Moving Together: Some Strategies for Inclusion

Jane Sahi and Vanamala Viswanatha

In this brief paper, we would like to share some strategies we evolved to make our classroom a more inclusive space in the way languages were used within the context of the two courses we taught in the MA Ed programme: *Language, Mind and Society (LMS) and Teaching English Language in India (TELI).* The students came from diverse linguistic backgrounds, with varied levels of proficiency in English, especially in formal, academic writing. Despite the fact that the students were doing these courses in their third and final semesters respectively, many students felt oppressed by the demands of writing in English and particularly the argumentative, discursive essay. In addition, several students felt left out as they could not share their experiences and insights due to their diffidence in using English; and this exclusion is surely a loss for all. We wish to argue that language, which can potentially bring the diverse worlds of our students into the class, can equally serve to privilege one exclusive 'world', one particular language and one style of using that language.

The notion of 'inclusion' has often come to mean including those with disabilities, weaknesses or deficiencies of some kind in the mainstream; but we have tried to explore the idea of 'inclusion' in our general teaching context to engage with the whole spectrum of students' strengths and energies, their diverse languages and particular experiences inside and outside the University. This is a particular challenge for teachers who have had to increasingly handle larger classes as there is a real danger that assignments become mechanical, feedback minimal and choices restricted.

We will now describe three overlapping ideas we tried out in our attempt at inclusion: the use of multilingualism as a resource; a wider interpretation of the 'text', and designing a range of assignments and presentations as part of assessment, all of which enabled greater participation and engagement in co-constructing the courses with students.

Multilingualism as a necessary resource

The students' knowledge and affinity to different languages make a potent resource in teaching as they help bring the students' worlds into the class, connecting the old and the new. Different languages extend our horizon and it is a loss if a known language is displaced or replaced. In Tagore's words "A language is not like an umbrella or an overcoat, that can be borrowed by unconscious or deliberate mistake; it is like the living skin itself".[1]

Canagarajah (2002) discusses the different strategies used by students to negotiate English as an unfamiliar language. He speaks of the need for a sense of *appropriation* where the student feels confident enough to be part of something and to use it where it is relevant and useful but not at the cost of abandoning familiar languages and ways of using them.[2]

In our teaching, translation was used as an active tool for negotiation and collaboration, and as a way of understanding 'otherness' by building on the interconnectedness of languages.

In the LMS course, we used proverbs to open up a rich discussion on how culture and language are

---

[1] *Tagore R. 1922. 'An Eastern University' in Creative Unity.*

[2] *A.S. Canagarajah. 2002. Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students. The University of Michigan Press. P. 113*

inextricably linked. The process of translating a proverb provided the context for a heated dialogue about meanings, equivalent words and comparisons. In the assignment on the unit dealing with 'Language, Power and Society', students were asked to select a story, poem or autobiographical narrative from an Indian language of their choice to reflect on the issue of language and power raised in the theoretical readings of Bourdieu and Fairclough.

The TELI course has made a pioneering effort to recast English Language Teaching in the context of India and Indian languages, moving away from a monolingual perspective to a multilingual paradigm. In our class, there was much discussion about the 'judicious' use of the first language in the teaching of English as a second language. Students were asked to come up with lesson plans about how to use the first language *systematically* within task-based teaching.

Students have reported that they often find it problematic to connect to given texts. The texts may be too long and dense or contain unfamiliar and complex ideas. Smaller parts of the text can be highlighted, an advanced organizer can be provided that explains why the text has been selected and what are the key issues to be attentive to and the context of the writing can be provided so that students are able to relate it to what they already know. Some texts can be introduced through a related activity. For example, a chapter from N.S. Prabhu's book (Second Language Pedagogy, 1987) proved to be incomprehensible to nearly all the students without some support. The text needed to be 'activated' to be understood. Not all readings lend themselves so readily to a practical demonstration but this particular text on 'task-based teaching' became clear to students when they were given a lesson using Kannada as a second language round the familiar resource of a calendar. Vanamala, building on the students' existing knowledge of Sanskrit based words and the shared notion of the function of a calendar, was able to effectively communicate in Kannada with non-Kannada students. It enabled students to discover for themselves the nature of 'a task based activity' in learning a second language that did not rely on explicit instruction in grammar, vocabulary or drill to interact in a new language.

Re-defining the nature of a text

In addition to theoretical texts used for analysis and reflection, we used multimedia texts such as films, poems, newspaper clippings, advertisements, cartoons, short stories, biographies and autobiographies. Some assignments required close observation in the form of a mini-ethnographical study or reflection on personal experience.

