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Ignite the zeal of every student to learn English language in a heterogenous class

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ABSTRACT

Our view of teaching the English language is essentially socio-constructivist. In India, the classrooms are generally heterogeneous. It has been a challenging experience for the teachers of the English language to tackle the problems in the heterogeneous classrooms. If we aspire to profit from heterogeneous groups; we need to believe that diversity is not a snag. It is an opportunity to know various perceptions and to enrich teaching. English teachers should be aware of the different interests and needs of the students to organize and to arrange activities accordingly. Humor can help teachers initiate a more relaxed learning environment which significantly lowers fear factor and allows quality learning to take place.

Keywords— Socio-constructivist, Heterogeneous, Diversity, Perceptions, Humor, Fear factor

1. INTRODUCTION

Today the world of information has replaced the world of industries. It has compressed the time and space. Transcending the geographical barriers, the information revolution is redefining the world of our priorities. The emerging global economy is both competitive and inter-dependent. The Economists opine that English is the world's standard language and has a global priority over other languages across the world. The world is in various stages of transition—social, economic and demographic. It has changed more rapidly in the past two decades than any other time in the entire history of the world.

Our view of teaching the English language is essentially socio-constructivist. In this, we believe that in the end, students must be able to use the language confidently. In order to learn, the students must first become engaged with situations or tasks that are sufficiently challenging to demand the usage of language by themselves.

In India, the classrooms at the tertiary level are heterogeneous. A heterogeneous class is one that has different kinds of learners in it. Every day, we face mixed-ability classes in which there are students with mixed language-learning abilities, different attitudes, personalities, cultural backgrounds and interests. As a teacher, our aim is to reach all of our students. However, it is well-known that every student has a different way of learning, and learns and progresses at diverse pace. Therefore, when some students may find the learning task very easy to deal with, others may find it difficult to understand. These may be an obstacle for the teachers in reaching the students, which eventually result in ineffective learning.

If we aspire to profit from heterogeneous groups, we need to believe that diversity is not a drawback. It is usually necessary for the teachers to evaluate and adapt the materials according to the class. Initially, an English language teacher may collect data pertaining to the background of the students. The teacher can prepare a diagnostic test to confirm the data gathered in the survey. As language teachers we are constantly trying to find ways to inspire our students and get them involved in the learning process. It has been challenging experience for the teachers of English language to tackle the problems in the heterogeneous classrooms.

Dhyrialakshmi, a student of Anna University committed suicide for not being able to understand the classes conducted in English. Every year, we come across a significant number of suicide cases for not being able cope up with the lessons taught in English. A growing problem not only in India but all over the globe is that this generation students are more stressed than ever. In fact, India has one of the highest rates of suicides among people aged between 15 and 25. Although the reasons are myriad but failure in examination, unemployment, and depression are some the reasons why people put their life at stake.

For the Tamil medium students and the first generation learners “peer pressure” is a mammoth problem. The more reputed the college is, the greater the competition and the gap between the Tamil medium and English medium students. So the chances of

failure are higher in IITs compared to other top colleges. Of course, being English language teachers, the onus is upon us to bring out some solutions for bridging the gap, which may take some years and may be a lengthy process, but rewards are countless.

Casting our eyes onto the past, we notice that learning was first viewed as a passive activity for the learners, the all-omniscient teacher poured knowledge into their innocent, untrained brains. This notion led teaching to be seen as teacher-centered and teacher-led, since the teacher was the authority figure and the only one who possessed knowledge. This autocratic model of teaching led to the creation of a persona, fashioned by most teachers at the time. The master was supposed to be cold, sterilized, devoid of any emotions. Students were seen as a hindrance to the progression of the lesson and mistakes were not tolerated. Individual differences did not exist and students were merely viewed as clones of one another.

Fortunately, we now know that learning is primarily an emotional process, therefore learners need to be inherently interested in what they learn and if this is to happen, teachers need to make their subject-matter relevant to the learners' needs and lives. The learners' personal engagement in their own learning is now valued, since learning is seen as a life-long process.

Learning is now seen as a combination of mental and emotional processes. It is a complicated process broken into a multitude of sub-skills and it tends to be different for different people. The idea of learning styles and multiple intelligences has helped educators of all disciplines realize that learners cannot be seen as a group. Individual presence, participation and differences matter and they play a great part in the efficacy of the lesson delivered.

Learning in an interactive way, in non-threatening environments, offers the opportunity to learners to ask questions, without being labeled negatively or bullied and they also have the time to connect incoming knowledge with what they already know. In fact, this connection forms the basis of their learning. Therefore, their past knowledge helps them understand, assimilate and later apply what they are learning.

Teachers have a number of tools at their disposal in order to create cohesive, all-inclusive and highly interactive learning environments. The first way to connect with our learners is to take them seriously into consideration. Getting to share their culture and their passions and having teachers show respect for the students' pastimes and their ideals, is what puts forward the idea of equality and opens the channels for true and honest interaction between the teachers and the learners. Music, the digital world (apps, games and even gadgets), sports and fashion are great vehicles that allow teachers and learners to come closer and use language to communicate in a setting which is purposeful and authentic.

