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Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Beginning Teaching

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Abstract

No teacher can ever forget the very first class he/she has ever engaged. It is a nerve-racking experience one would rather not discuss. Teaching in the degree college does not require you to go through any sort of training. Teachers have practically no experience whatsoever with engaging an audience and particularly youngsters.

Today, when looking back in retrospect after eleven years of teaching a whole lot of subjects and streams, I wonder how it would have been if I had some training in teaching from the beginning. No matter how sure one is about his or her knowledge of the subject taught, approaching a class for the first time and teaching a language to the second language learners is a very daunting task. It requires specialized training, which is still not provided. It is not just about

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providing good material, classroom activities, translating, using print and electronic media and the like. In order to understand and empathize with the students and particularly with the first generation learners of English, teachers require a deep understanding of the thoughts, beliefs and complexes of these students.

This paper discusses the need for the teachers to empathize with the students who have no background whatsoever in English. It also emphasizes the need to introduce training programs for language teachers in the degree colleges.

Teaching is Beyond Imitation

Teaching in the degree colleges does not require any training as per the eligibility criteria. Nevertheless, teachers who begin their teaching career would realize right from their first hour of classroom teaching that teaching English as a second language is a daunting task. They certainly had spent a lot of time watching other people (their teachers) teach. But just copying them, trying to learn through a trial and error approach, and picking up notes from the websites would not help. Understanding the technical aspects of teaching is equally important.

It is a well-known that Second Language Acquisition is a difficult process and is an emotionally trying experience for both the teacher and the students.

Subjects of This Study

The subjects of this study are the First and Second Year students of English in the colleges under the University of Mumbai. This is a part of my Minor Research Project conducted on the Topic ‘Challenges of Teaching Language and Literature in the Colleges of Mumbai’. Empathizing with the students is the core of this paper, especially with reference to teacher training.

Many students do not have any background, whatsoever in English. Though they have studied English for almost eight to twelve years, they have not been able to pick up much English due to many reasons. Very few of them have any exposure to English other than their classroom lectures. They hardly ever read any English newspapers or magazines. They do not have any scope for watching any T.V. or listening to anything in English in their near environment. Some of them are even second and third generation learners of English.

Problems Faced by Students

Linguists have pointed out that children in all languages and cultures find it easy to achieve communicative competence in their ‘first language’—unless they have a specific language processing problem or handicap. Some of the problems that students face during their communication with others in a Second Language include fear, shyness, nervousness, ignorance, inferiority complex, and status distinction.

Second Language Acquisition researcher Stephen Krashen (Krashen,1982) developed the construct of an Affective Filter, consisting of the variables of anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence. Affective Filter is an imaginary wall that is placed between a learner and language input. If the filter is on, the learner is blocking out input. The filter turns on when anxiety is high, self-esteem is low or motivation is low. Hence, low anxiety classes are better for language acquisition.

Too Much Correction and Other Issues

Another implication is that too much correction will also raise the affective filter as self-esteem in using the language drops. According to Krashen (Krashen, 1982), these psychological variables may strongly enhance or inhibit second language acquisition by playing a critical mediating role between the linguistic input available in the educational setting and the ability of the students to learn. Therefore, according to him, in order to learn a Second Language effectively the students should be relaxed, motivated and self-confident. But this is a near

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impossibility in the current setting of Second Language learners. They often feel anxious, discouraged and embarrassed within the classroom setting.

There are a number of reasons why one's affective filter may be raised. For example shy students from reserved cultural background, struggle to participate in a class. This is also because of their concern about speaking less eloquently in their L2 than using their L1.

Language Shock – Culture Shock

A variety of Second Language Acquisition researchers have sketched out the dynamics of this problem that so impedes second language learning. John Schumann (Schumann, 1986) explores the concept of 'language shock' a fear of appearing comical or making a fool of oneself while attempting to communicate in a second language. The students desire to avoid any injury to his self-esteem and fear of criticism decreases his motivation to learn English. Schumann calls this anxiety and disorientation as the 'culture shock' which further complicates the learning process. There are two necessary aspects to the development and exercising of empathy: first, an awareness and knowledge of one's own feelings, and second, identification with another person (Hogan, 1969). In other words you cannot fully empathize—or know someone else—until you adequately know yourself. (165)

Carl Rogers' theory suggests that

Given a nonthreatening environment, a person will form a picture of reality that is indeed congruent with reality and grow and learn. "Fully functional persons," according to Rogers, live at peace with all of their feelings and reactions; they are able to reach their full potential. (Rogers, 1961).

Dealing with Students in Mumbai Colleges

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Dealing with students of English at the First and Second Year B.A. in the colleges of Mumbai, one very often comes across students who have had their main education in their standard native language. One very common behavior we come across in students is their lack of interest in learning English and an inferiority complex. When given an opportunity to communicate in English, they try their very best not to make mistakes. This fear leads to very little or almost no verbal communication. There is a possibility that the students face the frustrations of language and culture shock. These students need to be helped to become full participants in the educational process.

