

INNOVATIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY FOR SMALL TOWN CONTEXT

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Abstract

English language education is a challenging task in India. Particularly in the smaller towns, where it is still a 'foreign' language that is far removed from the local context. However, it is considered to be critical for both professional and social progress. Year after year, reports on learning levels and drop-out rates are evidence that the prevalent teaching methods are failing. There have also been studies stressing on the need to make English language lessons more meaningful by keeping in mind the context of the child. This study seeks to unravel the challenges and opportunities of teaching and learning English in a small town. It takes a multi-faceted perspective by examining viewpoints of both teachers and students. This paper advocates for widespread adoption of communicative language teaching methods and 'translanguaging' using the child's first language. It also lays emphasis on utilizing suitable literature and necessity of support structures to create a conducive environment for English language education. The study concludes with suggestions on systemic changes to evolve teaching-learning English as a second language. Since the students in the small towns are not immersed in English language, it will be beneficial for educators to foster advancement in the students' first language. A deeper engagement in their first language can lead to simultaneous development of both languages.

Key Words: Indian Education, Teaching English language, Communicative Language Teaching, Translanguaging.

Innovative English language pedagogy for small town context

With the adoption of the Three Language Formula by the National Policy on Education, 1968 across many states, English became a compulsory language taught in most elementary schools and the medium of instruction across a vast number of schools in India (Shah, 2010). Being the principal language for communication in the globalized world, proficiency in English has become critical for educational and employment opportunities. Moreover, English is a language of power and prestige which aids social mobility.

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However, English is far removed from the social context of most children in India. Such unequal access to the language goes on to widen the chasm between the elite and the marginalized (Agnihotri, 2010). Hinged on the grammar translation method, English is taught in a linear, additive manner where grammar and vocabulary are taught through repetitive exercises focusing on test scores rather than learning. The dismal learning levels in schools provide additional proof that these methods are failing to achieve their objectives (Nanda P.K, 2018). Despite policy documents recommending education in the child's mother tongue, such schooling options are dwindling. A large migrant population in urban and semi-urban areas of the country has little option but to choose English medium education leading to higher push-outs and educational failure (Mohanty et al, 2010).

This makes a case for large scale adoption of wholesome and inclusive teaching methods placing the learner at the centre. When diversity is a given in any classroom in India, we also need a diverse set of learning objectives and teaching methods. (Parikh & Menon, 2019)

This study seeks to unravel the challenges and opportunities of teaching and learning English in a small town context by employing a three-pronged approach: (i) Researching an effective teacher's practices; (ii) Understanding the students' habits and motivations; (iii) Adopting innovative teaching methods in a community learning centre.

The study has been conducted in Sirsi town in Karnataka. Sirsi is a town municipality in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka. The population is about 62,000 and the average literacy is about 92% (Census, 2011). The major languages spoken are Kannada, Havyaka Kannada, Konkani, Urdu and Marathi.

While the time-honoured Skill-Building Hypothesis states that we learn structures, practice them in communication, and thereby develop fluency in the language; whereas, the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) takes the opposite route – where we first go for the meaning and thereby learn the structure of the language. The Input or Comprehension Hypothesis is based on the understanding that we learn language when we understand what we hear and read.

The Conduit Hypothesis (Krashen, 2018) posits that there are three stages in the development of academic language skills, where each stage serves as a channel for the next, providing the literacy competence as well as the knowledge needed to progress to the next stage. stage one: engaging with stories; stage two: starting with self-selected recreational reading and gradually

moving to narrow reading of a single author or topic of interest; stage three: narrow academic reading.

Hence, the current need is for developing a pedagogy shifting the focus away from building skills to classroom process and learner autonomy. Communicative language teaching (CLT) (Savignon, 1991; 2007) aims to bring the focus on the learner by taking into account a host of cultural, gender, social and other contextual variables. The need of the learner to negotiate meaning leads to cross-cultural understanding, which is critical for multicultural classrooms.

A classroom full of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds being commonplace in India, teachers who recognize the subtractive linguistic practices occurring in schools have to turn towards creating translanguaging spaces in their instruction. Translanguaging assumes the existence of a single linguistic repertoire from which multilingual speakers draw flexibly to accomplish different linguistic aims (Garcia & Yip, 2015). It has been recommended to use the ‘child’s fluid language practices’ in English classes. Fluid language practices means utilizing multiple languages simultaneously in conversations or while explaining something, by consciously choosing the various linguistic resources that each of the languages provide. Such an approach leverages the child’s full language repertoire leading to better comprehension of English texts while analysing their literary or linguistic aspects. Recommendations from translanguaging that can be implemented in a language classroom include creation of multilingual classroom spaces with appropriate multilingual content and grouping students according to their home language for peer-learning.

