

The Text is Only A Pretext

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Abstract

The need to teach communication has been accepted, so syllabuses have changed. Text books were changed to make learners learn communication. Activities in textbooks were designed for teaching and learning English. But unfortunately, there hasn't been any training provided to the teachers on how to teach communication or to the learners on how to learn language. The result is there is no skill development in the learners and the situation doesn't seem to be changing because though the tools and equipment are given very few know the effective use of it. It has been found and observed that the teachers carry out the same traditional teaching with the same texts and the same ways of teaching –even the communicative syllabus. This paper proposes that there is a need to change the teaching techniques so that actual teaching and learning takes place and the learners are able to use language in various real life situations where they need to communicate. Learners don't only need to pass the examinations but also need to communicate, express themselves, to talk about themselves and their ways of life, their surroundings, their place, their education, their problems and present themselves in a better way that helps them in their careers and work places- no matter what field of education they belong to.

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Introduction

In the English language classrooms, English is taught with the help of a text book. A text book matters a lot for learners from the examination point of view. The students' focus or expectation for learning English is towards what is going to appear in the examination. Teachers therefore tend to repeat content items from the texts from the examination point of view. So their purpose of teaching English is not to teach them language but to make the learners ready for the examination. The teaching of English is nothing much than revolving round the text and its exercises in the present English language classrooms. With these conventional methods the communicative abilities cannot be developed though the present and urgent need is communication skills for students.

What is our national teaching objective of teaching English. It is to teach English in such a way that our learners are able to communicate well. We need it for the utilitarian function, for internal communication and for global communication. We want to make our learners good communicators. So the text should not only be used for the examinations but also to be able to communicate well.

The present situation of teaching English language

Usually it is seen that teachers take a lot of efforts in explaining the text to the extent of draining their energies to make the learners answer questions to the exercises given or the ones that are likely to appear in the examination. In doing all this, teachers miss their focus on what actually needs to be done- teaching them language that will be with them forever. If the learners are able to acquire the language then they can comprehend all that

the text has and their ability to answer questions will be developed. The technique to extend beyond the given text makes them able to catch the fish and does not make them dependent on someone serving them the dish of fish again and again.

This competence of the learners in communication is one of the aims of language teaching. Therefore, the teaching of language should aim at building the competence of the learners.

It has also been observed that we expect communicative competence but our learners lack even the linguistic competence, communicative competence is far away from it.

This is a sad situation but even then not an impossible task to achieve. No one else can change the situation as much as the teachers can. They can because they are constantly in touch with the learners and teaching.

The efforts the teachers take for teaching language need to be directed in the right direction, towards fruitful teaching that serves the needs of the learners. With some training the teacher can change the picture of the existent degrading language education. The researcher has experimented with a methodology that has helped the learners acquire the language along with doing the text, its exercises etc. The methodology adapted uses the text as a pretext. It is used as a launching ground for giving exposure to the learners. Because the language principle says- *'The more is the exposure, the more is the learning'*.

Text is only a pretext

A 'text' is a stretch of language written or spoken. Any stretch of language used for the purpose of teaching is a text. It could be a passage; a dialogue; a description, or a film. It can be either aural or written or even visual.

'Text' is a tool for fulfilling the objectives of the syllabus and curriculum. An educationist says 'Text book is a half of apparatus of teaching.'

In the pedagogical context, 'a text' is a means of making learners acquire English.

In fact, the text is only a pretext. It is only a reason to teach something more important than its given content. The texts will change every year and with time but what is taught in language is the 'language' itself. The learners need to be able to use the language for different purposes. They should be able to acquire the language items that the text contains or the language items related to that subject or theme. The text, the chapter, the content will be forgotten but the language learnt will not be over; it remains with the learner forever. The language gets enhanced and grows with its use. This unique characteristic of the language needs to be understood by the teacher of language. This understanding will be able to change the picture of teaching and learning and the efforts will yield positive results.

For example- The researcher studied a chapter in her school days – 'Sunny days' - A part from Sunil Gavaskar's life and the hundred centuries he made. The language learnt then is with the learner – that is how to talk about someone's achievements but the content may or may not be remembered.

Similarly, the present day learners will have some other player's or person's achievements in their text. It is observed that teachers give importance to the content and understanding of the lesson or poem etc, on the other hand equally important is the language that needs to be acquired to be able to talk and communicate.

The textual content is brought in to be used as a spring board for providing the communicative language to learners. This aim of teaching can be achieved if the 'text' is

used not as the **means** but as a **tool**- it should be a **pretext** to **teach what is needed** for the learners.