The idea of including the personal narrative within the academic context has often been viewed with some suspicion and even derision as being superficial, emotional or trivial. However, it is a sound, well-proven educational principle that personal narratives can help link students' current knowledge to the new learning. It is not the personal narrative in itself, but the possibility of reflecting on it as a spectator that supports growth. The more conventional discursive essay often distances the student from the issue and does not include the students' experience and existing knowledge. As Salmon Rushdie writes, *"Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives - the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change - truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts."*[3]

In response to the question, 'Critically comment on your own experience of learning English in relation to other Indian language/s', one student expressed, perhaps for the first time, her discomfort with the language that she is most proficient in. The student writes, *"Out of the six languages I am familiar with, English can be said to leave the rest far behind with regard to the exposure that engaging with any language has given me. And yet, I have largely used the language like a borrowed tool. It never completely felt my own. I always used it the way those in positions of power (teachers, mainstream*

[3]*Rushdie Salman. 1990. One Thousand Years in a Balloon. Viking Children's Books.*

schooling) expected me to…   I still believe I have largely (consciously, at least) never attempted at making the language adapt to my own social circumstances."

Another student writing a review of the film English Vinglish related it to her own experience of feeling marginalized by languages. She writes,

"The movie was basically about dignity and honor, not language. She was learning English not because she had its necessity but because she could not bear the insult. Most of the time we also do the same. We don't think that if we know seven languages except English but if you don't know English then it is a big deal."

There is a real challenge for students to write about their personal perspective within the context of an assignment because an intrinsic part of academic discipline is to consciously look at an issue from different perspectives and to shift from a given opinion to an informed, balanced argument. Ira Shor writes about the need for closeness and objectivity,

"We gain a distance from the experience by abstracting it from its familiar surroundings and studying it in unfamiliar, critical ways until our perceptions of it and society are challenged. "

In addition to looking at classroom observation in the school context, the University itself can be a fruitful site for learning. In the LMS course, students had the option of doing a mini- ethnographical study about classroom discourse in the University setting. For some students this was perhaps the first opportunity of consciously analyzing classroom participation from different points of view. One student wrote imagining herself as a Tamil student who has minimal skills in English and concluded,

"Would it have been possible for me to even converse with my professors or classmates if I was not familiar with English? I would admonish myself in participating in class, at the fear of sounding foolish, for I would not know how to put my ideas forward in English. To a great extent, it will be an alienating experience and I would feel like a fish out of water. It would not be the same as speaking to someone from my own culture. If I had to adopt

English as the language through which I give meaning to my thoughts, it would require me to conceptualize and experience the world in a different way."

Designing assignments and presentations that require students to actively seek out the connections between theoretical texts and practical issues.

Patterns of assignment and feedback often indicate what is actually valued and so it is essential that theories of inclusion are put into practice where it is significant for students within the context of institutional requirements.

A process portfolio is one mode that offers a more flexible tool for written assignments that values both the process and the product. It also provides a wider range of submissions in terms of size, genre and state of completion. In addition it supports both a cumulative and summative way of assessment and gives a chance for revision, improvement and critical awareness of the process on the part of the student.

A significant aspect of the portfolio is a different understanding of who the audience should be for assignments. Usually a grade with or without feedback is the end of the exchange. We tried to think how students could be supported to build on a draft and to see an assignment as a way of beginning of a conversation rather than a conclusion.

On one occasion three students were asked to discuss another student's work and present it both orally and in writing. A framework for analysing features of good writing was suggested and students were asked to comment on the development of ideas, the organization of the essay, sentence fluency, the authenticity and power of the writer's voice and in addition to looking at conventions such as spelling and punctuation.

Students largely gave each other critical but sensitive and constructive feedback. It was a learning experience both in terms of exposure to different points of view and it also served to help students to be more critical of their own work, in light of the suggested framework for analysing good writing.

In conclusion, it is essential to challenge students and not merely to provide easy options or dilute the seriousness or complexity of ideas. Freire discusses a radical understanding of 'rigour'. [4] A Pedagogy for Liberation. Rigour does not lie in dealing only with abstract ideas in isolation which is bound to support awareness and depth in thinking; it is as much in bringing practice and theory together in engaging inter-subjective and multilayered ways. Texts need to be varied, accessible and generated by students themselves in a variety of languages to establish an inclusive classroom.

---

[4] *Freire P. and Shor I. 1987. A Pedagogy for Liberation. Praeger.*

Jane works part time both at Azim Premji University, Bangalore and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She has worked at Sita School, a non-formal school on the outskirts of Bangalore, since 1975. She has more recently been involved with adult education. She can be contacted at jane.sahi@azimpremjifoundation.org

Vanamala is a member of the Faculty at Azim Premji University. A student of languages and literatures, she teaches courses related to the role of language in education. A translator working with Kannada and English, she is also a scholar of Translation Studies. She may be contacted at vanamala.viswanatha@apu.edu.in