The comprehensible input necessary for language acquisition can be ably provided by bringing suitable literature into the classroom. The NCCL (Shukla, 2012) guide to good books suggests that the purpose of engagement with texts should consider these three aspects – to enable and support the learning of reading; exposure to the world, and, enabling all round, holistic development of children. Development of literacy and expansion of one’s linguistic ability should go hand-in-hand with scope for meaningful engagement which allows children to connect with the text and respond to it in various ways. To aid reading for pleasure that forms the conduit to academic reading, we have to provide an environment that aids free voluntary reading (Krashen, 2019).

Conceptual Framework:

It has been notably emphasized by Paulo Freire on how children are actively *reading* the world much before they are taught to read the word. It becomes necessary for the teacher to either be immersed in or develop a fair knowledge of that world when we begin to teach the children of a community. The pedagogy has to evolve out of this understanding of the students' context; And it has to offer space for the students to participate as co-creators. Thus creating an environment for dialogue where ideas can take shape and change. (Freire & Macedo, 2005).

I have been regularly visiting and spending quality time in Sirsi for the past 5 years. And I have taken support of other participants in the study to enhance my understanding of the context.

1. The government school teacher grew up in in a nearby village and has lived all her life in and around this town. Observing her classes and conducting detailed interviews helped me reflect on my own teaching practice and alter to make it more suitable.
2. The focus group discussion with the 9th grade students helped me gain insight into a sub-section within the same town community – children who attend an English medium school.
3. Interactions with students both inside and outside the classroom was instructive in knowing their joys, peeves and dynamics within the group. Since they all lived in the same neighbourhood, seeing where they live and gaining some background knowledge about their families was helpful.
4. I had teacher colleagues and co-founders from V-Learn who observed my classes and provided feedback after each class. This was helpful to tackle classroom discipline issues apart from deepening my understanding further.

In this study, I have been able to collect and refine teaching methods by reflecting on my own practice and that of the government school teacher, and also by employing inputs from all the other sources of data.

Broad Research Question: Based on the literature and experiences, the following question needed further examination: What are the possibilities of using innovative English language pedagogy in the small town context?

Methodology

Specific Research Question	Participant (s)	Research Tool (s)
1. What are the reasons making the English language teacher working in a government school in the small town effective?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government school teacher 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Classroom observations 2. Semi-structured interview
2. What are the factors that are supporting some students to achieve higher proficiency in English language?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 students from a reputed English medium school 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Focus group discussion
3. What are some effective ways of using children's repertoire of languages as a resource in the classroom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students • Researcher • Teacher colleagues 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Verbatim of classroom interactions 5. Written responses 6. Reflective journal 7. Oral feedback from teacher colleagues

This study has been conducted in three separate locations in and around Sirsi town.

Village School: This government primary school is located in a village at a distance of about 10 kilometres from Sirsi town. The village has a population of about 200 people and farming is the main activity. The school has a total strength of 25 students in classes from grades 1-5. Most of them are children of agricultural labourers and are first generation schoolgoers. I conducted classroom observations for 1 week in the mixed-age class of grades 4 and 5.

English Medium School: is a reputed high school located within Sirsi town. The school is run by a large educational institution and has a total strength of about 500 students from grades 8-10. Most of the students here hail from middle-class families. I conducted a focus group discussion with 4 students studying in 9th grade. These students were handpicked by the school principal for their academic proficiency in English.

V-Learn: is a two-year-old community learning centre being run in Sirsi. The founders are mental health professionals who have been working in the space of intellectual and learning disabilities for over twenty years. V-Learn conducts their after-school Program at the community hall in a working class neighbourhood in Sirsi town. I conducted 18 sessions during these 6 weeks for about 24 hours in total. The class strength was about 10-15 students and they were all studying in different government schools in Sirsi town. These students are from working class families living in the same neighbourhood.

Tools:

1. Semi-structured interview - Teacher:

I visited the government primary school for 1 week to observe classes and interview the English teacher through the week. The broad areas we covered during these interviews are:

- i) Family and educational background; The profile of the teacher as a reader.
- ii) The role of English language in teacher's life and career.
- iii) Pre-service and in-service teacher training.
- iv) The influence of Kannada on the proficiency of English.
- v) Classroom methods used and its effectiveness.

