

TEACHING ENGLISH TO A FRIEND WITH CEREBRAL PALSY

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Abstract:

My friend, Mahek Panesar, suffers from Cerebral Palsy. While her movement of the right limbs is restrained, her intellectual capabilities are on a borderline. To help Mahek get through her ICSE examination, certain techniques were used so that she passed her compulsory English. The use of techniques like using visual aids, modifying speech to help comprehension, being patient with her and not expecting immediate prompt answers, paying more attention to key terms etc. helped Mahek to get more than just pass marks in the ICSE Examination, not only in English, but also in other subjects.

This paper aims to present the techniques used, with examples, to illustrate the fact that such methods and techniques of teaching English is actually applicable in real life situations and do not stop at being a theoretical construct only.

The changing times have made the ability of an individual to communicate in English absolutely essential. During our grand parents' times, individuals proficient in English were needed mostly in teaching or in the Civil Services. But today, with job opportunities opening up so many folds, with call centres, multinational companies, medical transcription centres which need skilled translators and so many such fields, the inability to communicate in English becomes detrimental to the individual. Thus teaching English language is now essential in our schools.

My friend, Mahek Panesar, is a year younger to me. She has cerebral palsy, due to which the movement of her right hand and leg is restricted. She is also prone to seizures, which aggravates when she is stressed. Thus, Mahek's family had never pressurized her to study from the childhood. She goes to a reputed English medium school which also did not put her through very tight rigours for promotion. Hence, she managed to "Pass" from one class to the next each year. Her Punjabi family does not have English conversations at home too, so her communication skill in English was not very sound, to say the very least. Her inability to follow conversations in English and participate in them made her a loner in the class. She thus did not enjoy going to school either.

When Mahek was promoted to Class IX with a warning, her mother realized that the time had come when she needs to be able to really pass her Board exams. So she was then put in various tutorials, where she realized that she did not understand anything of what was being told, felt stressed and started having frequent seizures. Although Mahek scraped through to Class X, the tutorials where she went did not want to teach her. On the other hand her school went on saying that she had to pull up her marks within first term. This was the circumstance in which I volunteered to help Mahek with her English.

Taking on the assignment, I was reminded of Professor Françoise Gouin's story (Tamura, 172). François Gouin was a professor of Latin who lived in France in the nineteenth century. To study German, he went to Germany and memorized various kinds of verbs, other words and

ultimately a full book of conversation. However he failed to comprehend or converse in German.

Disappointed, he returned home to France. In France, he found that his three year old nephew could speak in French more fluently than he could in German. It was then that Prof. Gouine realized the importance of listening to functional conversation in a language to be able to learn it.

He innovated the Gouine Series, a language teaching method that stressed on auditory perception, which is the listening skill of an individual who wants to learn the language. He stated that for the acquisition of a foreign language hearing is definitely better than reading. Also, since we communicate in sentences, teaching of abstract grammatical rules is of no use unless it is taught by series of sentences with respective grammatical patterns.

In the 2nd half of nineteenth century, the Direct Method started being used. Harold E Palmer, (Tamura173) the well-known linguist, used the “oral method” and taught the language through structured conversations. He used reading material consisting of dialogues and related texts with easy and interesting descriptions and narratives

Other developments were also taking place in research of language teaching. After many years of research for new methods to help individuals to learn faster, the renowned Bulgarian psychologist and educator, Georgi Lozanov (Tamura175) achieved some prodigious results and introduced new components. The technique consisted of suggestion and relaxation to learning. The method was called Suggestopedia or Suggestive- accelerative approaches to learning.

The method needs an enterprising teacher who would be responsible for presenting in class a large amount of information while eliminating learning obstacles and students’ inhibitions. The power of music, drama, dance and movement were to be used by the teacher to the fullest. Students listened, watched and then performed the material taught in class.

The method was used by Dr. E. Gateya, where she started her lessons with Mozart and Brahms’ music, followed by reading the text emphatically and dramatically. The students would then dramatize the lesson, each one taking turns in reading different roles. Meanings of the words would be explained with synonyms.

From this information, it was concluded that while listening was important in language acquisition, the importance of seeing, and actually taking part in the various activities related to the learning material actually enhanced the learning process, as the old Chinese proverb goes: **Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand.**

Starting from this premise, Mahek’s academic journey was planned.

It started with comprehension skills. This primarily entailed creating activities to help Mahek recognize the meanings of words used in various contexts.

It was also needed that she is to be able to guess the meanings of words and phrases by reading the context and without knowing the exact meaning of the words.

So speeches were modified, spoken slowly, the key words were emphasized, and simple vocabulary was used to help Mahek comprehend the speech.

I tried to have her focus her attention on the key words, and hence modulated my speech in

such a way that the key words would be pronounced emphatically like, Portia's famous speech in Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare: "The quality of MERCY is never strained....." I extensively used visual stimuli like pictures, film clips, videos and even my own hand gestures.

Questions based on such visual aids, like miming the act of drinking a cup of tea, and asking her what I was doing, helped me to draw her out of her anxious shell. While such activities were more fun, like a game, it helped me to boost her morale, give her confidence and also make her fluent with words and phrases she knew but did not normally use in English and also to teach her new words and their usage.

