Promoting Participatory Learning Through Activity-Based Teaching

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Abstract:
English has always occupied a unique position in the education system in India. The concept of its inception, right from the primary level, justifies its global position . Students are exposed to the grammatical intricacies of the English language by gradations all through their primary, high school and higher secondary levels of education. A good majority of the learners aim at completing their higher secondary course just for the sake of a decent percentage and hence manage to obtain marks without sufficient knowledge of the language. In the case of native medium learners, there is an upward graphical surge that shows an increasing number who move out of school with a good percentage but remain handicapped in communication. At the undergraduate level, when students are compelled to switch over to English as their medium of education, it becomes extremely difficult to cater to the academic demands. The regular teaching patterns, heavy syllabus and expected input to create a sense of fear which leads to lack of confidence and uncertainty, especially among students who hail from rural backgrounds and native medium of education.
This research paper proposes to present an activity-based approach to promote participatory learning, using informal teaching patterns through simple activities, to motivate learners and produce better results by assisting them both educationally and morally, thereby creating a conducive classroom atmosphere. It has been implemented in a class of forty-five and has found to be motivating and effective. Students are educated to learn by learning how to learn. In the words of Tolstoy, "The difference between education and training lies solely in the coercion which training claims as its right. Training is forcible, education is free. (295)

Key words: Motivation , Participation , Active interaction, Language acquisition

1.Role Of Activities In Promoting Participatory Learning

The necessity of including activities to promote learning in a regular classroom is basically to encourage motivation and to initiate active interaction. The students had all along remained passive listeners, occasionally answering a question or two in the course of the formal teaching process, without actually involving themselves in class. Activities change the trend of learning by shifting them to the position of active participators and encouraging them to contribute their bit of knowledge, thereby acquiring information from their peers. Motivation becomes the key factor that helps in the successful implementation of activities

The role of activities according to Richards:

Activities that involve real communication promote learning. A second element is the task principle: Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning (Johnson 1982). A third element is the meaningfulness principle: Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. Learning activities are consequently selected according to how well they engage the learner in meaningful and authentic language use (rather than the merely mechanical practice of language patterns)…. (161).

2.Supportive Factors

When compared to formal methods of teaching, activity-based participatory learning lists more advantages. Classrooms become enjoyable, active and pleasurable places of study, which is most comfortable for shy-learners. Students learn what they need and want. Group activities urge better participation since they boost courage and encourage peer-patronization. Appreciation and encouragement go a long way in pulling out shy students from their shell. Ultimately, students are driven home the fact that much depends on self-interest in the process of learning. The main focus of activity- based teaching is to develop language fluency in the students and to enhance their learning ability, eliminating fear and uncertainty. Byrne opines on the perspectives of language fluency:

The main goal in teaching the productive skill of speaking will be oral fluency. This can be defined as the ability to express oneself intelligibly… reasonably accurately and without too much hesitation. To attain this goal, you will have to bring the students from the

stage where they are mainly imitating a model of some kind, or responding to cues, to the point where they can use the language freely to express their own ideas. (9-10).

3.The Communicative Approach

The term communicative approach, according to Geetha Nagaraj is, "The development of language learning or teaching from form-based to a meaning- based approach: the move towards an eclectic approach from a rigid method: the shift from teacher-fronted to learner-centred classes: are all subsumed under the broad term communicative approach."(41) In a mixed level of performers in a classroom, the instructor faces the challenge of catering to the requirements of slow learners while keeping pace with their smart counterparts. To create a balance, the ideal alternative would be to motivate group activities. Within the first few introductory sessions the faculty gets quite familiar with her enthusiastic wards and the low-confidence students. Students could be grouped with one or two fast learners in each group. Re-grouping could always be sought for, in case of additional assistance. Once the groups are formed, the following step would be to encourage interaction within the group using ice-breaking sessions. The students are thus groomed to comfort, with their peers. Then begins the process of informal participatory language learning classes.

4.Methodology

The context used for this research is the regular text book, Literary Inroads: An Anthology of Prose, Poetry and Drama, prescribed for General English-- Semester III, following the curriculum of the undergraduate programme of Auxilium College (Autonomous), Vellore. This course work has been implemented in a class of forty-five students (girls), pursuing their second year undergraduate programme. One topic from each module has been selected for sample activity, in order to brief the course of implementation.
The activities listed below have been designed on the basis of simplicity of procedures adopted, to create an atmosphere of comfort and interest in the participants and eventually lead into participating as well as learning. Students are expected to follow the instructions given prior to the execution of the activity. However, relaxation is allowed in the process of understanding, to boost confidence and instill the urge to learn. Several repetitions of the activities with slight variations in the procedure, tune them to understanding and responding better.

- Activity I: Module One - Prose

Lesson: 'Two Gentlemen of Verona', by A.J. Cronin. (pg:37)
Aim: Encourage participation, promote interaction, exchange information for better understanding.
Class Time: 180 minutes. (3classes)
Procedure: Students are given a brief introduction to the author and his style of writing. The instructor gives an outline of the content in the lesson. A few contextual questions are asked in between so that the context is understood. Now the students are instructed to read out each paragraph within their group (beginning with their leader) and explain the context to their mates, one by one. The leader and the members of the group interact and share their views accordingly. The instructor keeps watch over students' participation in the first few classes. Students are motivated to voice out their doubts or suggestions for clarification. A few paragraphs are allotted for each class to ensure thorough scrutiny. The last ten minutes of each class is set aside, for each group to explain their allotted paragraphs to the class with the assistance of their group members. This allows continuity and opportunity for each group to participate as a whole. After the explanation of each paragraph, the groups are encouraged to add their analysis or ask questions to clarify doubts. Each prose extract may require around three to four classes, at the end of which comprehensive questions are documented and corresponding exercises are worked out. Students are encouraged to note down points for paragraph and essay questions. A complete perusal of the details takes place which aids in registering the contents without much strain. Communication, in the first few classes can be expected only from a few students but the number keeps increasing as this method of teaching is repeated for the following lessons as well. Exercises could also be distributed in the same pattern.