The researcher has experimented teaching with this methodology with many groups of learners and there has been a lot of language learning possible along with keeping the interest of the learners and motivating them to participate in the learning process. This methodology or technique helps fulfill the classroom teaching objectives.

As cited in an article by Thornby Scott, Akbari (2008:647) notes, 'What the majority of teachers teach and how they teach [...] are now determined by textbooks'. Despite this, we still know little about their actual effectiveness in terms of learning outcomes, and it is curious, to say the least, that textbooks rarely if ever feature in discussions of factors that influence second language acquisition (SLA).

Teacher's role in going beyond the text:

We live in the post-modern context. The post-modern concepts are to be applied to the English teaching context. In post modernism, the very notion of 'text' has changed. The text is only a pretext. The text may be in the written form or spoken form; it can even be visual like a movie or a piece of painting or any symbolic representation like a statue or a piece of architecture.

Learners need not 'master' English as it is believed to be; they should have a functional competence so that English can be used for all professional purposes. Teaching is done to make learning happen. Teaching is a process and that must have a direction. This direction is decided by the aims and objectives of teaching and learning English.

The teacher's objective is to make learners learn English; only the text is not enough; the teacher needs to go beyond the text- give more examples to make them learn the various language items that the learner needs for communication.

However, the creative and innovative teacher does not depend only on the given text but makes the learning happen by going beyond the text. The innovative teacher is on a look out for complementary text which can give language exposure to the learner. Every text contains a sub-text, something hidden in the text; learners must know how to read between the lines and relate the text to other texts and contexts.

The teacher needs to know intertextuality. E.g. while reading a text, the reader is not there in the text all the time, there are many associations in the learner's mind and they come alive while reading the text.

For example -

Any story – especially satirical has a suggestive/implied meaning. For example-A Tenali Raman story named 'Golden Mango' talks about golden mangoes but there is a suggestive meaning to it i.e.- Too much greed leads to destruction. Though the words greed, destruction etc. are not mentioned in the story, the teacher can pick upon these language items to generate English in the classroom and make the learners use these words like greed, destruction, words used for people who are greedy etc.

Inferential meaning is derived from the context. Every reader will derive a different meaning from the text.

The text is thrown 'open' so that it is possible to go beyond what is written without restricting the teaching and learning only to the given text. The text is used as a pretext

and to go beyond to learn English. The ultimate aim is to learn English and not to mug up the content of the 'text' as it appears.

So in a classroom language teaching context, it is not only the 'text' that is to be used but a teacher needs to go beyond that.

The teacher's activities in the classroom thus would consist of :

1. Doing meaning focused activities
2. Providing comprehensible input
3. Integrating the language skills
4. Making modifications and corrections

Here the teacher's role in going beyond the text is to catch hold of the intertextual segment which can promote language learning. The teacher also can infer or perceive the intertextuality on the basis of the interaction with the learners in the classroom.

For example if a word 'green' is there in the text. The teacher can ask them to think about words that are used with the word 'green'. The students may come up with many words like –green-house effect, green room, have a green thumb, green fuel etc. that go beyond the colour 'green'. Several vocabulary items, phrases, usages etc can be recalled and revised. Here the text 'green' is a pretext to generate more English.

Another example- Talking about the railway station- there is a lot of intertextuality in it. Talking about the various parts of the train-the bogie, the berth, the cabin; the people related to it, the ticket checker, the guard; phrases related to it like 'get on a train', 'board a train', 'get off at', 'running late' etc can be dealt with in the classroom. One thread can be picked up and developed further to make the learner learn English.

This activity is related to the text and based on the text and a lot of English is also generated in the classroom. This is a teaching strategy to generate English in the language classroom.

This activity helps in building the linguistic, communicative and pragmatic competence of learners.

Learners develop their ability to frame acceptable sentences and use them in communicative situations. Communicative competence according to the glossary of basic terms in materials development in language teaching means – The ability to use the language effectively for communication. Gaining such confidence involves acquiring both sociolinguistic and linguistic knowledge and skills (or, in other words, developing the ability to use the language accurately, appropriately and effectively). Learners also develop the ability to use English appropriately, depending on the situation.

Language teaching should aim at using the text to take the learners to the real life situations where they can put language to use rather than learning language forms that are only in the context given in the textbooks.

Teacher's performance: It is the teacher who needs to make the learning happen. For this the teacher needs to have the bare minimum competence to make learning happen. The paper qualifications and length of teaching would not really matter in effective teaching-learning process in the classroom. What matters is the ability of the teacher to impart language items which are expected that the learners should acquire. Using the text as pretext calls for intensive training and experimentation by way of its application in the classroom.

