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TEACHING OF ESL WRITING SKILLS

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Abstract:

English is an international language already known to educated Indians for a very long time since A.D. 1600 and A.D. 1700 when Britain established its colonies in a number of countries. In this world of competition, the large number of young people desirous of achieving excellence in specialized courses is required to have fluency in English. As it is more convenient and more useful to learn English, the number of those who want to learn English far exceeds those who want to learn any other foreign language. This fact keeps English in the front line. Listening, speaking, reading and writing are the basic skills of English. Language is a tool that makes human beings uniquely different from other animals and writing is the most difficult of all the skills to acquire. Communicative Approach can be adopted in teaching writing skills and the role of teacher in teaching writing is unique as a facilitator, group participant, and researcher.

Key Words: International language, basic language skills, writing, communicative approach, role of teacher, facilitator, group participant.

Today the English language has pervaded all walks of life. Krishnaswamy and Lalitha Krishnaswamy (2006:153) say that "English has become a global commodity like oil and the microchip and without petrol, computers, and the English language, the world will come to a halt. It is no longer a language of

national or cultural or class identity; it has become a language of technology, of communicational necessity".

"As a result of the widespread use of English, the very character of the English language is changing; it is slowly being stripped of its culture, class, and even race" (Krishnaswamy and Lalitha Krishnaswamy 2006:154). It has become a tool for international communication and a fairly high degree of proficiency in English & excellent communication skills in speaking and writing enhance students' employability. The career purposes of the language have been gaining importance.

Writing-an Important Language Skill:

Language is a tool that makes human beings uniquely different from other animals and writing is without doubt an important ability that human beings are endowed with. It is very important because it helps the students to learn. According to Raimes,

How does it help one to learn? Firstly, writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that the students may have been taught; Secondly, when the students write they have a chance to use language to explore what they want to say and decide on how best to say what they want to say. Thirdly, when students write, the effort to explain ideas is there. As the writers struggle with what to put down next or how to put it down on paper - they often discover something new to write or new way of expressing their idea (1983:3).

Writing also involves developing an idea and refining it. According to Shaughnessey (1977:234), "writing is the record of an idea developing. It is a process whereby an initial idea gets extended and refined. He thinks, toys with an idea and develops it". According to Emig (1977:123),

Writing allows us to have our ideas immediately available for review, re-evaluation, a process that can lead us to reconsider and refine our ideas, i.e. to learn what we think by

writing. Writing is a thinking process at various stages. Writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes in which writers orchestrate to organize during the act of composing. Writing is originating and creating a unique verbal constant that is graphically recorded.

The process of writing is usually divided into three stages – manipulation, structuring and communication. Manipulation consists in the psycho-motor ability to form the letters of the alphabet. This is the most rudimentary stage in writing and it should be taught from childhood onwards. Even for the Indian students whose mother tongue does not use the Roman alphabet, the task of learning to write the letters should be comparatively easy. By the time they come to know English, they will have developed sufficient muscle control by writing in their mother tongue. During structuring, the learner is required to organize the letters into words and words into phrases and sentences. This will be comparatively easy if writing is preceded by intensive oral work. In writing, communication is the ultimate goal. At this stage, the writer is able to select the appropriate structures and vocabulary in the overall context of the passage keeping in view the subject matter and the audience.

The explicit presentation of instructional objectives in a course syllabus enables the teachers to transform student needs into teaching points, identify target skills underlying instructional points, decide on the level of specificity for teaching activities, adopt or adapt teaching materials appropriately, framing blue print for assessment, evaluate their own teaching effectiveness (cf. Frodesen 1995).

There is a close relationship between instructional objectives and learning outcomes. In teaching and learning, objectives help us in taking important decisions regarding course outlines and methods to be adopted. Before going to teach a subject, the teacher should be

clear about what he is going to achieve. A good teacher should decide the aims of teaching the target language. With careful thought, puzzling out precisely what he wants to achieve and what the immediate needs of his pupils are, a teacher of language can soon become an expert in noting the objectives that he should strive for and once he is aware of the advantage, he very soon forms the habit of directing his efforts and those of his pupils on to selected objects. The carefully thinking out of detailed and well-defined objectives for lessons will do more than almost anything else to improve a teacher's work and make it effective.

The materials suggest objectives, content, learning activities and learner and teacher roles. The content defines linguistic content in terms of language elements – structures, topics, notions, and functions – or learning tasks. They further specify subject matter, even where no syllabus exists and define intensity of coverage for syllabus item, allocating the amount of time, attention, and detail particular tasks required. Some activities are designed for students' self-instruction or for peer tutoring. Some of them also dictate interactional patterns in the classroom. The goal of materials is to present content, to practice content, facilitate communication between learners, etc. Materials should be text-based and task-based.

The Communicative Approach in Teaching Writing Skills:

This approach in language teaching is based on the theory of language as communication and can be adopted in teaching writing. The goal of teaching language is to develop "Communicative Competence" (Hymes 1972). The three important elements underlying the learning theory are communication principle, task principle, and meaningfulness principle. Some of the characteristics of the communicative view of language are: Language is a system for the expression of meaning; the

primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication; the structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses and; the primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meanings as exemplified in discourse. The general objectives of teaching a language are at an integrative and content level, a linguistic and instrumental level, an affective level, a level of individual learning needs and a general educational level, Littlewood (1981) mentions "functional communication activities" including tasks like learners comparing sets of pictures and noting similarities and differences; working out a likely sequence of events in a set of pictures; discovering missing features in a map or picture, etc. and "social interaction activities" including conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role plays, simulations, skits, improvisations and debates. The learner is a negotiator and the teacher plays the role of needs analyst, counselor and group process manager. A wide variety of materials have the primary role in promoting communicative language use. Cooperative learning, cooperative organization and activities, task-based language teaching etc are important features of the approach.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) prescribe basic principles of communicative language teaching. Some of them are – meaning should be important presentation should be in the form of dialogues, contextualization, drilling, effective communication, judicious use of native language, reading and writing from early stage, teacher's motivation of the learner, learning within curriculum, etc. Wilkins (1976) proposed Notional Syllabus, which specified the semantic-grammatical categories and the categories of communicative function that learners need to express.