2. Classroom observations: Notes have been maintained on all the classroom observations of the government school teacher.

3. Focus group discussion – Students:

I conducted a focus group discussion with four 9th grade students who are managing to achieve a higher engagement with English literature and discussed the below topics:

- i) Family background.
- ii) Tracing literary activities from early childhood.
- iii) Literary environment at home.
- iv) Literary activities at school.
- v) Literary activities outside of school.
- vi) Support structures at home and school.

4. During my own classroom sessions at V-Learn, I recorded the following data –

- i) Verbatim of classroom interactions: Classroom interactions were monitored and recorded verbatim as far as possible.
- ii) Written responses: Students' written responses were analysed to gauge the effectiveness of the teaching methods and CLT strategies.
- iii) Oral feedback from teacher colleagues: There was always at least one teacher colleague from V-Learn who attended the classes and provided oral feedback at the end of each class.
- iv) Reflective journal: A reflective journal recording notes after each class reflecting on the methods employed, results and learnings.

Findings

Based on the thematic analysis of data, I have generated the following main themes: *Communicative Language Teaching*; *Translanguaging*; *Engaging with Literature*; and *Support Structures*. Some of these themes have multiple sub-themes as discussed below.

Communicative Language Teaching:

The necessity to adopt CLT methods was well summed up by the government school teacher I was researching. During an interview she gave on All India Radio, Karwar station, she says: 'Since English is a foreign language, village children feel overwhelmed and find it daunting. Hence, it is important to engage them in games, rhymes, conversations and other activities. Children should not realize they are being taught to. This will help in acquisition of the language in a very effective manner. Moreover, this is a joyful way of learning devoid of any fear or inhibitions.' (Annapoorna, 2019)

1(a). Contextualizing the content:

During my interview with the government school teacher, she indicated on the importance of English language in the context of the village where the school is located. She revealed that beyond the need for English in higher studies and career prospects, English language is now a necessary life skill on par with knowing to operate computers. Hence, her focus is to first ensure that her students are equipped with basic communicative skills in a supportive environment.

When asked about her teaching methods, the teacher briefly revealed the 5E Model of Inquiry (Bybee and Landes, 1990) adapted for language teaching. The lesson is planned around the 5Es: Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate. She begins the class by engaging the children in a warm-up activity; next, the topic of the lesson is explored with the students. During the class I observed, the topic of the lesson concerned professions. At this stage the teacher asked the class about all the different professions they know. To further contextualize the topic, she asked what are the different professionals they see when they visit the market. Such an approach brings the topic closer to the students and helps them comprehend the lesson better.

1(b). CLT activities:

In one of our interviews, the Government school teacher stated that warm-up activities help in bringing the child from her world outside consisting of her family, village etc. to the academic world of the school. The teacher uses an exhaustive list of language activities to engage her students with. Since they do not allow students to go outside the school premises for playing on a daily basis, she keeps them engaged in such activities during the breaks in between classes too.

When asked about rhymes, she said, 'We use rhymes as a warm-up activity to refresh the children's minds. Children learn sentences and new concepts and grammar too. There is also swinging of arms and legs, jumping and dancing – all of which they find thoroughly enjoyable. There is a rhyme called 'green-green parrots, flying in the forest, small-small parrots, we are happy now!' and later we have elephant, tiger and rabbit. There are times I ask the children to add on to this poem with any animal/bird of their own choice. Once the students added 'blue-blue peacocks, dancing in the forest, small-small peacocks, we are happy now!' By this, they learn sentence formation, understand the structure of a poem, rhyming words and moreover, it is a creative endeavour.'

The teacher has repeatedly emphasized that such activities help in immersing the child in a conducive environment of English language and thus extremely helpful in aiding acquisition of the language.

1(c). Conversational English:

During the class observations, I have seen how the government school teacher uses facial and bodily gestures to aid higher comprehension. The teacher's reading of the lesson is akin to a theatrical performance with voice modulation, facial gestures and hand movements to help her students understand the English lesson. She elaborates on this 'Our classrooms are

essentially bilingual classrooms where the usage of English is gradually increased as the students graduate from Nali-Kali to primary classes. For example, in Nali-Kali, I would simply use a communicative word like ‘come’ along with the appropriate hand gesture to help them understand these words first before they go on to comprehend entire sentences in the later years’.