- Activity II: Module Two – Poetry

Poem: 'Nutting' by William Wordsworth. (pg: 89)
Aim: Analysis, interpretation, understand poetic devices, summarizing the poem.
Class Time: 120 minutes. (2 classes)
Procedure: Preliminary instructions are the same as in the prose activity, but with reference to the poet, a detailed explanation of the background of the poem is essential for the students to interpret the poem appropriately. Wordsworth recollects his childhood experiences, in this poem, and expresses his disappointment over a certain childhood activity. The students are given details of the poem and the poetic devices used. Each group is allotted a few stanzas. They fall into their respective groups and begin their activity. The students are assisted when needed, thereby keeping watch over the use of the target language. Error correction is done smoothly without offending the students. The last few minutes are reserved for questioning and sharing views, as usual. Corresponding exercises related to the poem are discussed in the same manner, with each group given an opportunity to answer questions by turns. Since the students are already familiar with this method of learning, their response is spontaneous. On completion of the text, each group is asked to make a simple game based on the content of the poem (such as identifying annotations, giving synonyms, etc.). Students come up with novel ideas. Points are awarded for better involvement.

- Activity III: Module Three- Drama

Text: 'Refund' by Fritz Karinthy. (pg: 120)
Aim: Understand characterization, sequencing, scrutinizing dialogue exchange, simplifying the text.
Class Time: 240 minutes. (4 classes)
Procedure: Drama needs more time depending on the length and the nature of the text. Here the students are given a detailed summary of the contents of the text and the motive of the writer. A brief account of the characters is also given. Students are allotted a certain portion to cover in each class and are made to take up reading the dialogues of each of the characters accordingly. The groups are monitored regularly as students may need assistance in following long dialogues or in summing up of details. At the end of every session it becomes very essential that students answer comprehensive questions framed by the instructor. This keeps them informed of the plot and atmosphere of the play. Towards the end of the text, groups are given a character each for discussion and are asked to talk about them to the class. Each student of the group is asked to list out at least two features of the corresponding character and second the points with references. This activity allows them to think and understand their analysis, and also get additional information form peers, about characterization. General questions are also discussed in the same pattern.

5.Challenges Faced In The Learning Process
- Meticulous preparation and scheduling for successful implementation of each activity is very essential.
- Individual attention and constant vigil are required to elicit the best out of the learners.
- Work plan in utilizing every class for the purpose, in order to avoid excessive time consumption, becomes mandatory.
- Motivating students in the initial stages call for patience.
- Slow learners need special assistance.

6.Findings
- Implementation of activities is found convenient with a schedule fixed for each class.
- After the ice-breaking sessions, classes seem to move on smoothly without many interruptions.
- Individual attention is possible as the weaker students are easily identified during interacting sessions. Peers in the group take up the task of helping their friends.
- Since these activities are planned during the regular General English classes, remaining for special courses in communication classes is found unnecessary.
- Interaction with peers and faculty creates a better rapport. Students voice out their difficulties comfortably.
- Rural students and native medium students find adequate material to learn which motivates better performance.
- Most of the students work with a sense of commitment.
- Results obtained in the following examinations showed remarkable improvement.

Pillai compares the process involved in first language acquisition to that of a second language:
In this process of Research, it would do good for us to take a lesson or two from the context of first language acquisition. How do children acquire remarkable mastery over their mother tongue in the first three or four years of their life?... How does a child born to a Tamil father and Telugu mother in Karnataka, manage to speak all three languages equally well, appropriate to the context?
... While the earlier approaches had communication as the goal or end of language learning, and adopted various means to achieve this end, communications suggest that communication is the end as well as the means of language learning. In other words, learners learn to communicate, through engaging in meaningful communication, just as people learn to swim, by swimming. The principle adopted here is 'learning by doing'. As Allwright puts it learners are learning to communicate through English—rather than learning English in order to communicate… If we want learners to become good communicators, we should create opportunities for them to communicate. (20- 21)

7.Conclusion
As Nunan states "Spoken language provides a means of interaction for the learner. Because learners must interact to achieve understanding, access to speakers of language is essential. Moreover, learners' failure to understand the language they hear is an impetus, not an obstacle, to interaction and learning (1995: V)." It proves essential for every primary learner to concentrate on understanding the target language and keep themselves comfortable and confident to respond better to regular curriculum. Participatory learning opens new avenues in imparting language skills through simple, uncomplicated methods and reaches out to the students, continually focusing on their learning capacities. Hence it can be summed up that it proves most essential and vital in language teaching to focus benevolently at the large majority of primary learners and adopt a flexible pattern of educating them with English language and increase their competence level. Language acquisition needs practical application for better understanding, good results and most important of all- opportunities for communication.

8.References

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