Teacher's Role

This is where the teacher plays the most important role. Douglas Brown (Brown, 2007) calls language as one of the primary means of empathizing. Encouraging the students by showing willingness to work without being judgmental and also understanding and empathizing with their predicament is of utmost importance. This is only possible if the teacher herself is confident and ready to step down from the pedestal to their level of understanding to empathize with them.

In the traditional setting of a classroom the teacher occupies the centre stage from where she always appears to be superior to all. In a learner-centred approach the students become more important. Instead of teaching being an ego satisfying exercise for the teacher, with humility and patience it can become more learner friendly. Considering individual needs we need to gently let them feel confident to express what they feel about an answer.

The biggest hurdle is to overcome the fear of making mistakes. Teachers need to let them understand that making mistakes is a part of learning and original thinking. Giving care to each student and in turn encouraging empathy among themselves is equally important. Getting better students to empathize with the weaker ones without making them feel inferior is very

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significant. Establishing the classroom as an informal environment, based on their language and culture, asking and letting everyone participate, approaching the class with empathy and humour, as much as possible, remembering their names are some of the methods through which a teacher can build a rapport with the students.

As Carl Rogers (Rogers,1961) puts it,

Teachers, to be facilitators, must first be real and genuine, discarding masks of superiority and omniscience. Second, teachers need to have genuine trust, acceptance, and a prizing of the other person—the student—as a worthy, valuable individual. And third, teachers need to communicate openly and empathetically with their students, and vice versa.

The Need for Training

This becomes possible only if we share or have some sort of training to understand the nuances of teaching, especially with respect to students of the native medium. Elaine Showalter's 'Teaching Literature' (Showalter,2003) discusses the isolation that a teacher is subjected to in a classroom situation. To quote Parker J. Palmer (Showalter,2003) from the same book,

Teaching is perhaps the most privatized of all the public professions. Though we teach in front of students, we almost always teach solo, out of collegial sight -- as contrasted with surgeons or lawyers, who work in the presence of others who know their craft well...When we walk into our workplace, the classroom, we close the door on our colleagues. When we emerge, we rarely talk about what happened or what needs to happen next, for we have no shared experience to talk about. (9)

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How many of us have the courage to ask some real questions and introspect, think harder about the reality of the Indian classrooms where English is taught as a Second Language? How many of us discuss openly on important platforms about our fears and frailties? This requires a lot of courage and introspection. We need to understand that if the students fail to gather what we teach it is also the teacher who fails to make things acceptable and easy for them. Every effort to include the communicative method of teaching English appears to have failed.

Lack of Time to Improve Language Competence

In my interview with students and the teachers one very prominent conclusion that has been drawn is about the lack of time devoted to improving language competence. Teachers seem to be in a hurry to complete the syllabus on time which leaves them with hardly any time to pay attention to individual student needs. With the introduction of the credit system matters appear to have only become worse. Applying western methods of education fails in an Indian scenario where teachers deal with more than one-hundred and odd number of students per class. Where is the time and willingness to probe and understand individual student need?

All this is also because of the lack of training initiatives that have been undertaken with respect to degree college teaching. As Elaine Showalter (Showalter,2003) puts it,

The most profound anxiety of teaching is our awareness that we are making it up as we go along. Teaching is a demanding occupation, but few of us actually have studied how to do it. Most professors at the beginning of the twenty-first century picked up teaching through painful experience, doing unto others as was done unto us....(4)

Teacher training therefore becomes a major requirement.

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My Conclusions

On the basis of my research I have reached the following conclusions:

1. Most students think English is hard.
2. Most students are afraid of learning English though they want to improve their performance in English.
3. Most students don't like the teaching methods.
4. Students who have less competence in English feel depressed and inferior in comparison with students having better English skills.
5. Teachers are not trained.
6. Teachers often frighten the students while teaching;
7. Teachers consider the better performers with regard and the poor performers are neglected.
8. Teachers complain that the huge number of students in the class makes every teaching methodology inefficient and ineffective.
9. Teachers are overburdened with a number of class assignments and tests to be conducted, leaving them no time to understand and attend to the needs of individual students.

To improve users of English, students must be helped to form the right attitude towards learning it. It also needs to be ensured that teachers get proper training to understand student psychology and their needs better. This can only happen if the teachers learn strategies to be taught to them through practical training. Empathy towards the students holds the key to resolving attitude issues. It is the understanding of others by being aware of their needs, perspectives, feelings, concerns, and sensing the developmental needs of others. To be empathic means to try to comprehend, as best as possible, the accurate meaning of what the other is experiencing in the very moment, *and* communicate this to him or her. Teachers can best understand this by being consciously aware of the students' needs.

It may not be the only tool in the learning of a Second Language but is a very important determinant of how the teacher begins to teach in a L2 class. If the content of our teaching pedagogy emanates from this level of the psyche, then the interaction with the students will lead to better understanding and creativity.

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