

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 9 : 4 April 2009

ISSN 1930-2940

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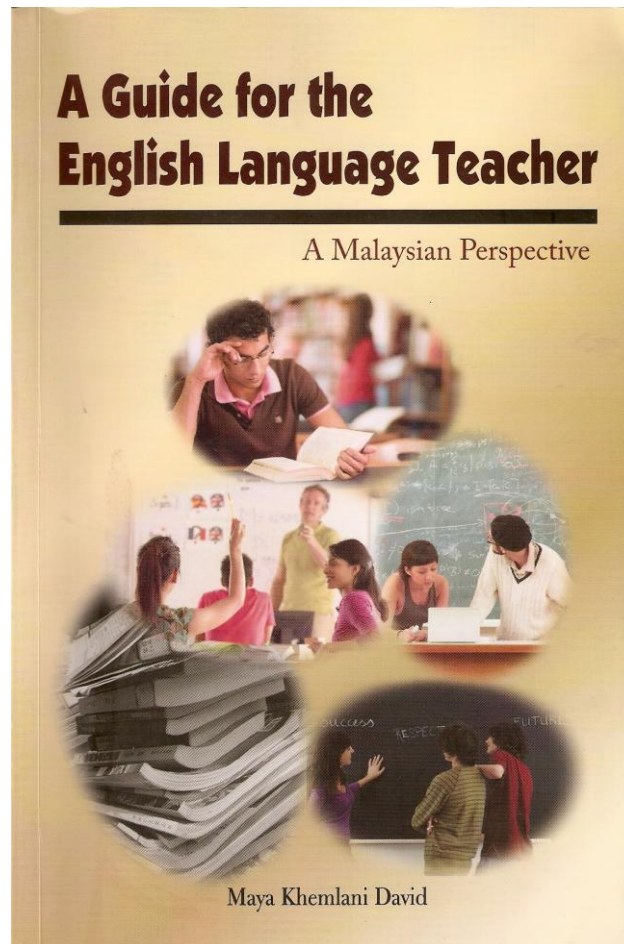
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Indian and Malaysian Contexts for Teaching English

South Asian nations share many values of English education with the multiracial and multilingual Malaysia. Professor Maya Khemlani David's *A Guide for the English Language Teacher - A Malaysian*

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Perspective is an insightfully written useful book for all English language teachers in South Asia. At the outset itself we highly commend this book for every college and university library in India and in every South Asian nation.

Useful Survey of Techniques and Strategies

This is a short book of only 143 pages, but within these pages, Professor Maya gives us a very useful survey of relevant techniques and strategies that English language teachers could use in their classrooms.

This book begins with a very valuable assumption,

“While ‘correct’ use of language is highly desired in language pedagogy, it is imperative to realize that equipping students with ‘politically correct’ grammar and spelling norms does not necessarily result in them being communicatively competent” (p. iv).

Impeccable Grammar is No Substitute for Appropriate Speech

Professor Maya Khemlani David further remarks,

“a speaker with impeccable grammar and command of a language may offend or insult his/her interlocutor if he/she does not understand the sociocultural norms of the environment his/her interlocutor is from. The speaker may practice face-threatening acts by being very direct although it is not his/her intention to hurt his/her addressee’s face. Hence, sensitizing students to different cultural norms and making them aware of the connotations and associations of language to the larger sociocultural practices must be incorporated in language teaching” (p. viii).

The book is divided into 9 chapters, with a prologue in the beginning.

Problems of Rural Students

Chapter 1 Political, Economic and Social Backdrop to Language Teaching in Malaysia

Any one from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan who reads this chapter will find the insightful comments of Professor Maya very applicable to their own nations:

“Rural students unlike their urban counterparts do not have sufficient access to English and their environment does not encourage the use of English” (p. viii).

These rural students, hailing from usually socially and economically backward social groups (castes) face a lot of disadvantage when it comes to actually using English. Recent trends in South India clearly show that in math and science these students excel and are able to enter

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engineering, medical and other professional courses with much ease, but mastery of English continues to be very poor. Maya concludes, “The adoption of a pragmatic policy which caters to the linguistic needs of the nation and its people is vital and has to be done with extra care in multilingual settings” (p. 18).

