

Towards a Conceptual Framework at using Language as a tool of Creativity and Communication in Social Work training

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Abstract

Language learning is said to be a complex process involving a lot of theoretical instructions and knowledge of rules to master grammar and writing skills. However, what we need is innovation and newer techniques in the teaching material for honing English Communication Skills. The aim should be developing an integrated approach to sharpen the skills of language: Reading, Writing, Grammar, Vocabulary, Speaking and Listening through a series of informative and fun filled tasks. Language is a social activity - so the aim of content writers should be to introduce learners to a totally new experience in developing these skills. With minimal textual emphasis and optimal use of practice exercises, an effort should be made to make learning a pleasure for students. In short, language should inculcate a sense of creativity and serve as an important tool of communication.

The social work training teaches persons to become sensitive to the needs of the weaker sections of society and to reach out to addressing their needs and concerns. Social work deals with individuals, groups and communities. In doing so the social worker has to be an effective communicator. To be an effective communicator the social worker must have a command over the language. This research article is an attempt to understand the issues and challenges of social work students in English language and to assist social work students to have a hands-on training on language, so as to be an effective social worker.

Keywords

Language, communication, creativity, social work, training

Introduction

Language is the empowering tool that distinguishes humans from animals and we are biologically tuned to gain knowledge with language as the catalyst. All humans have a language acquisition device which contains knowledge of grammatical rules common to all languages- proposed Noam Chomsky (Shaffer, Wood, and Willoughby, 2002, pp391-394).

It would not be an exaggeration to say that language is a sub - conscious process and the focus is on understanding and communicating the content through language where the communicator is not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the language he or she is acquiring. The comprehensible input from the environment coupled with contextual and non-linguistic cues

enables us to focus on the understanding of language one encounters and enables one's audience to understand what one means. Thus, as a language and social work teacher, the onus is on us, not to despair and bemoan the paucity of resources but develop techniques on enhancing language skills through constant experimentation and innovation.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce students and teachers to use language as a tool of communication and to enhance creativity which is integral to personal, social and professional interactions. One of the critical links among human beings and an important thread that binds society together is the ability to share thoughts, emotions and ideas through various means of communication both verbal and non-verbal. In the context of rapid globalization and increasing recognition of social and cultural pluralities, the significant and creative use of language as an effective communication tool has substantially enhanced.

The present study hopes to address some of these aspects through an interactive mode of teaching-learning process and by focusing on various dimensions of communication skills. English as a language is very important in the government and non-government agencies. In the developmental sector at national and international agencies English is the language that is in use. Many students do not have a command over English language as in their schools English was the second language and they do not belong to that social environment that English is much in use. Thus, as teachers we felt that for social work students to professionally develop English steps must be taken to strengthened the language at college level.

Research Findings

The present study was qualitative in nature. The objective was to understand the views, issues and challenges of social work students towards English language. Twenty students were randomly selected from first year Bachelors of Social work from a college in Delhi. The students mainly come from rural Delhi area. The findings highlight that the students come from schools where English language was the second language. All the students reported that they were not comfortable speaking, reading or writing in English language. The average marks of these students were 62 % scored in the school leaving examination (12th class). All the students stated that English was never spoken in their families and community. They all showed keen interest to enhance their knowledge in reading, writing and speaking the language.

This article endeavors to facilitate the students to advance in English language. To some extent, the art of communication is natural to all living beings, in today's world of complexities, it has also acquired some elements of science. It is hoped that a careful adaptation of the techniques suggested, students will find a difference in their personal and professional interactions and teachers will feel more empowered to use language effectively as a tool of communication and creativity.

