Impact Study of Activity Based Learning in English Language Classrooms at Primary Level

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on: The analysis of widely prevalent English teaching activities /methodologies adopted by govt. school teachers in primary classroom. 1) The concerns and worries of the teachers pertaining to teaching of English. 2) Sharing innovative methods of teaching. 3) Discussions based on the feedback of the teachers during In-service Programme. The feedback and reflections invited from the teachers regarding: 1) The implementation of the different activities for teaching in English language classrooms. 2) Constraints and concerns emerged during sharing of activities. 3) Evolving solutions through discussions and sharing expressions of the teachers.*

Keywords: Learning, English, Language, Classroom

1. Introduction

One of the essential endeavours of a teacher is to adopt a 'Learners Centric Approach' in Classroom teaching. That means an atmosphere has to be created in which students learn to think independently. Learning to know is what education is all about.

"A student-centred approach helps students to develop a 'can-do' attitude. It is effective, motivating and enjoyable" (*Leo Jones, 2007)*

Ironically we profess student centred teaching methodologies but our classrooms are still very much teacher centric. Teachers mostly adhere to lecture method followed by question-answer session and seating arrangement without exception is like:-
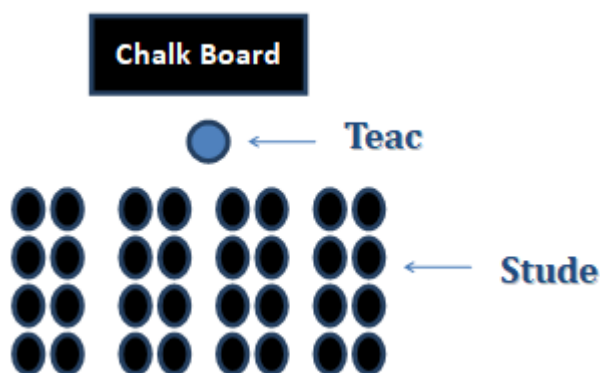
Talking about the teaching of English Language (L_2), it is the only method adopted and supposed to be most effective and practical under the prevailing circumstances of government/MCD schools.

Research shows that we generally retain
- 10 per cent of what we hear
- 20 per cent of what we hear and see
- 40 per cent of what we discuss with others
- 80 per cent of what we directly practice using the skill to be learnt
- 90 per cent of what we teach others

The content of the above table calls for a need to shift our focus from traditional methods to modern methods of teaching to achieve our desired goals and objectives. One such method is Activity Based Learning (ABL).

The key feature of ABL method is that it uses child friendly educational aids to foster self learning and allows a child to study accordingly to his/her aptitude and skill. The philosophy of ABL is that learning can be best when it is initiated by the surrounding environment and motivated by providing optimum opportunities to learn. (Wikipedia)

Initially, a core team was asked to investigate the current practices of classroom process and find out the reasons for the low achievement of children. As the team members had rich exposure in the field of primary education they had strong faith on children, parents, teachers and the government that they would not be responsible for low achievement of children. Then, after close study in some of the schools in the corporation area, the team identified few maladies in the conventional process.

Main constraints identified in the conventional process by the us team:-
- Teacher dominates the classroom always.
- Rare use of teaching learning materials.
- Most of the time the lecture method was followed.
- Importance was given to rote learning.
- Teachers are under the assumption that they know everything and children do not know anything.
- Focus is given on teaching rather than learning.
- Absence of joyous based extra activities.
- Absence of play way and learning by doing activities.
- Less chance for mutual and self learning.
- Coverage of syllabus by the teacher and not by the children.
- Classroom with less facilities for learning activities.
- Instructional materials neither intensive nor attractive.

To overcome the above malady in teaching learning process a suitable strategy called Activity Based Learning (ABL)

was evolved to be implemented in the Chennai Corporation Schools.

Until or unless the new methodologies are tried in the classrooms, one cannotanalyze the difference between the two and make a choice. A combination of both can be brought up for a viable solution Government schools class room scenario.

2. Need for the study

During the Inservice training programmes organized for MCD schools teachers and primary class teachers from Directorate of Education, teachers showed their concern about the poor performance and standard of their students. The teachers also kept forward the constraints they felt for poor standards of learning and interest shown by the students.

