

AN ALTERNATIVE METHODOLOGY TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM

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I am indebted to my father for living but to my teachers for well living’, Alexander the Great. Teaching is a private job, but it’s a public affair. Teaching is done privately inside a four walled classroom, but what it produces either make or break the society. It is rightly said that, ‘Teaching is one profession that creates all other professions’.

The term Method as defined by Oxford dictionary is, ‘A particular procedure for accomplishing something, especially a systematic or an established one’. However, in Language Teaching and Learning, it is best defined by Edward Anthony, a well-known American linguist, who defined ‘Method’ as “...an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected approach [theory]...”(Anthony, 1963,p. 63). In this context, all classroom methodologies are backed by a theory. Thus, how and what is taught in a classroom reflect the theory adopted, which determines: what language skills to be taught; how contents are to be ordered and presented; and what are the roles of the teacher and the learners.

The quest for effective ways of teaching and learning had begun since long. It is evident from the various theories of learning and teaching methods that flourished in the 19th and the 20th century. However, no method/theory has been able to offer a foolproof panacea for effective teaching and learning and perhaps no method/ theory ever will, however, the quest should not be left complacently.

Different theorists have given different opinions on how learning takes place; what are the best and effective ways to ensure learning. Some of the most prominent theories of learning that emerged in the past century are –

- a) Behaviourist Theory of Learning- it is based mainly on the works of Pavlov and Skinner. It emphasises on the belief that learning is a habit formation, and repetition facilitates learning. According to this theory, the basic method to ensure effective teaching and learning is to practise the pattern of repetition and imitation based on the stimulus-response concept. The Audiolingual method of language teaching is based on this theory and the methodological practices of language teaching under this method include: sequential learning of language skills i.e. hear, speak, read, and write; phonological aspect of language as a basic unit of language learning; immediate correction of mistakes; repetition of sounds, memorizing of dialogues, and performing drill practices. Thus, language learning is basically viewed as a mechanical process of habit formation. However, this theory clearly stands on the sinking sand by presupposing learners as the passive recipients. Their thinking credibility is not taken into account. It assumes that learners will function as intended. However, humans are by nature unpredictable; it is

very unlikely that one will react to the same situation exactly the same way every time. Moreover, assuming that effective teaching and learning will happen without taking into account the affective factors would mean humans are emotionless beings and that in itself is inhumane. Learning involves a much more complex phenomenon than mere repetition and imitation. Also, repetition entails lack of creativity in teaching and that will ultimately lead to boredom and lack of motivation to learn.

- b) Mentalist Theory of Learning – Noam Chomsky is the main proponent of this theory. It developed in response to the idealist view of the behaviourist theorist. He opines that thinking is a rule governed activity and learning consists of acquiring rules. It is acquisition of rules that enable learners to deal with infinite range of experiences they may encounter. In the context of language learning, the proponents of this theory opined that acquisition of language is not a mechanical process of habit formation, but it is a rule conscious process. Also, the theorists of this theory hold a strong belief that language learning happens due to an innate knowledge that learners by virtue of being human possess. This innate knowledge was termed as, “Language Acquisition Device” (LAD) by Chomsky. He opined that a LAD is not socially acquired or obtained, rather, humans are born into society with a LAD; and it is this innate knowledge which permits human to acquire a language. Thus, this theory totally discredits any societal influence that could affect the language learning phenomenon. However, learners are humans first and humans are a social being, born and raised in a society. A child left alone in a jungle with no human contact will never learn to speak any human language by herself; in this context, the belief of LAD held by the mentalist theorist(s) stands contrived.
- c) Cognitive Theory of Learning – the ground work of this theory was laid by the mentalist theory of learning. Unlike the behaviourists who took learners as passive actors, theorists of this theory took learners as active beings. In language teaching and learning scenario, learners are viewed as ‘Information processors’ who think and use their cognitive ability to acquire language rules, their implications, and process information. Thus, acquisition of language is seen as an active discovery process which happens consciously. Language learning is a dynamic process where learners are actively engaged in the negotiation of meanings. The basic teaching technique associated with this theory is the problem-solving tasks; whereby, learners’ logical thinking and reasoning skills are focused primarily. Reasoning skills in language learning includes reading tasks such as inferential reading, reading for comprehension etc.
- d) Affective Theory of Learning- this theory is based on the premise that learners think, but they also feel, i.e. they are emotional beings. Earl Stevick, an expert in language learning and teaching states, “Learning, especially that of language learning, is an emotional experience, and the feeling that the learning process evokes will have a crucial bearing on the success or failure of the learning” (Stevick, 1976). This theory presupposes that effective teaching and learning will happen when learners are motivated, when they feel good about what they are learning. In the context of language learning, motivation is facilitated in a situation where: learners feel safe; teachers are empathic; and a learner-centred approach is adopted. Also, learners’ cultural affiliation and social conditioning play a pivotal role as the emotive stimuli in the overall outcome of the language learning journey. Thus, learning is more than just an acquisition of knowledge; it is a personal

journey whereby the means is as important as the end. However, to seek motivation for teaching and learning solely on the emotional factor is irrational. Learners feel, but they think too. Hence, to place irrational importance on emotion in the quest for effective teaching and learning is to base our foundation of learning on a shaky and an unstable ground whose demise is foreseeable.