Message Sent Must be the Message Communicated

Chapter 2 Ensuring Teaching Equates Learning

Maya argues, “Teaching must be seen in the same light as communicating. ... In other words, the message sent must be the message communicated” (p. 21). However, there are many intervening variables or factors that do not help achieve this essential goal. This chapter focuses on these intervening variables and factors and helps us not only to recognize them but also to bring them under our control so that teaching and communicating become one and the same. These are discussed under the categories: Learning from students and adjusting information accordingly; seating arrangements; sensitive to noise; checking on understanding; sensitivity to students’ questions and responses; readjusting information; and peer learning.

How to Overcome Inadequacies?

Chapter 3 Compensating Inadequacies through Communicative Strategies

Starting with the fine observation, “As second language users do not have all the linguistic means to express the message, their communicative success relies heavily on their ability to communicate within restrictions,” Professor Maya discusses the role of paraphrase, borrowing, literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance and mime in addition to avoidance resorted to by the students in class.

We’d also like to view these strategies not merely emanating from the inadequacies of students, but also from the conversational strategies normally adopted by adults in the community when they use or try to use English. For example, English speaking situations in India outside the classroom are full of such strategies adopted normally when educated adults communicate with one another in a variety of situations including formal situations. Current standards of communication through English in India, thus, are replicated in the classrooms as well.

Patience and Other Qualities in Communication

Chapter 4 Discourse Norms: The Influence of Group Work

This chapter focuses on four important strategies for discourse construction in normal conversational situations: Turntaking, Repairs, Openings and Closing, and Speech Acts. Indian and other South Asian students really need additional training in all these four categories. We

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have no patience to wait for our turn to express ourselves! While we try to be respectful in our own ways, such respect is hardly extended in taking turns in conversations. We often tend to be very short in our responses and thus such responses could be interpreted in diverse ways. Training in discourse norms adopted in English will, we think, improve our strategies in our own mother tongue communications as well.

Important to Learn Cultural Strategies of Communication – Unity in Diversity

Chapter 5 Going Beyond Schema: Selecting Texts

This chapter is more technical than other chapters. As the chapter deals with theories of reading (and learning) in some detail, there is room to simplify this chapter when a reprint is published.

The chapter focuses on cultural influences in reading a text. Three items are suggested based on research by various authors: Students “recall more of the native than the foreign text; produce more expansions as a result of ‘remembering’ items which were not mentioned in the text but were culturally appropriate and consistent with it; [and] make more distortions of the foreign text.”

In major metropolitan cities and in elitist private schools and colleges we notice the emergence of families that encourage their children to speak and think in English only. While their accent is typically Indian English, their grammar is appropriate and vocabulary is expansive. We wonder how these groups of students would perform in relation to the above three categories listed.

In any case, we now know how most students in general category perform and thus we are in a position to take remedial steps.

Professor Maya raises a very important question:

If cultural unknowns are a sure source of misunderstanding in the reading classroom, then it can be argued that only texts that deal with known aspects of culture should be used in the reading classroom (p. 55).

She rightly concludes, “Although such selective choice of texts may facilitate the reading process, it does in no way open up new worlds and new experiences to them” (p. 55).

This chapter also provides us with many useful ideas and strategies for curriculum development in pluralistic societies of South Asia, based on Malaysian experience. Professor Maya suggests,

In a multiracial, multiethnic, multireligious country like Malaysia it is vital that people learn about each other’s culture. This is true for members of the Islamic cultural majority as well as the minority cultures, and one should not assume

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that by living together in the same country that people have gained sufficient cultural knowledge about each other (p. 55).

This chapter provides many useful strategies to select appropriate texts.