1(d). CLT tools:

The government school teacher has created an English Corner out of the primary school classroom. She has painstakingly created over 500 TLMs out of discarded packaging material such as saree boxes and sweet boxes, invitation cards, calendars, paper cups, newspapers and magazines. She has crafted these into suitable shapes and hand-painted pictures and words that grab attention. Many of these materials are hanging on the walls of the classroom. They have been designed to meaningfully achieve an objective in enhancing English language skills of the students. I have seen a number of these TLMs being used during classes as well. The teacher has hand painted illustrations from textbook chapters which she uses as an aid during the lessons for better comprehension. In another instance, I saw the story from a textbook chapter being enacted by students using finger puppets created by the teacher.

Since every lesson introduces new words which are easily forgotten soon after, she has asked the students to maintain a Spelling Book – in which students make a note of the new word (they encounter during a lesson) and its meaning in both English and Kannada. They start maintaining the Spelling Book in 2nd grade and continue till they graduate from this school after 5th grade. This comes in handy throughout their schooling for spellings and meanings and goes a long way in developing their vocabulary.

Translanguaging:

The government school teacher revealed to me that she only began to learn English language from the 5th grade. However, the medium of instruction all through her schooling and beyond was in Kannada until she began pursuing her B.Ed. degree. When asked about how her proficiency in Kannada language helped develop her English language skills, she said, ‘Upto the age of 20, I studied in Kannada medium and I revelled in the richness of the language. Being my mother tongue, Kannada is firmly rooted in my consciousness. In addition, the literature I read made me fall in love with the language. Understanding the nuances of my mother tongue well has helped me develop proficiency in english. Languages have basic structures of alphabets, sentence formation, grammar etc. which are common to all. In my classroom, I ensure that we use Kannada to help understand the rules

of English, and meanings of words. We obviously communicate in Kannada and ensure their first language is improving as well, along with the English. I use the bilingual method along with the direct method at times. English is a language that is rarely heard in these parts, so it is crucial that they have a strong foundation in Kannada, which will help them develop their skills in English as well'.

For every new word they encountered during a lesson, the teacher would contextualize it in Kannada and get her students to write down the Kannada meaning of the word in their spelling books – sometimes with opposites, plurals and a sentence example. This was to aid the students recall the complete meaning of the word when they referred to it by themselves. After reading the lesson aloud in English, the teacher helped her students comprehend it in Kannada in an interactive manner encouraging the students to freely share their understanding. When asked about it, she said that comprehension is paramount and development of language skills depend on it.

Engaging with Literature:

The Reading Hypothesis claims that reading for comprehension is the source of our reading ability, writing ability, vocabulary, spelling, and our ability to understand and use grammatical rules. Recent studies strongly support the idea that the most effective form of reading is when we read what we want to read, i.e. free and voluntary or self-selected reading (Krashen, 2019).

3(a). Read-Alouds

I began my teaching stint at V-Learn by conducting Read-Alouds with carefully chosen picture books. Apart from introducing children to the magical world of stories told using alluring words and captivating pictures, these sessions also led us to have rich conversations, where we would interpret the text together as a group. Firstly, these conversations helped make connections between the text and illustrations. They also presented an opportunity for us to make inter-textual connections and even go beyond the text and draw parallels with the world outside. And crucially in this context, I read out bilingual picture books and tailored activities around them to help in skill-building.

3(b). Reading for pleasure

While relating her own journey as a reader, the government school teacher related how she began with reading locally available story books in Kannada during her years in primary school. And later graduated to 'personality development' (self-help) books in her high school years. During her college years, she graduated to reading both contemporary and classic novels in Kannada. Simultaneously, she also began reading the newspapers and

general awareness magazines. She had also read the English newspaper at times. It was only when she began her career as an English teacher, that she started to read English newspapers more regularly along with novels and self-help books. And now she reads academic papers and books to help her improve her skills as a teacher.

During the focus group discussion, only one student out of the four denied reading anything apart from her school books. The other three indulged in reading story books and short novels written for children. All of them revealed the books they mostly read contained moral values in them or were said to be ‘inspirational’. And since these books were purchased by their parents, inculcating such values seems to be an added purpose. All of the books they have been reading since the age of about 10 were in English. One student revealed that she began reading a book in Kannada during her previous vacation with the chief purpose of developing her language skills in Kannada.

Support structures:

4(a). Family

None of the parents of the 4 students who took part in the focus group discussion are college graduates. Their fathers run small businesses. But all their parents have ensured that their daughters attend English medium schools from kindergarten itself. The families support them by buying them books, encouraging them to participate in extra-curricular activities. 3 out of the 4 students have elder siblings and they claim to have been benefited from this by getting help in learning to read and write, getting introduced to books and getting guidance on academics. One student also finds it useful that her elder sister speaks in English with her as a fun activity. All 4 students remember their parents giving them their first lessons in early literacy. These introductory lessons in English language were to prepare them for their very first competitive entrance test - to gain admission into an English medium school of repute.

