This, in turn, stems from his/her sense of responsibility or accountability with reference to examinations. The little speech practice whatsoever is evidenced in the class, unfortunately becomes the yardstick for teachers to gauge or guarantee learning and mark their achievement. But the sentences produced by the students as part of predetermined exercises do not constitute true language behaviour. Such a behaviour projects language learning as a matter of imitation and reproduction, taking away the quintessential property of language, that is creativity or productivity. Moreover, conditioning the minds of the learners into practising certain sentences or utterances leads to the stunted growth of their competence in that language resulting in their poor performance. Learners reformulate their learning through constant exposure to new chunks of language and it would do us good to supply them with a huge repertoire of expressions or utterances to draw from.

The English language text book at the Pre-University (P.U for short) or +2 level in the state of Karnataka has also risen to the occasion, incorporating more skill based components, providing ample practice to the learners in all the four skills of learning English. Though the implementation levels of tall

claims made in the objectives are of questionable proportions, the same cannot be generalized. This has, of course, served to enhance the entry level English literacy of our students with the undergraduate syllabus forming a continuum of what has already begun. The importance of learning pronunciation (one of the basic tenets of English language and also the most neglected for reasons that are more often than not, beyond our control!) is echoed in P.U English book in its note about the Language Laboratory. These are pointers to the fact that the syllabi in English at different levels are displaying an increased awareness of the importance of communication skills by incorporating the appropriate elements.

Teachers have also started responding to the new dimensions in the syllabus of English Language i.e. communication, a dimension which was hitherto taken care of in the normal course of teaching but now needs to be given a separate treatment. This has brought in its wake, challenges that force the teacher to redefine his/her priorities. The ideal, for these priorities, is to look beyond the examination requirements and address the genuine needs of learners in the areas of communication and equip them with the tools in order to become proficient users of language. Another step in this

direction is to increase the duration of a learner's stay with English for two more semesters, by not dispensing with English in the 5th and the 6th semester as is being done presently with the undergraduate students in all the universities in Karnataka.

What need to be addressed are the basic competence levels of our learners and not merely correcting their performance levels. In other words, the learners' basic understanding of how a language works needs to be strengthened rather than helping him or her learn many sentences in that language by heart.

When one can SEE the goal,
One can REACH it as well!!

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