Aspects of language skill development

The step-by-step progression in Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills determines the extent of perfection and mastery achieved in handling vocabulary within the structural norms of a language. Language creativity is the key aspect of communication. The skill in selecting the right choice of words is a great influencing factor in whatever we have to communicate through our spoken and written word. The horizons of communication, of which language is a major tool, are endless. They open a plethora of possibilities and set the stage for personal, intrapersonal and interpersonal interaction. Personal aspects include the confidence we have while facing an audience, holding a discussion or even simply writing our resume and filling applications. The intra and interpersonal skills need a strong control on words in order to express and convince our contentions on a wider platform, how to twist and turn words to be able to give appropriate messages, advertise, inspire and even convey diplomacy in undertones. The mode of language expression determines the extent of impression that we can create.

We shall now handle one by one the four aspects of language skill development and what measures can be taken to enhance each of them.

Listening without Comprehending: The dilemma of Indian classrooms

First and foremost, comes listening. The first impression of language is created through listening or in other words focused hearing. Very naturally, a child constantly exposed to the spoken words picks up its mother tongue. Here itself lies the cue. An appropriate listening environment needs to be created. Sounds of the words listened to have to be well articulated, as it is the gateway to correct pronunciation, intonation and stresses. Here the role of the instructor is extremely vital. Not only within the language class but throughout the medium of instruction, the learner is exposed to listening, and will pick up the speaking style accordingly. The key is to listen to the right pronunciation and copy. Hence, command of the spoken language has to be mastered by every instructor. To draw and sustain the attention of a listener is an art in itself.

While teaching language, storytelling is an extremely powerful means because a narrative always catches the interest of a listener. The narrator needs to mix and match pictures and dialogues, within which the learning message is hidden and nowadays there is no dearth of multimedia assistance. The possibilities are unlimited for any age-appropriate audience.

For instance, if in my field placement I need to instruct 6 to 8 year old on personal hygiene as a preventive measure against the spread of a pandemic. My story can be of a wicked witch called COVID who kills through a secret weapon called virus. She has created havoc all over the world. What to do now, before this witch is overpowered? And lo! comes a magician with his magic mantra of the 3F's. The first 'F' is FINGERS- remember to wash your hands after touching surfaces because the witch uses them to spread virus. So, destroy her weapons with soap and water. The second 'F' is FACE, our breath is a route for the virus. So, stop its spread

with a face mask. And the third 'F' is FOOD, beware of exposed and touched food, God knows how many have breathed and sneezed on it and dust has settled on it. So, conquer COVID through the 3F mantra, FINGERS, FACE and FOOD. So many slides and pictures can be shown to prove the point. Purpose of attentive listening solved.

Another means is through word association. A learner should be able to associate one word to a number of words related to it, and must be able to translate it into the counterpart word in one's own language and vice versa. For instance, the word is 'classroom' all related words are walls, floor, ceiling, black board, table, chairs, desks, bags, books, stationary, pupils, cupboard, teacher, chalk, duster, windows. First the word 'floor' can be conceived in native language and then translated and spoken in the languages being learned. Every word if translated, associated and then spoken, registers very well in one's mind.

For the keen listeners and learners, there is no dearth of opportunities. Entertain yourself plus gain knowledge by watching English movies, innumerable web series, plays on BBC, channels like History, National Geographic, Animal Planet, English news channels. You will register speaking styles and right pronunciations, when you will listen with keen interest. Decide on your own listening experience. At every stage a personal effort is needed. If you land in a foreign country where a different language is spoken altogether, try to listen, associate, translate and understand. Common nouns and objects remain the same, only they are called by different names. Even the rules of grammar don't change.