Hence, using the text is a purposeful activity. The text can be used as a base and a launching ground to go and explore some more language items related to it. The language

forms it contains in various contexts are to be brought into light and passed on to learners. The application of these usages in the real life context needs to be discussed shared and taught so that the language is learnt for communication.

The teacher provides an opportunity to the learner not only to acquire the language items of the given text but the ones related to the context. By doing so, the amount of input is increased which ultimately helps learners to improve their language competence. Speaking about the learner's learning strategies professor Kumaravadivelu says:

The competences and functions invariably determine the nature and quality of input that is available to the learner. Most often, the learner is not exposed to the full range of the TL in all its complexity that one would expect in a context where it is used as the primary vehicle of communication. (Kumaravadivelu: 2009:44)

Example of using the text as a pretext

Here is an example of how a teacher can take the learners beyond the given text by providing linguistic input in a classroom context. The teaching points here can be: to make them get the vocabulary, the sentence structure, ear training, to make learners use the sentence in different ways and practise the related usages.

For example - A sentence of a given text is –

“A person who is nice to you but rude to the waiter is not a nice person.”

For the preliminary level

Step 1- At the preliminary level/ class/activity- the potential word that could be used here is the word ‘nice’.

The teacher gives them the words that can go with the word ‘**nice**’ like **nice person, nice weather, nice building, nice house, nice guy, nice girl** and so on.

The teacher gives them a task to replace the word ‘nice’ and add their own descriptions.

The teacher facilitates the activity in the following way:

The teacher asks what the word ‘**nice**’ means in ‘**anice person**’. The students respond- ‘gentle, generous, helping, pleasant’ etc. The teacher then takes them further by asking if the word ‘generous’ can also be used for ‘weather’. The students respond ‘no’ to it. Then the teacher asks them to give the words describing ‘weather’. The teacher questions if ‘nice weather’ is equivalent to ‘nice person’.

So the board - work would be like this:

Fill in the blanks with appropriate word instead of ‘nice’:

Nice person

_____ weather

_____ building

_____ house

_____ dish

_____ trip

_____ oranges

_____ guy

_____ girl

_____ officer

_____ behavior

_____ shirt

_____ city

The teacher prepares flash-cards for some words and depending on the time may select the number of items. The selection of these items is done considering their problem areas, as the learners need to talk about their city, people, work places etc. in their communication, this activity helps them describe things and objects in the real context.

The responses from the students for the above items that come up are:

A nice/gentle/strong/decent person

pleasant, fresh, healthy weather

attractive, well designed building

spacious, airy and light, with good interiors, well maintained house

delicious, tasty, mouth-watering, palatable dish

enjoyable, memorable trip

juicy/sweet/ oranges

cheerful/friendly/polite guy

lovely/decent/sweet/smart girl (here they come up with many words)

helpful/sincere/ officer

good/gets along with othersbehaviour

stylish/well-stitched/ befitting/designer shirt

planned/ancient/pilgrim/clean and green city

The teacher writes the words on the board or asks a couple of students to write down the words that everyone shared while the teacher moves round the class to see if they are doing the activity. The activity is also taken further by asking the learners to describe the people and things negatively like unpleasant/dull/unhealthy weather. (when it's monsoon) or an old, reconstructed building. Of course the use of articles can also be focused upon if the need be depending on the learners. At the end of the activity the learners come to know a number of new words and where they are used. The teacher even takes them further to construct some sentences with the help of these words which they use in their daily life. For example the sentences like –

*'My mother has brought a **designer sari** for the Navratri celebration.'*

*'My college is **huge** and has a **spacious playground** with **well-equipped laboratories**.'*

*'The weather is **unhealthy**. I've **caught a cold**.'*

During the activity, the learning is enjoyable and fruitful. There is a lot of vocabulary learning without which communication is not possible.

A number of research studies have recently dealt with lexical problems (problems related to words) through research the scholars are finding that lexical problems frequently interfere with communication. Communication breaks down when people do not use the right words. (Nagaraj Geetha:1996:183)

Similar kind of activities can be carried out for the intermediate and advanced level learners where phrases, idioms and daily usages can be dealt with.

Conclusion

The class in this activity is all motivated and everyone in the class participates and thinks what they can respond. They enjoy every moment of it. The learning they receive is forever and they acquire many language items, various forms of sentences that are used in spoken English, the pronunciation of the different words and to add to it, the grammatical structures and other related constructions. The learners acquire much of grammar too. They are able to express their minds in sentences and this gives the

learners a sense of achievement and boosts their confidence. This confidence makes them get into the competition and participate in various activities because they can speak. This is how learning takes place under the pretext of the text.

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