Identification of Cultural Norms

Chapter 6 Discovering Cultural Norms through Speech Acts in Texts

This chapter discusses differences in speech acts between communities, ethnic groups and nationalities, etc., and how these differences could affect speech acts in English in a foreign/second language learning situation. For example, while “Malays consider indirectness as polite and face-saving, ... the Germans consider indirectness as a waste of time” (p. 65). The chapter deals with specific items that would need special attention so that speech acts in English would be well constructed. Difficulties faced by the students are identified in relation to their cultural backgrounds and steps to overcome such difficulties are discussed. Compliments and admonitions are taken up for a focused study and description. This is a very interesting chapter which could be expanded by teachers with materials from the culture they are in.

Mother Tongue Education in Aid of Learning English

Chapter 7 Incorporating Mother Tongue in Literacy

This chapter is probably the thinnest chapter of the book, but it has an immense value in dealing with classroom activities. The argument presented here is rather bold and absolutely correct, in our opinion:

Reading in the target language is an important means of learning the target language. However, language students may not understand the skills required if they are taught in the target language. Skills such as skimming, scanning, looking for main ideas and supporting points, and decoding difficult lexical items are better understood if such skills are taught in the first language (p. 83).

Unfortunately, at least in Indian situations, mother tongue teachers are not adequately acquainted with novel and useful ideas by their exposure to what happens in the English textbook and classrooms. Innovations are not pursued with determination in mother tongue classrooms. What Professor Maya says is that if language learning in mother tongue is carried out with skills orientation, then, learning English and applying general skills in using English will be much easier. Mother tongue literacy comes to the help of learning English better in such situations.

Movies for Learning English

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Chapter 8 Movies as Peripheral Teaching Aids

Professor Maya's suggestion that, "One easy way of making second language learners aware of niceties in discourse is to extract excerpts of spoken discourse on such speech acts from movies," is a very useful suggestion. However, language teachers need skills in making clips and using them appropriately. This also involves technical and financial details. Teachers are ill-equipped to handle these in South Asian nations, and in many other nations around the world.

We'd like to add that this recommendation is achieved more easily if the Directorates of School Education in various provinces in a country and in various Asian and African nations could prepare a list of such episodes, obtain permission to use the clips and make these available to all schools in CD formats. They also need to catalogue these clips in terms of content and strategies as well as grammatical and lexical structures.

Unfortunately we do not have many movies in English taken in India watching which could help develop fluency in English while keeping under control other (western) cultural factors. There are other types of materials also: cartoons with subtitles, movies with subtitles, indigenous cartoons with characters speaking in English, and so on.

This chapter takes up a movie clip for study and operation in the classroom. The strategies identified and adopted in this section of the chapter are highly useful guidelines for individual teachers.

Text Analysis for Language Learning

Chapter 9 Sociolinguistic Variables in Language Teaching: Use of Authentic Data

This last chapter in this very useful book takes us to a higher level of instruction. Professor Maya proposes, "effective conversation and effective writing both demand examination of texts that exemplify the genre in which students hope to produce spoken comments and written arguments. A careful textual analysis, undertaken as a class activity, serves to bring the student from the realm of the personal into the common ground of shared, purposeful and goal-directed conversation with others" (p. 106).

This area is largely neglected and ignored in Indian contexts. Every learning process must help students to develop their skills in critical inquiry. Tradition-bound Indian schooling, especially schools that follow Indian languages medium of instruction and rural schools, needs greater improvement in this area. Introducing textual analysis as suggested by Professor Maya will help not only effective learning of English but also equipping students with much needed critical skills.

To conclude

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To conclude, every page of this book is a helpful addition to our knowledge and understanding of how to teach and learn English effectively. The steps suggested in this book are highly relevant for Indian and South Asian contexts and for all Southeast Asian nations as well.

Copies of this book are available from the publisher:

SIRD
Strategic Information and Research Development Centre
sird@streamyx.com
<http://www.gerakbudaya.com>

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Adjunct Teacher
St. John's Matriculation School
Tenkasi 627 811
Tamilnadu, India

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
Faculty of Malaysian Languages
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia
sammohanlal@gmail.com

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