The government school teacher also claimed that she owes a lot to her parents and siblings’ support which has benefited her immensely as a student and now as a teacher.

4(b). Schools and teachers

During one of our interviews, the government school teacher revealed that she herself did not get good support at her school in the initial years which had her feeling indifferent towards English in the initial years. All of which changed in her high school when she was fortunate to have been taught by an effective teacher ‘who put in efforts and brought alive the lessons rather than just complete the syllabus. She further adds, ‘he taught us right from vowels and consonants and made meaning out of the lessons and this is what made me start liking English’.

All the students who participated in the focus group discussion spoke of the encouragement and support that is provided by the school in pursuing extra-curricular activities such as elocution, debate, drama etc. both within and outside the school. The school also ensures that these students are trained before representing the school in competitions outside.

4(c). Environment

In the low exposure setting of a small town, it is beneficial to make space for students to bring in their first languages into the classroom and engage with the foreign language. With the teacher making fewer corrections and instead providing more positive reinforcements. Such a healthy space at V-Learn and the Government school led the students to participate excitedly in games, express without inhibitions in classroom activities and even stage impromptu art performances.

It has been further corroborated by the 9th grade children during the focus group that a conducive environment also includes supportive peers, suitable books and educational audio-visual material.

4(d). Teacher training

The government school teacher claims to have immensely benefited from the training she received throughout her career. She made special mention of the English Language Teacher Education and Development Program conducted by the British Council of India through *Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan* (SSA) in collaboration with UNICEF. The training was on developing LSRW skills through language games; understanding instruction-checking questions, concept-checking questions, micro-teaching, giving feedback, classroom monitoring and management – almost every aspect that makes me an effective teacher comes from here. Later on, we she was responsible for cascading these Programs by training other teachers here in her own taluk. This was conducted over a period of 3 years and she claims it has played a major role in developing her both as a teacher and teacher-educator.

Conclusion

The study conducted across the three locations in a small town provide a multifaceted perspective to finding an English language pedagogy suitable for this context.

It has been revealed by the government school teacher and the enthusiastic students across the field sites that creating a micro-environment for teaching and learning English language skills in a small town setting is achievable.

Communicative Language Teaching (Savignon, 1991; 2007) practices offer a range of tools and strategies that have been found to be effective in this setting. A print rich classroom with well-designed TLMs, along with engaging activities conducted using the students' languages aid in acquisition of language while also being joyful.

The need for a comprehensible input in language acquisition (Krashen, 1982) has been articulated by the government school teacher. Extra-linguistic information can be provided by voice modulation, facial and bodily gestures to encourage acquisition of language as observed in the classroom practices of the government school teacher. This is particularly helpful with conversational English as observed across all three locations.

It is critical to employ translanguaging strategies (Garcia & Wei, 2014), (Garcia & Yip, 2015) (Garcia, Johnson and Seltzer, 2017) to use Kannada for learning English and thereby develop skills in both. The government school teacher's own journey as a learner suggests that both languages can develop simultaneously (Cummins, 1991; 2005).

The government school teacher's journey as a reader clearly depicts her moving through the three stages as postulated in the Conduit Hypothesis (Krashen, 2018). One of 9th grade students in the focus group discussion is on the similar path in her evolution as a reader.

This study also validates Free Voluntary Reading (Krashen, 2019) which claims that a reading habit helps in enhancing language skills. The data from all three settings in this study confirm that reading for pleasure is critical for developing this habit and has to be supported by both schools and homes.

The study establishes that creating a suitable environment for teaching and learning English needs to be supported at multiple levels. There are underlying reasons for both teachers and students who have achieved success in this context and we have to find ways to extend such support to everyone.

While V-Learn was engaging the children with Science, Math and English, it is suggested that they also develop a Kannada language program. Kannada is the home language of majority of the students and well entrenched in their environment. The purpose of the Kannada program should be to have a deeper engagement for developing academic language skills. Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis has been verified by the government school teacher who has attributed a strong base of Kannada literacy upon which her sound English language skills were built. Wider use of bilingual literature and Translanguaging techniques will help in making English more accessible and can ensure development of the Common Underlying Proficiency and foster simultaneous growth and transfer of both conceptual knowledge and language skills between the languages. Regular assessments can be designed to measure the improvement in language skills and the correlation between them. (Cummins, 1991; 2005).

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