

Teacher Preparation for Teaching Language in Elementary Schools

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Language is an entirely unique human activity that has no real comparison in any other species, though there is enough evidence to show that animals, both land and aquatic, birds and insects 'communicate' with each other and with the rest of their community to survive and procreate. Of course the 'finer' sentiments of love and loyalty are expressed by gaze and licking and so on.

However, using language as a tool for every activity that covers behaviour is, I would think, peculiar to *Homo sapiens*. I would go even so far as to say that we are drenched in language. Our intentions and thoughts, whether made public or not, are couched in linguistics. In this article, it is essential, I shall argue, to equip our children to acquire enough language skills in the first few years of their schooling that will stand the test of time and the vicissitudes of life. This broadly covers the following:

- Giving children enough language inputs to cover their immediate schooling needs (academic)
- Giving them opportunities to extend these skills to outside-the-classroom activities (social)
- Creating enough interest to use these skills in later life

Here we have to understand that in the Indian context, we are considering English (L2) as a replacement for the role played by the mother tongue (L1). The basic conundrum that faces most teachers in Indian classrooms across the length and breadth of this country is how to superimpose L2 on L1 and allow it to take over the functions of L1. Whether it is advisable to do this, were it even possible, is of course a moot point and one that has been the subject of a longitudinal study done for Cambridge University several years ago (Dr Sita Chari and Prema Raghunath). That no satisfactory conclusions were drawn is enough testimony to the very complex nature of the part played by language in the human brain. However, L2 is

here to stay. Indeed it has become an Indian language in one sense, though it is not entirely clear what part of the population that has even a working knowledge of English, would use it for social interaction and emotional satisfaction. We are talking in this context of a language that teachers must teach in order to equip learners for the economic and commercial world, rather than a language that gives its speakers a world view.

Language acquisition begins with listening. It is entirely safe to assume that if a child has normal hearing, she will pick up first the sounds, then chunks and finally sentences that constitute her linguistic world. This is the language that one hears spoken, whether the mother tongue or any other.

At three, the decision has been made to introduce L2 into the child's life and the elementary school teacher is the one to translate this dream into reality. In learning English, what does real-life listening involve, especially from the teacher's point of view? This can be divided into two stages:

First, gather samples of situations which might require English. List all the situations you can think of which involve people listening to others in their own mother tongue. This will include where they are responding answering, commenting, reacting etc. but the important thing is they must be able to understand what is being said. Penny Ur recommends that you talk yourself through a routine day and note all the different listening experiences that occur.

The second stage involves finding commonalities between English and the mother tongue. How can this be achieved in the classroom? Here are some suggestions:

Day 1 : The first item is, most definitely, informal talk. Most listening texts should be based on genuine, spontaneous speech or at least as close an imitation of it as possible.

The class must, by now, be able to understand simple words, appropriate grammar in the present and past

tenses and through this, be able to construct simple sentences outside the conventional textbook situation.

For example:

What are your names?

My name is _____. Her name is _____.

Practice with and.

My name is _____ and she is _____.

How do you both come to school?

I come walking and she comes by cycle.

Please point out that AND is used when things are related and BUT when there is a difference or something unexpected takes place.

I went to my friend's house. She wasn't there.

I went to my friend's house but she wasn't there.

On the other hand, we say I went to my friend's house and she was there.

OR indicates choice / uncertainty.

When do you eat dinner?

I eat at 8 or 8.30.

Please contrast this with:

Sometimes I eat at 8. Sometimes at 8.30

Examples of 4 scenarios for creating sentences using conjunctions:

- Talking about daily routines
- Meeting a friend
- Getting ready for school
- Making a cup of tea

Day 2

Practise the following with a partner:

- Telling a favourite story
- Visiting a relative

It is apparent from this that the closer the situations are to the target audience, the greater will the impact be.

It is very useful to create some of the tasks in the classroom itself so that the children can participate in the activity. Encourage children to develop the ability to extract information from a single hearing. This is where discussion plays a very important part, because apart from allowing children to think in a web pattern, it requires that they use language further for thinking.