Developing Speaking Skills: Innovative Approaches

Listening paves, the way for speaking when one tries to articulate the sounds one hears and registers in one's mind. A good speaking skill encompasses a smooth flow of spoken words that convey a clarity, in diction and pronunciation, whereby the message delivered by speaker is well communicated and understood. To inculcate confidence in conversation, facing questions, discussions, making presentations, debating, dialogue delivery and giving a speech, persistent practice of spoken words, is the only solution. The more we practice, the more perfect we become. Now, the basic question is to create maximum opportunities to exercise our vocal cords. Firstly, through keen listening, correct pronunciation of words needs to be copied and then repeated over and over. In a classroom, model reading of every sentence, followed by the repetition by the learners does a great job, be it random words, literature pieces, prose or poetry. This should be followed by evaluated individual opportunity and group presentations. Every learner must be asked to speak on the qualities of oneself and one's peers verbally. Two minutes need to be allotted to personal speech on any random topic by circulation to every learner. This can be easily accommodated for two to three learners in every period. A group discussion, role play on an interesting topic which is latest and happening, can be accommodated for five minutes, once a month for individual groups of the learner's choice. It is also a very good means for the instructor to note and correct pronunciations and grammatical errors after every individual and group presentation. Besides, all varieties of speaking competitions are a part and

parcel of student life. A parent can also spare two to five minutes of one's time and ask the learner to keep him or her abreast of the latest news and happenings or to what happened in the college. Friends and siblings can have a conversation time. These activities build confidence through practice. A sincere effort can accomplish a lot and step by step a good speaker is created. At an advanced stage rehearsal and correction are extremely important. One needs to record one's spoken words and presentation and listen back to them part by part or take an expert advice if possible, and then take the corrective measures. Recording is ready feature in smart phones now. Once again, listening and emulating a good speaker's goes a long way in self-improvement.

Right Reading: Interactive Initiation into the process

It is rightly said that 'Reading Maketh a Man'. Reading lays the foundation of knowledge and moulds the character and personality as it is a great influencing factor in one's attitude and outlook towards life and society.

As far as language learning is concerned, it is incomplete without reading. It fills up the lacunae created due to lack of opportunities in speaking and listening. Understanding the subject matter only dawns through reading, because it enables one to grasp the meaning of the written words. Secondly, the structural and grammatical errors can be minimized only through reading because every part of speech is knitted together to create meaningful sentences. We get a hands-on experience of the context in which every grammatical rule fit into a sentence. Thirdly, reading is the Mecca for enriching one's vocabulary. The more we read the more familiar we get to the sea of words. There is the dictionary, the thesaurus and the encyclopedia which opens new horizons into a new world. A person may not have experienced the new environments, but reading definitely gives a verbal exposure and creates a ground work of what to expect, rather it gives the preparedness, at least theoretically in facing any situation in life. Hence to learn a language a mandatory reading time has to be set apart. A well-read person always stands apart in one's knowledge and perspective towards any aspect.

Now, the question arises on how the maximum benefit of reading may be acquired. Firstly, it is a gradual stepwise progression from simple to complex. At every grade, the age-appropriate reading material is readily available to everyone. The sources are book shops, public and institution libraries and book fairs, the availability of reading material is endless. And now with great advances in technology, guidelines for reading are available on the internet; any kind of book anywhere in the world can be accessed through amazon and downloaded on the kindle software. There is no dearth of reading opportunities and no shortage of a variety of practice material to anyone who can access the net. Once again, the need of the hour is the willingness to set apart a person appropriate reading time. Nowadays, reading time has been encroached by endless surfing which may not serve the right purpose and may even be derogatory. Hence, regulatory diversion towards meaningful reading is the need of the day. Interest has to be created and sustained as well. It is not the compulsory study, but the extra study, reading as an enriching hobby that needs to be inculcated.

Enhancing Writing Skills: The Product Priority or to build an Authorial Practice

Reading is the foundation stone of the writing skills. Only a well-read person can flower into a good writer, as reading provides the manure of vocabulary to nurture the soil where flowers of good writing pieces will blossom.

One thing must be kept in the mind is that, in order to initiate a reading habit in the learner, the choice of reading material is very vital. It should be able to create the spark of interest in the reader and should be easily digested by one, leaving a craving for more. In the rudimentary years story books, fairy tales, comics and children magazines play that initiating role. As age progresses, novels of every genre are available to satiate one's reading appetite, then there are popular magazines, like reader's digest, sports magazines, fashion, food magazines, political magazines, a variety of newspapers and the latest and the most happening in the tow are the blogs to follow. Social work students have access to the library and there are online books and articles that can provide lots of reading material.