However, while initiating this process, there were long "silent periods", when Mahek had not uttered a word, but while I did not force her to speak until she was ready, I did not let this deter me from my endeavor.

Gradually, with clear and precise instructions, I noticed that Mahek started responding during the lessons, with single word answers. Once she realized that I was not judgmental about her answers, her pronunciation or accuracy of the content of the answer, she opened up more and more. She lost the terrified look in her eyes and her mother said that the frequency of her seizures was also going down.

Once I realized that Mahek was relaxing and was getting comfortable with me, I started expanding the one word answers that she gave and rephrased or paraphrased them in complete sentences for her, while telling her that her answer was absolutely correct.

For example, from the chapter Hunger, when I asked, "What was 'Chacha' selling?" her response would be, "Old rags". I would then say, "Absolutely correct. Chacha was selling old rags."

I started to speak with her in English when I was speaking with her casually, not in the teaching learning situation. Normally I would have such conversations with her in Hindi. Having a dialogue about a film that she had watched or wanted to watch, the various advertisements in the print media or television and such other things served as topics of discussion which started to bring in some amount of lucidity and fluency in her thought process and speech.

I also started showing her films and videos of various kinds. We started with short and fun video clips with easy words and clear pronunciation. She did have difficulty understanding the content in the beginning, but gradually she caught on with what was being said. I also got the lyrics of popular songs in English, and then while I played the song on You-tube, we would sing along with it. This activity, while being fun, helped Mahek to increase her vocabulary, to frame sentences properly; it also helped her socially as she could now participate in such singing sessions with her classmates in school. Later, when she was ready, we started watching films which were a part of her ICSE syllabus, like The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare with English subtitles. This had manifold advantages. While her understanding of the play improved, she remembered the sequence of the events better, and which dialogue was said by who become easier for her to grasp as the information came to her through various sense organs at a given point of time.

All along, simultaneously, I was also working on her writing skills as ultimately she would

have to write her ICSE Examination. We had to work primarily on handwriting and spellings. Since Mahek is not naturally a left handed person, but has to use her left hand as her right hand does not function well. So writing is not an easy affair for her. Hence her handwriting used to be illegible. The first thing that was done was help Mahek form the letters of the alphabet and practice them over and over again. We avoided cursive writing as it was more difficult. We adopted D'Nealian manuscript style of writing which is preferred as transition to cursive writing with this style is easier. Mahek however, preferred to stay on with the manuscript style and did not use the cursive writing.

We also used phonetics to get a grip over the spellings of regular words, while spellings which were atypical and did not follow phonetics, with silent letter like "listen", were either learnt by mnemonics, or were committed to rote memory by practice. An example of such a spelling was that of 'Lieutenant' which went by the mnemonic 'lie – u – ten – ant'.

While answers from the text could be handled, training her for creative writings like essays or letters needed other techniques. We started off by practicing events or places. The first exercise done was where Mahek wrote down the direction to her house from City Centre 1, which is very near her house. The first draft of this writing was very simplistic, with only 'straight', 'right' or 'left' being the key words used. We then worked on elaborating the direction including the description of the land marks, like the hospital that is opposite to the block, and the park from where one needs to turn right.

When such real life descriptions were mastered by Mahek, we went on to describing imaginative things. We saw pictures and framed stories about it. We thought about what might be happening there, what lead to this situation and what will happen to resolve the situation. Dealing with topics like this was not easy, but we took it as question answers first. "What could be the names of the children in the picture?" I might ask, to which she would suggest certain names. This would be noted down. The next questions would be about their backgrounds, what they were doing and why, whether they could face any trouble, and in that case how would they overcome it. Now that we had all the points jotted down, what we did was to write them in paragraphs.

Initially Mahek would stick to short simple sentences, without much description, like, from 'the second girl from the left,' we worked up to 'the second girl on the left wearing blue full sleeved top and a red apron...'

Practice with such material and also written discussion on advertisements on print media worked wonders with Mahek. She made immense improvements in her writing skills, while her ability to run a conversation also improved. Discussions regarding current news brought about clarity in the thought process and again, she was able to follow and contribute in the discussions that went on among her class mates in school. This made her feel that she was not an outcaste any more.

She felt that she belonged in that group and this did wonders to her self-esteem. With better esteem, she improved in leaps and bounds.

The improvements that were shown in her class tests and consequent praise and encouragement by her teachers also played a vital role in her improvement. The best thing that happened was that this improvement helped her to better her other subjects like History, Geography, Home Science too. She also had a better understanding of Mathematics, and for

the first time since Class IX, she has actually passed in Mathematics in her ICSE. She says that she could do it because now she understood what was being asked in the question.

So, it did take a lot of planning, some research, collecting a lot of material from school library and the internet, but Mahek and I did manage to sail through ICSE, with pretty good marks by her standards, in fact, best marks since she was in Class V. This also brought me to my premise that the theoretical concepts of teaching a language, which I had researched and found from various journals and books actually work in real life situations, are very doable, and hence practical. We just need an open mind, some enthusiasm and an indomitable spirit of not giving up even when faced with a few bumps and failures.

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