Main apprehensions expressed by them include:-
1) Their students belong to poor socio economic background which means they neither have any access to the English language (L_2) reading material or exposure to the language at home.
2) They are first generation learners and generally have no support in studies at home.
3) The textbooks are too difficult for these children who did not have any formal pre school exposure like public school students.
4) Even the teachers find themselves not well equipped with latest teaching methodologies, preparation of Audio Visual Aids etc.
5) Many teachers themselves face problems as had studied in Hindi medium in their school days.
6) Teachers feel a need for training so as to exploit textbooks and some resource material that can readily be used in their classes.
7) Teachers show a desire to improve their own communication skills and the same for their students.

3. Objectives of the study

Keeping in mind the concerns and needs of the teachers a few objectives were drawn up in order to share few innovative methods that can be used in English Language classrooms. Few of which are:-
1) To make classrooms more learner centred
2) To make classroom teaching more communicative.
3) To encourage involvement of the students in the class.
4) To motivate the students to share their ideas.
5) To introduce activity based techniques.
6) To encourage kinaesthetic learners.
7) To help teachers exploit text in easy and interesting ways.

Sample Tool and Technique
Two groups (of 50 each) of teachers were randomly asked a set of questions. Notes were taken with the help of a volunteer to keep record of the responses. It was not a formal, in-depth interview conducted individually, rather for every question, answers were welcomed willingly. An informal tone was set in order to make them feel comfortable and come up with genuine responses. The

questions used as an interaction tool has been attached as 'Appendix A'

4. Methodology

1) 'Grouping for Learning' Activities

These activities aim at kinaesthetic learners at all levels. Elementary level students enjoy such activities a lot with a reservoir of energy in them.

The teachers were not told about the activity, rather they were made to participate and reflect upon it.

Activity Steps:

- Five animal picture cards (A4 size) were taken and kept at five different tables.
- All the teaches were given a slip each with a characteristic feature of an animal.
- It was ensured that there were equal slips for all the five animals.
- The teachers were asked to match their slip with its respective animal and make groups accordingly.
- When all teachers got arranged in five groups, they were asked to discuss the characteristic features written on their slip to check whether they were in the right group or not.

The characteristic features mentioned in the slips were kept a bit challenging so as to maintain an interest level. But for elementary class students, grouping can be done as per their level. Grouping Activities can be devised to exploit textbook content for a pre-reading,
while reading, post reading or revision activity. Few of such examples have been mentioned as under:

2) Grouping for recognition of alphabets (class-I)

Activity Steps:
- Keep six cards containing four letters each (2 cards may have 5 each) at six different places.
- Give all the students a slip each containing one alphabet. The number of slips can be prepared as per the requirement.
- The students are supposed to find their group by recognizing their letters with its respective card.
- When all the students are seated in their groups, they are supposed to check all the slips to ensure that all of them are at the right place.
- As an extension they may be given a list of words, out of which they have to encircle the ones that begin with the letters of their group.

3) Grouping for learning sounds, three letter words

Activity Steps:
- Place five cards containing five vowel sounds a, e, i, o, u (after explaining and giving example) at different places.
- Give all the students a slip each containing a three letter word with one of the vowel sound for e. g.
'a' – hat, bat, cat, fat, mat

'e'-bet, jet, net, get, pet
'i'-bit, sit, fit, hit, kit
'o' – cot, dot, got, hot, pot
'u'-but, cut, hut, nut, tut

- Make sure that there are equal number of slips for each vowel sound. Ask the students to join their respective group by recognizing their vowel sound.
- Let the students check all the slips to ensure that they are with the right group.
- Give them a passage containing the words of different vowel sounds. Let them encircle the words with the vowel sound of their group.

4) Grouping for learning names of animals, birds

Activity Steps:
- Place 4 cards containing the titles:
  Land Animals
  Aquatic (water) Animals
  Polar Region Animals
  Birds
- Give all the students a picture each belonging to one of the four cards
- Ask them to find their group as per their picture.
- Let all the groups ensure that all its members are in the right group.
- All the groups are supposed to write the name of the animal with the help of a list provided by the teacher.

