

A New Chapter: Being A Child

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It was the end of the rainy season somewhere in month of September-2016 when I joined one of the biggest not-for-profit organisations in India, the Azim Premji Foundation. It gave a sharp turn to my life. The programme I joined, associateship programme, is mandated with the initial process to understand a government school through observations and facilitations of classes for a year as we needed to work with public school system, developing the teacher capacity more in terms of perspective along with content. Fortunately I had been assigned to Azim Premji School.

Teaching is a skill which needs special professional training and I had no such expertise at hand. Besides, I had been in primary school only when I myself was studying there! In the beginning the school seemed fascinating due to its enthralling learning environment and superlative schooling culture. As instructed I remained as observer and deciphered the academic as well as administrative process of public education system.

As I did this, I realised that I had reached the place where I supposed to be. The initial phase of observing English classes opened my eyes to the children's interests, their learnability and the challenges which teachers face in teaching a foreign language. This is when I had got the practical knowledge of teaching. At the same time, I started facilitating Nali-Kali classes. This is when I validated myself as a teacher.

It is now been three months that I have started taking English classes independently. At the beginning, as all new teachers assume, I also became aware of the fact that 'more is better', experience does matter in the teaching learning process. Initially, keeping order in the classroom took up a lot of time and there was not enough time for the teaching process and planning activities. I became a bit discouraged due to my incompetence in facilitating classes. As it was English class I spoke only in English which made students lose interest as many of them could not understand what was going on around them. Under pressure, I switched to the local language, but it appeared that it distracted everyone from my aim of creating the

right environment for learning English. It is rightly said that only an interested teacher can make the learning interesting, so I decided to motivate myself and develop the learning atmosphere.

The first two months, the process of assessment of children's baseline knowledge, that is, locate my students' learning level, helped me to get back on track to create the right learning background.

When we talk of English language in primary schools, the aim is to cultivate the children's ability of speaking and communication, as English, like every other language is a tool of communication. But among four skills of language learning- listening, speaking, reading, writing,- I found reading, even without understanding, is perhaps the easiest for children, whereas speaking is the most difficult. There may be various reasons for the children's inability to comprehend what they read, and speak what they understand, but for our school children the obvious reason is that they have little or no exposure to English environment and speaking practice outside the classrooms. This means that the school may be the only place for them to use what they have learnt, so they need lots of practice when they are here.

This raised the following questions in my mind:

What can be done to create an English learning environment and enhance students' engagement and individual involvement in classrooms?

Which method to choose?

How to connect the whole class where we have children of different interests and levels and bring in individual inclusive development?

How to evolve lesson plans tailored with activities to the interest of each individual?

At this point my experience of observing classes and children led me to the conclusion that 'language has to go in before it can come out'. Developing vocabulary can help me to achieve this goal. And I admit that one of the ways of learning a foreign language is through the ears - what children hear is one of the sources of the learning. I wanted to choose the best way to make their



learning interesting and began to explore as well as experiment with my own learnings to ensure the children to achieve second language competency.

One of the activities that was designed focusing on the listening ability was rhymes. Children of any age love to sing poems and rhymes. My first step towards building vocabulary was to sing and repeat the rhymes, which encouraged children to feel the language, the sound, the intonation and the rhythm. The rhymes were chosen with a combination of pictures and movements which helped to establish the link between words and their meaning. I accessed the rhymes through internet and made the selection according to the lesson. I was supposed to teach body parts so I took up the rhyme, *'Two Little Eyes to Look Around'*, while the poem. *'What's the Weather Like Today?'*, linked the idea of clothes to the concept of weather. In this way, rhymes have become a tool to teach concepts in my classes. Through these rhymes I have tried to make the children understand naming words, action words, and sentence structures. *I am, I can, I like* are usages that were easily conveyed to children only through rhymes.

Little bird can you clap?

No I can't, can't clap.

Little bird can you fly?

Yes I can, can fly.

Another tool has been stories which not only helped me in language teaching but also in widening the imagination and introducing new concepts relating to other subjects. Extensive use of body language has proved to be smarter when I tell stories to children. I am interested in music and theatre, which paved the way for an effective

delivery of stories. Stories of animals, science and traditions got the children's attention. Children asked questions about the characters, themes in simple sentences and modelling for stories in the summer holidays has been a big help, particularly in building vocabulary.

All this requires proper planning. Lesson planning is a very demanding task which takes great effort and time to understand. Designing materials is a challenge. I understood that to teach, designing Teaching-Learning Material (TLM) is a very challenging task. Along with this, alternative plans and teaching material and a good command over language are absolutely important in language classes. I needed to think out-of-the-box to bring in the right English learning atmosphere. Role playing, games, opinion writing and many such fun assignments enabled me to get children's attention and interest in learning a foreign language. Secondly, to fulfil lesson objectives, different worksheets were prepared to address different interest groups. Special attention was paid to grab the attention of the children who had not reached the class level. Activities such as group discussion, video screening, picture matching (related to the concept), and vocabulary building were redesigned. The earlier difficulties gave way to confidence - my zeal started paying off.

The list of activities tried goes on. Here I have been able to mention very few instances and activities which I have tried in class. Some were very successful, others less so. I am happy that I am exploring myself and finding many possibilities of teaching learning process. Although there are many challenges I have to face, will face with a smile and enthusiasm to go forward as the learning never ends. My motto now is, to quote Alfred Tennyson, *'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'*.

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