Some of the designers looked to task

specification and task organization as the appropriate criteria. "The only form of syllabus which is compatible with and can support communicational teaching seems to be a purely procedural one – which lists, in more or less detail, the types of tasks to be attempted in the classroom and suggests an order of complexity for tasks of the same kind" (Prabhu 1983:4).

The activities compatible with communicative approach are unlimited. These exercises engage learners in communicative process as information sharing, negotiation of meaning and interaction.

These attempts take many forms. Wright (1976) achieves it by showing out-of-focus slides which the students attempt to identify. Byrne (1978) provides incomplete plans and diagrams which students have to complete by asking for information. Allwright (1977) places a screen between students and gets one to place objects in a certain pattern: this pattern is then communicated to students behind the screen. Geddes and Sturtridge (1979) develop "jigsaw" listening in which students listen to different taped materials and then communicate their content to others in the class. Most of these techniques operate by providing information to some and withholding it from others (Johnson 1982:151).

The learner is a negotiator – between the self, the learning process and the object of learning. He interacts and negotiates within the group. He learns in an interdependent way. The teacher is a needs analyst, counselor and group process manager.

The instructional materials influence the quality of classroom interaction and language use. They may be text-based or task-based and they play an important role in promoting language use. The techniques and class management procedures include presentation of brief dialogues, oral practice, question and answers, interpretative activities, giving written home assignments, evaluation of learning, etc.

The communicative approach aims at fluent, authentic and meaningful communication and it involves the integration of different language skills. Learning is a process of creative construction. With these principles in mind the approach can adopted into our teaching of writing skills.

Role of Teacher:

The role of teacher in teaching writing is unique. During their process of teaching, the teacher monitors the pairs, intervening when appropriate, to help students. Harel (1992: 169) says "during this time the teacher interacts, teaches, refocuses, questions, clarifies, supports, expands, celebrates and empathises. Depending on what problems evolve, the following supportive behaviours are utilized. Facilitations are giving feedback, redirecting the group with questions, encouraging the group to solve its own problems, extending activity, encouraging thinking, managing conflict, observing students, and supplying resources". According to Breen and Candlin,

The teacher has two main roles: The first role is to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom, and between these participants and the various activities and texts. The second role is to act as an independent participant within the learning - teaching group.... A third role for the teacher is that of a researcher and learner, with much to contribute in terms of appropriate knowledge and abilities, actual and observed experience of the nature of learning and organizational capacities (1980:99).

Besides these roles, the teacher should act as a needs analyst, a counselor, and group process manager. The teacher assumes a responsibility for determining and responding to learner's language needs.

The communicative method in ELT is envisaged not only to develop the communicative capacity in our students but also to empower them with the capability to learn

how to learn and become self directive in the long run. As writing is also a form of communication, this method can be applied to teaching of writing skills.

Mastering the art of writing involves learning to use writing implements, write legibly, spell correctly, use punctuation, satisfy grammatical rules, take an account of audience, construct and organize texts, select from a range of styles etc. A strong need to improve writing skills of students at degree level was felt. A language task with communicative principles was applied to teaching of composition. An activity of writing to short composition on a topic "The Importance of English in India" is assigned to a group of thirty students in a degree class.

As a part of pretask activity, the problem was posed, defined, and a general class discussion was conducted. The students were asked to write a short composition, with minimum teacher support. They lacked confidence and their output is substandard. Their writing performances revealed problems like inadequacy of ideas, poor organization, writing irrelevant information, errors in spelling and grammar etc.

During the task activity, the students were organized into five groups of six each and one of them acted as secretary. Each group was given an aspect of the topic. The aspects are English as a 'link language', means of social communication, window on the world, library language, language of globalization etc. The group started working suggesting one another. The brainstorming activity took place through talking to other students. This helped them to collect many ideas. The secretary reported back jotting down the points discussed. The ideas were further developed eliciting questions, generating vocabulary and phrases and related language structures. The blackboard was used to highlight the useful words, structures, layout, etc. The classroom provided an environment for writing at each of the main stages, gathering

ideas, working on drafts and preparing the final drafts. The groups working were monitored, encouraging in a supportive way intervening to correct errors, building confidence etc. The drafts were exchanged and peer feedback was collected. The drafts were revised and submitted for correction. The feedback was given commenting and making suggestions. Remedial teaching was taken up.

The learners came out with much better products when the teacher planned and organized enabling activities and brainstorming sessions for eliciting ideas, identifying suitable language items, adopting appropriate style etc. This establishes that the qualitative improvement in writing performance is gained by establishing a collaborative, interactive framework where learners work together on their writing in a workshop atmosphere.

Findings:

- 1 There is a positive relationship between teacher preparation and learner performance.
- 2 Application of communicative approach to language learning brings about qualitative change in the writing performance.

Implications:

- 1 Skill development in language learning should be based on process-oriented approach.
- 2 When the writing is on monitoring and regular feedback will promote development of writing skills.
- 3 As attempting writing tasks is a complex process, teacher should facilitate that acquisition of writing skills by the learner.
- 4 The focus of attention at all levels should be communicative competence.

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