An English teacher has to cater to the linguistic needs of all the learners to pursue their professional courses successfully in English medium. Students in India enter the professional courses with different standards in English language. Although the goals of English language communication skills to a mixed group at professional courses are common, the immediate linguistic needs of each individual vary. Some students need accuracy in language and some students need fluency. Some students are poor in writing and reading and some students in listening and speaking. Hence, it is the duty of the English language teacher to know the immediate needs of the learners at the beginning of the course in order to meet the common final goals.

Since most language textbooks are designed for an ideal homogeneous classroom environment, teachers always have to deal with the problem that students react to the textbook differently due their individual differences. Many of the teaching materials presently used in an English class rooms are alien to the socio, cultural and geographical backgrounds of the learners in India. So, some students may find the textbook boring or very tough, whereas some find it interesting or very easy. In addition, as language teaching course materials are currently based on content-based or theme-based syllabi, some students may find the topics dull, strange, or meaningless; whereas others find it enjoyable, familiar or interesting. Therefore, it is usually necessary for the teacher to evaluate and adapt the materials according to his/her class.

Since the classroom is the first and only environment for many good language learners, they should make use of this chance as much as possible. However, some of the students find it difficult to speak in the target language for many reasons ranging from interest to confidence, from age to knowledge. Other students, however, would like to express everything they think or feel by using the new language. As a result, some students may take many turns, while others do not speak for the entire lesson. It is the duty of the teacher to create the congenial atmosphere in the class room and build confidence among the students to express their views in the target language. Interest problems may arise due to the differences among students in terms of their attitude towards the subject matter and/or the teacher; their knowledge of language; and their personality. For instance, some students may find lessons boring, as the topic has no familiarity with their own life or their interests. Furthermore, some of the students may not be interested in the lesson, unless they do get the chance to express their own ideas since the teacher talks too much during the lesson or the other students take many turns. Hence, teachers should be aware of the different interests of the students to organize and to arrange activities accordingly.

Classrooms in schools and colleges in India are usually over crowded. The number of students in each classroom varies from forty to sixty and sometimes even to eighty. Hence a language teacher cannot concentrate on needs of each individual, cannot do justice to all students in developing their LSRW skills. In this situation, a fully equipped digital language lab can help in conducting a diagnostic test, knowing individual's problems in the language and assigning different exercises to practice according to their aptitude. Some suggestions to deal with the above pedagogic problems to handle a mixed group at tertiary level of teaching are:

- Know the learner's profile. (socio-cultural, economic, geographical and educational background of the students and their family members)
- Conduct a diagnostic test to know the language standards of the students.

- Categorize the students according to their levels in language standards.
- Select appropriate teaching material according to the language skill required to develop and the level of the students, familiarity, interests, etc.
- Motivate the students towards the topic and its importance as a skill.
- Build confidence among the students that they can excel in the target language.
- Build a congenial atmosphere to learn and practice the skill in target language.
- Choose eclectic approach according to the attitude and learning style of the students.
- Take the regular feedback tests and evaluate their standards at regular intervals.
- Make use of appropriate teaching methodology and techniques and audio-visual aids to make learning effective.

In a heterogeneous classroom, it is important to assess the background knowledge of each child. The achievement of each child depends on his cognitive skills. Learning and academic performance of a student depends on social and economic factors. Whole-class learning is able to proceed largely because students are able to learn when the task comes within the range of their current knowledge.

The use of humor can help teachers create a more relaxed learning environment which significantly lowers the fear factor, thus allowing quality learning to take place. The idea of using humor in education goes far beyond cracking jokes or pleasing the crowds by turning the teacher into a caricature. Our sense of humor, when put into good use, can bring us closer to our learners and also defuse tension. Attention is needed, though, as what constitutes a joke differs greatly between people of different cultures. Sharing a laugh with students in class is part of sharing positivity with them. The teachers' ability to see the ridiculous side in serious issues has the power to make learners stress less over tests or exams. This also tends to make learners less afraid of their mistakes. Sharing emotions creates a sense of belonging, so that all the students in the class feel they are members of the same team. The additional bonus is that empathy is created, because students learn how to express their feelings and how to share their feelings with others in a healthy way. Finally, a sense of shared purpose is achieved which helps in achieving the learning goals as well as having fewer discipline problems.

Effective teachers make continual assessments as teaching proceeds, in order to keep the class in the learning zone. There is no need to record such continual assessments because if they are effective, they should be out-of-date before the end of the lesson. One of the most common instruments used by a teacher to help students to use the language on his own is questioning. Experienced teachers rarely deliver lectures. Rather, their expositions and explanations are characterized by the skilled use of oral questioning. Clearly, oral questioning has the potential to generate required information to guide the teaching and learning process.

Time and time again many complaints have been made against the Indian education system which is more inclined towards memorization and takes long systematic study hours. To make the entire system of education effective, the English teachers have a huge role to play. In an Engineering college, the English period is the most sought after and welcome one. The students give feedbacks stating that only during the English classes they are treated with dignity as future professionals. This motivates them to come out of the shell and learn things with a lot of enthusiasm. In short, an effective English classroom is interesting, interactive and instructive.

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