5) Grouping and learning rhyming words

Activity Steps:
- Keep five cards with a word each that can be used as a stem rhyming word, at different places.
- Give each student a slip containing a word rhyming with one of the stem word.
- Tell students to find their group by matching their rhyming word with the stem words on the cards.
- Let them check their rhyming words in their respective groups.
- Ask them to prepare a chant with the help of their rhyming words

6) Grouping for enhancing vocabulary

Activity Steps:
- Make six cards for the people/things related to:-
  School
  Kitchen
  Sports
  Hospital
  Metro Station
  Bathroom
- Give each student a slip containing the name of a thing/person related to one of the six cards.
- Make sure that there are equal number of slips for each category. Let the students find their group by matching their slip with its respective category.
- Ask them to check within their group all the slips. They have to ensure that all belong to their group.
- Ask them to write few sentences using the words written on their slips in their group as a group work.

Teaching Rhymes Differently
Although rhymes attract children a lot when accompanied with action, it can be made even more interesting by adding few surprise elements, sing song ways to it. Few such techniques are described below:

1) Disappearing Chant (*Concept taken from training Manual produced by British council under Project English, Delhi*)

Activity Steps:
Choose a few rhyming words in a chant and keep a blank at their place. Let the students guess those rhyming words with given hints. When the chant is complete with all blanks filled with correct rhyming words, start the process of recitation done through different modes. Let all students recite the first line in whispers and the second loudly and likewise the whole chant.

For second time let all the girls recite the first, third, fifth…… lines and the boys recite the second, fourth sixth…. . lines.

Next let it be row wise in the same way. The teacher may not speak the words, instead can do appropriate gestures.

Now, start rubbing few of the words (may be 4-5 at a time). Every time let the students recall and recite the chant with disappeared words. Gradually all the words disappear and the students are through with the chant. This technique can be followed for any rhyme to ensure complete involvement of the students.

2) Teaching Rhymes Group-wise
This technique can be adopted for the rhymes that deal with different animal characters.

Activity Steps:
Each group can be allotted one particular animal character.
When the teacher recites the poem the each group has to recognize their part subsequently doing the actions.
For the second time let each group recite its part with actions thereby completely the whole poem.
Next, the entire class can be roped in for the recitation with their respective actions.

3) Teaching Rhyme for a particular sound

Activity Steps:
Select a poem with a particular sound appearing quite often. Tell the students that they are supposed raise their hand as soon as they hear the sound. For the first time the teacher can demonstrate along with the recitation. For the second time, change the action, let it be nodding their head when they hear the sound. Next, students can be asked to stand up when they hear the sound while reciting the lines along with the teacher.

4) Composing music for the Rhymes

Activity Steps:
Divide the class into 5-6 groups. Select a rhyme and compose a tune for it to be recited in a sing song manner.

Now give the same rhyme to each group. Ask them to prepare their own music for that rhyme. Let each group present their composed musical rhyme and ask others to sing with them. The entire class will be reciting the same rhyme in 5-6 different ways.

5) Teaching Rhymes with picture comprehension

Activity Steps:
This technique can be adopted with rhymes that have a uniform pattern all through. There is only a slight change after every verse. E. g. when you are happy and you know it……. '
- Clap your hands
- Tap your feet
- Say hurrah
- Blink your eyes

Teacher can use pictures for the actions. Let each group get one picture showing an action. When the teacher recites the poem she shows one picture and the group having the same picture recite the lines subsequently doing their respective actions.

When the recitation of the poem in parts is done, let the students all together recite the while poem with its action.

Reflecting on the Activities
The teachers showed a lot of interest while taking part in the activities and discussing their learning outcomes. They appreciated the activities for:
- Bringing in an element of fun that ensures more involvement of learners.
- Giving opportunity to learners to talk more and share their ideas.
- Creating a atmosphere where learners feel more secure and less anxious.
- Encouraging learners to use English more and enhance their vocabulary.
- Making English language classrooms more communicative and lively

Feedback of the teachers
During the second phase of the training programme that was held 3 months after the first phase, the teacher's feedbacks were welcomed. There were about 20 teachers who tried most of the activities in their classrooms and others also evinced keen interest. The feedback questions were therefore focused on those who had practically used the activities in their classrooms within the group. This discussion was aimed at identifying and sharing that how did the participants managed the activities and the students reaction. Based on the feedback the other teachers although interested in activity-based learning but could not implement them were motivated to do so by discussing their apprehensions and concerns.