Each of the theories mentioned above has a role to play in shaping the language teaching and learning paradigm. However, as pointed above, each of them has drawbacks. To this end, no theory can be placed at a pedestal but an eclectic of best teaching practices from every theory and method will make a substantial contribution in the quest for effective language teaching and learning. The need is to engage learners both affectively and cognitively. Learners learn in different ways, have different needs and interests. Thus, teaching and learning should not be based on one static prescriptive theory but on the concoction of good ingredients from all theories. Variety not only adds spice to learning, but it also ensures that all learners in the class are benefitted.

Above all, the true essence of an effective Language teaching and learning depends on the teacher. Teaching is an art and like all other arts, its best manifestation depends on the artist's skills and personality. A teacher as a facilitator, instructor, and a classroom manager plays one too many roles in the classroom. And the teacher's skill is an indispensable factor in making a classroom the most dreaded place into a place where imagination ignites, hope blooms, and creativity flowers; the place where teaching and learning happen with motivation driven by passion.

There are no specific sets of theories to master the art of teaching. However, some good teaching practices can be generalised to ensure effective classroom teaching:

- a) A good lesson plan
- b) Classroom management
- c) Reflective teaching

● Lesson plan- it is a sad reality that most often teachers have a very little say in designing the syllabus. It comes as a prescription; the contents chosen, sequenced, and graded only to be followed. However, a teacher in her capacity has the choice of planning and implementing the syllabus in ways that best suit the learners and their needs. Also, planning a lesson not only helps a teacher to be clear with the objectives, goals, and purpose of the lesson to be taught, but it also helps to contextualize the lesson for effective teaching and learning according to the learners in the classroom.

In the preparatory stage of the lesson plan, the teacher decides about the objectives, goals, resources, time, activities (tasks), whether an activity will be an individual or a group work etc. And its implementation in the classroom is done in three stages-

- 1) warm up
- 2) Presentation
- 3) recapitulation

Warm up

This is the stage where the interests of the learners are activated. The teacher : (a) asks questions to get learners thinking about the coming lesson; (b) gives some questions to the learners, then asks them to skim through the lesson and predict answers to those questions; (c) uses teaching aids and props as scaffold to grasp the learners' attention; (d) helps learners to relate learning to the real life situations.

Presentation

This is the most crucial stage, where the success or the failure of the lesson plan depends. Here, the teacher: (a) introduces the lesson or the topic to the learners; (b) facilitates learners in the learning process; (c) guides learners in fulfilling the objectives of the lesson; (c) clarifies doubts and questions of the learners; (d) elicits responses from learners.

Sometimes, it may become necessary to make certain changes in the lesson plan; if it is found that it is not going fruitfully or when something happens at an early stage that necessitates a change in the lesson plan. Thus, having a contingency plan for such times is always helpful. However, a variety in lesson delivery, choice of activities, and being mindful of the lesson pace can to a large extent avoid such circumstance.

Recapitulation

In this stage, the teacher : (a) helps learners recall what was learnt in the class; (b) assess the success and failure of the lesson plan; (c) leaves learners with some questions to ponder on the lesson learnt.

●classroom management- a classroom is as interesting or as boring as a teacher makes it. An interesting classroom is a class of engaging, motivated, and productive students. But a boring classroom is a class of disgruntled, unenthusiastic, and noisy students. Here, a teacher's personality is a quintessential factor and the influence of a teacher in the classroom environment is an indispensable fact. It includes the teacher's gestures, body language, and the voice tone.

A teacher's role in a classroom management includes: (a) motivating the unmotivated learners by ensuring their participation in the classroom; (b) managing time; (c) dividing the class into small groups; (d) ensuring turn takings so that every group gets a chance to answer; (e) systematizing the activities in the class.

●reflective teaching- it is a method where by the teacher critically asses his/ her class and seeks to improve oneself by being one's best critic. It is a reflective process where the teacher: (a) analyses the day's or the week's class; (b)evaluates what went wrong and what went well in the class; (c) diagnoses the problems faced in the class (d) look for ways to solve the problems.

Conclusion:

To sum up, the efficacy of Language teaching and learning (in the classroom) depends not on the strict adherence to the set of theories or methods but on having the discernment to engage learners both affectively and cognitively. Moreover, fruitful teaching and learning to a large extent depends on the teacher; the instructor, the facilitator, the motivator, and the balancer in the classroom. And to this end, the best scaffold for a teacher to ensure effective teaching in the

classroom is a good lesson plan. Also, effective teaching depends on a good classroom management for only then, a lesson as planned could be implemented. Moreover, having time to reflect back to ones' teaching at the end of the class is a good practice for there will always be a room for improvement.

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