Writing is a fine art. It is an idea, a thought, an emotion, a perspective, a contention interwoven into sentences whose purpose is mostly clear but sometimes clothed in a web of intrigue which takes an effort to decipher. Mastery on the writing skills is a gradual process which progresses from simple to sophisticated. The simpler aspect of writing is to use a good vocabulary to create meaningful sentences. Sentences that support a single idea are grouped together to form a paragraph. Then paragraphs on the same perspective, group into an essay, article, speech, debate and so forth.

The topic sentence in the paragraph is the key. All other sentences support the topic sentence or word. The simplest means is to create a graphic organizer of word association. It means putting the topic sentence or word in the center circle and using arrows, writing all the words associated with it. If I have to write about myself, I will put my name in the center and with arrows mark my personality attributes in single worded traits. Firstly, the apparent ones which are short, stout, fair, fashionable, round face, short hair, brown eyes and so on. Similarly, mark the less apparent ones like friendly, extrovert, open minded, flexible, mature, cultured, the choice of vocabulary is endless. Now, I have to expand these words into sentence and group them together to form a paragraph or two on myself. The purpose is that, first through word association we need to collect a vocabulary which can be expanded into sentences that are able to support the topic sentence and build it into the paragraph.

Word association and graphic organizers are the blueprints of an architect on which he can build up and create an end product, be it an article, essay, speech, blog, debate, discussion or presentation. For instance, to write an article on any issue, problem or topic, we can use ICES; keeping the topic in the centre, four boxes can be created namely, 'I' or 'Introduction' stating the facts about the issue and quoting any data available. Even if four to five facts are stated in basic words, an introductory paragraph can be created. The next box is 'C' for 'Causes' which gives four to five reasons on why the issue has come up. It forms the second paragraph of our article.

The next box is 'E' or 'Effects', to every cause stated in the second paragraph, there is definitely a corresponding effect. Newton's Third Law, the cause-and-effect relationship. We can have access to data to strengthen all I, C and E. This is our third paragraph. And finally the fourth is 'S' or 'Solutions'. I simply reverse the causes and this gives me meaningful solutions to my issues, topic or problem. It constitutes my fourth paragraph. Thus, a balanced article is created.

Of course, a study to create the groundwork of ICES is mandatory, so all reading resources need to be tapped. In a debate, one creates all positives in favor or negatives against the motion. In a speech, motivation is the purpose. But, paragraph by paragraph, each one has to be built through reading and preparing the groundwork of associated vocabulary and interconnected ideas.

Finally, the creativity on the canvas of the subject for the article or report needs to be discovered and nurtured by the soul. The world of the great novelists and writers needs to be explored and appreciated before the seed of creativity takes roots. The basics need to be imbibed and understood. Creations have to be polished and decorated with figures of speech. The flame has to be kindled first before the sparks are unleashed. Many of

budding writers blossom through influence and inspiration and even through an innate potential to play with words. Many have reached the pinnacle of verbal and written expression. The possibilities know no limits. Just reach out and touch the sky.

Conclusion

While minimal emphasis should be on theoretical aspect, the motive should be to expose the reader to more interesting material. Interactive worksheets must be incorporated to improve communication skills. The lessons on language skills, should be targeted at enhancing a student's ability to speak, read and write better English. Writing and speaking tasks must be an interesting mix of pleasure and learning. A fresh approach to tackle the problem areas in reading and comprehension is the need of the hour

Thus, the social angle of collaborative learning that Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development where the learner learns new skills in the company of better informed, better trained or better equipped persons is very true of learning. Vygotsky "repeatedly stressed the importance of past experiences and prior knowledge in making sense of new situations or present experiences. Therefore, all new knowledge and newly introduced skills are greatly influenced by each student's family environment"(Dahms et al,2008).

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Bio-Note



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