The set of questions as an interaction tool for the feedback has been attached as **'Annexure B'.** Teachers feedback has been summarized in the findings.

5. Findings

Activities created a lively atmosphere with maximum involvement of the students. Even those students who had been quiet and submissive earlier seemed to be enjoying the activities were actively participating in them.

Initially it was a tedious process of arranging the class in groups. Teachers had to struggle a lot to do grouping as quietly as possible. Moreover it took a lot of time to arrange the students in groups. But it was not the case after 3-4 times of practice. Gradually they took less time and tried to be less noisy.

Regarding instructions, teachers faced a bit of problem as they had to support their instructions with more of the native language (in their case, Hindi). In groups as well, the students used more of L_1 (native language) for discussions.

Few students still felt nervous tongue tied, while taking part in discussions. Students made a lot of mistakes while speaking in English with each other or presenting their group work.

As a whole, grouping and learning activities turned out to be magical to make the students speak in class.

For 'Teaching Rhymes' activities the response of the students had been wonderful. Disappearing chant was liked by all very much. 'Teaching Rhymes' with groups, and composing music for rhymes also generated a lot of life in the classroom. The rhymes were learnt fast by the students.

Teachers made use of the activities shared in the first phase to exploit their textbooks. They shared those activities in the second phase of training. Few of the tried activities were further modified to make them more practical and applicable in given scenario.

Concerns of the Teachers

The teachers' apprehensions to bring these activities in daily routine is that of:
- Large class size.
- Dual desks chained hinder movement for easy group work.
- Increased noise level disturb other classes.
- Non-serious students divert attention of others.
- Lack of any resource pool for ready to use teaching aids and worksheets.
- Making teaching aids is a time consuming process.

6. Suggestions

1) Teacher can divide the class into small groups and then call one volunteer from each group and demonstrate the activity with them and these volunteers can go back to their respective groups and conduct the activities.
2) Where dual desks cause hindrance, preference can be give to pair work and group work can be done in set of four students facing each other.

3) Teacher monitoring and effective counseling can play an important role in maintaining acceptable noise level in the class.
4) Non-serious students can be counseled and if need be made group leaders to install sense of responsibility in them.
5) A group of teachers in the school can pool in their resources and create common teaching aids and use the annual grant received under Universalisation of Elementary Education (Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan) Scheme. This will also address the concern of making of teaching aids being time consuming.

7. Conclusions

The new ways of teaching need to be tried and tested in the classrooms to be analysed for their feasible points. A shift from traditional ways of teaching to modern ways of teaching has to be gradual but steady. Continuous training and resource material is to be provided to the teachers to motivate them to bring in a change.

Some of the perceived benefits of the ABL approach not only experienced in this study but also vouched in the Tamil Nadu study as discussed above mainly are:-

- Children learn on their own pace.
- Through group learning, mutual learning and self learning are encouraged.
- Rote learning is discouraged.
- Classroom transaction is based on child's needs and interests.
- Sense of achievement boosts child's confidence and morale.
- Attractive cards and activity create interest among children.
- Scope for child's development in creative and communicative skills.
- Children will have a feel of security as they sit in rounds in the groups.
- Children are allowed to move in the classroom for the activity.
- Moreover the distance between the teacher and the child is largely reduced and the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than teacher.

References

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Annexure A

Set of questions asked during training programme **Phase-I**
1) What teaching methodologies do you use for the teaching of English language in your classrooms?
2) Have you tried something different for the teaching of English?
3) Are you satisfied with the performance of your students?
4) Do you feel the need to bring any change in your teaching methods?
5) Who talks more during class room interactions?
6) Do your students respond well, when you ask questions pertaining to comprehension?
7) Do you teach poetry the same way as you do the chapters/prose section?
8) What strategies do you adopt to ensure complete involvement of the students?
9) How do you ensure that the backbenchers (disengaged) are attentive and participative in the class room?
10) What kind of audio-visual aids do you use to support your teaching?

Annexure B

Set of questions used as feedback tool during Training Programme phase in the II P
1) Did you try the activities we shared during the first phase of the training programme?
2) What was the response of the students?
3) Which were the activities that you found to be more suitable in Government School scenario?
4) Which activities need to be further modified?
5) What were the challenges faced by you while organising the activities?