This fulfils the first requirement of the task itself, which is to have, in advance, some idea of the kind of text they are going to hear. The listening purpose must also be made clear. Are you, as the teacher, going to ask questions, or are you going to give an extended task i.e, some further task which will use this particular text as a basis. For example, you may be using the sample listening text just to familiarise your children with the language, as in, listening to a song or a story or watching a film. It is entirely possible to gauge the reactions and understanding level from your observation of their body language and facial expressions. For example, your response list might include the following items:

- Obeying instructions, which may mean drawing/ painting a picture of the text you read, or making something (an origami boat).
- Ticking off items, which may mean that you read a list of items required for, say, a picnic and the objects placed on a tray.

For Classes 4 and 5, you may want to include:

- Detecting mistakes, statements which contradict earlier ones
- Guessing and predicting - What do you think happened next/to character/who do you think was the real culprit?

Teaching speaking is an activity which is at once easy and, sometimes, impossibly difficult. How many times does a teacher, when confronted with a class of young learners, find to her despair that the same mistake is being made again and again! An example is learning the difference between the verbs, 'to say' and 'to tell.' Tell can only operate with an object - told me/him/ someone, while say doesn't need one (he said.....). However, the number of times one hears 'My mother told she will give you a letter,' is legion!

Here are two questions that elementary school language teachers can ask themselves:

1. How do you judge an activity as having been successful
2. What are the problems you encounter in getting students to talk in English in the classroom?

Here is a classroom activity for oral fluency which teachers could try:

Have two pictures with a number of items, for example, an urban scene and another of a rural scene. Each group looks at the picture for two minutes and then makes as many comments as possible, with a nominated person in the group marking a tick for each comment made. The pictures are exchanged and the class repeats the exercise with the second picture, trying to get more ticks this time.

The second activity is the famous 'Spot the Differences.' Here the students work in pairs, with each member of the pair having a different picture. Each one will then describe his picture, item by item, while the other describes the same item in his. Thus if there is a tree laden with fruit in one picture, and a bare tree in the other, this point is noted. The teacher has to ensure two things - one, that the discussion is being carried out as far as possible in English and two, that she knows the pictures really well.

Other speaking practice items include role play and related techniques, such as, dialogues (though this has gone out of vogue in most classrooms, it is still a very effective method), plays, and simulated situations. The last two are particularly valuable for 7-10 year olds.

The more complicated skills of reading and writing should be introduced with great care and sensitivity. Most Indian classrooms have to reckon with the fact that the classrooms may be the only place where reading opportunities present themselves. The hard questions are: Should students be taught orally for a while and then reading introduced? Or, should reading and writing be introduced from the beginning? Most schools favour the latter, though the problem with this approach is that children are often bewildered by the onslaught of new skills to grasp.

Some more questions to ponder on include:

Should it be the phonetic method or should it be direct attack? Name or sound? What about capital and small letters of the alphabet (no Indian language has them)?

Both the phonetic and direct attack approaches

have been tried and found successful. In elementary schools, it is important to use symbols that are easy for children to relate to. In today's context, thanks to TV, many words are ubiquitous and need no translation. Teachers could make a list of English words that are already in the children's vocabulary and teach these first (examples include names of fruit, sports equipment and facilities, names and functions of cars and bikes, eating and drinking items). However, given below are the items that have to be checked for efficiency and its opposite:

1. Language
2. Content
3. Speed
4. Attention
5. Prediction
6. Background information-familiar items make the reading experience far more fruitful
7. Motivation - let's not shun information about favourite celebrities such as cricketers and other sports persons, even film stars are allowed if we monitor information
8. Purpose
9. Strategies - gently progressing to the techniques of skimming, scanning and detailed reading for pleasure or serious study

I have deliberately left out writing since that is a very complex activity, perhaps the subject for another article, though I'd like to mention in passing that in France, mindful of the fact that, on the whole, girls' small muscles develop faster than that of boys' (whose large muscles develop earlier, hence their ability to jump, climb and run), the entry age for writing is four years for girls and five for boys. This brings us to issue of preparedness. Our children have to be prepared and for this our teachers' watchwords have to be preparation and alertness.

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