

## Language or Life-force: What It Takes to be a Language Teacher?

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### Abstract

Language is one of the most important cognitive faculties that man possesses. Without language man is more dead than alive. It is an essential component in effective personality building especially in case of young language learners. The role of elementary language teachers becomes very important due to this. The teachers need to free themselves with any type of prejudice and need to give the freedom of expression in whatever language the child chooses as the first step towards language education. The emphasis should be to inculcate the spirit of confidence and proficiency in the first language/ mother tongue. Once this is achieved then teaching a target language becomes an easy job. The paper highlights some of the steps that a language teacher can undertake in order to excel in the task of language teaching at elementary level.

**Keywords:** language acquisition, linguistic competence, language teaching pedagogy, E-description

### 1. Language: a gift

Language is an immensely magnificent gift that man has been endowed with. It is amazing that just like other biological systems working in a human body language too plays an equally vital role. Survival of human race is as much dependent on oxygen as it is on language. Yet, how many of us consciously think of its role and importance in our daily lives? How many of us truly spare some time to refine our quality of language use or for that matter do we not judge one another on the basis of what language form one uses?

It is really discriminating and derogatory to be judged for something as vital and pertinent as language. Have we ever judged anyone because someone breathes oxygen in the serene environment of a country side or someone who stifles in the suffocating atmosphere of a

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metropolitan? We do not. Oxygen is our life- force and so it is beyond judgment. The present paper argues for a similar position for language. The paper argues that language is no less than oxygen that ensures healthy growth and development of the human race. Another important issue that gets voice in this paper is the role of teachers in providing a conducive and judgment free environment for young children to study and practice language of their choice and interest. Both these issues are very much related.

## **2. Nature of Language**

Let me begin by discussing the various aspects of language that make it highly important and at the same time very latent just like oxygen. We realize its existence only when it ceases to exist. Language is as much biological as it is sociological. It is as much cognitive as is imitative. It is as much powerful as is vulnerable, each at the same time and each at the same degree of intensity. Earlier researches tried to locate the gene responsible for language in man. Such researches were an attempt to establish the biological origin of language. The discovery of gene FOXP<sub>2</sub> revolutionized the contemporary linguistic world. The simultaneous researches in the neuro-linguistics sphere and the researches on aphasia establish that language indeed could be located to particular locations in the brain. (Broca, 1861) The claim was further established when Lenneberg argued for the biological basis of language. (Lenneberg, 1967)

The intriguing nature of language can be established from the fact that several researches are being carried out all around the world to find out what exactly contributes in the acquisition of language. From behaviorists to cognitivists, all have tried to bring forth one or the other nature of the language. Behaviorists focus on the imitative nature of language: the application of stimulus- response theory (Skinner, 1957). The stimulus from the surrounding initiates response from the learner in the form of language. The brain thus acts as a homogenous computational system with language acquisition being one part of general learning. Language acquisition and language learning are life-long processes (Piaget, 1962). This theory holds true in almost all aspects of language except for one very major aspect that the rate of acquisition of language is not same at all ages. Also the rate of acquisition differs for different languages.

The cognitivists gain ground here. They believe that language is a cognitive faculty and it is not just a stimulus- response mechanism owing to external influence but it is also due to the

mental faculty of the human race that language is nurtured in the human mind. Each human brain is capable of processing information in a separate brain language that Pinker (1994) aptly labels as ‘mentalese’: in such a case language is as much an instrument of individual expression as much as a method of social cohesion. These are the two most important functions of language. Only when both these functions of language are given equal focus the proper growth of individual can be guaranteed. How can we forget the contribution of the innatist theory which clearly argued that every human being is born with an innate ability to acquire language and that every human brain has a hypothetical language acquisition device? There is a ‘critical period’ in which the ability to acquire language is maximum in man and as one outgrows that period the efficiency to learn a language diminishes. (Chomsky, 1968)

Language has the power to bring together nations. It also has the power to ruin civilizations. Just like the power of science which can construct as well as destroy depending on how it is used, in the same way language can be used to uplift society or break it. This argument finds its birth in the linguistics determinism theory that was postulated some decades back. In one such hypothesis that led to the theory we get to know that language creates the world as we see and perceive it. We see what we are capable of expressing. Or we remember what we can express in our language. (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956)

### **3. Synonymous with Life**

It will not be an exaggeration to put here that language indeed is the life force for humanity. Many might argue that language is secondary to humans. It cannot be compared to air and water or for that matter food and shelter but I agree to disagree at this point. When I talk of life here I do not merely mean man’s ability to inhale and exhale air or the ability to eat and digest and grow physically. By life I mean man’s ability to develop, to create and to establish: to develop as a social being, to create habitable societies and to establish habitable environment. This is more than just being alive. It means to be alive and conscious, to be able to use brain and cognition, to be able to communicate and exchange, i.e., to be able to use language. This is the truest form of being alive. It is language which differentiates man from plants and animals. So in my earnest opinion this mental faculty called language should be given the same degree of importance and attention as any other factor that influences life to such a great intensity.

As we are born and we grow up we hardly ever think consciously as to what are the processes through which we acquire language realizing only either when we lose it or we are mocked at by others. A minor brain injury can make a man linguistically impaired, a condition known as aphasia in the medical world. The patient may appear fit and fine biologically but linguistic incompetence can render him to be labeled ‘unfit’ for the society. Since language is as simple as much a complex process so there are enormous possibilities where impairment can occur: production, transmission, reception and comprehension are the four pillars on which a man’s entire linguistic competence rests. As for the other case where we get mocked for our language is purely of sociological origin. The speakers of a socially superior language laugh at a socially inferior language. The problem is not with them that they laugh but the problem is with the other group which allows to be laughed at accepting the imposed inferior status of the mother tongue. We are so much prone to the idiosyncrasies of the popular culture that we lose our own language in the rat- race. Losing one’s mother tongue is synonymous with losing one’s identity. We forget our own speech community and we relentlessly try to enter into a bigger and more popular speech community.

This might not sound so alarming at the outset but it has disturbing and destructive consequences. The situation becomes worse and grave in a multilingual culture. Every culture tries to outshine the other culture and what could be better than engulfing a language altogether. Well, I do not want to alarm the readers here, rather I would like to offer a solution through this paper; a certain and effective measure that could retard or in some cases reverse the entire disturbing process finally resulting into a healthy linguistic environment. The effectiveness of the implementation of the method lays in the able hands of our teachers especially elementary teachers who get to nurture young minds. They are the potters who mould growing nascent brains in the best possible manner. The job is very satisfying but it comes with its own share of responsibility. An elementary teacher especially language teachers need to free themselves of language biasness so as to give an equal and just platform to the young speakers of varied linguistic background. It does not matter what language is to be taught in the class: whether the language is classical like Sanskrit which is for purely academic purpose or modern like English for broader communication or completely foreign like French or German for purely business or job purpose; the basic methodology for remains the same.

#### 4. To be a Language Teacher

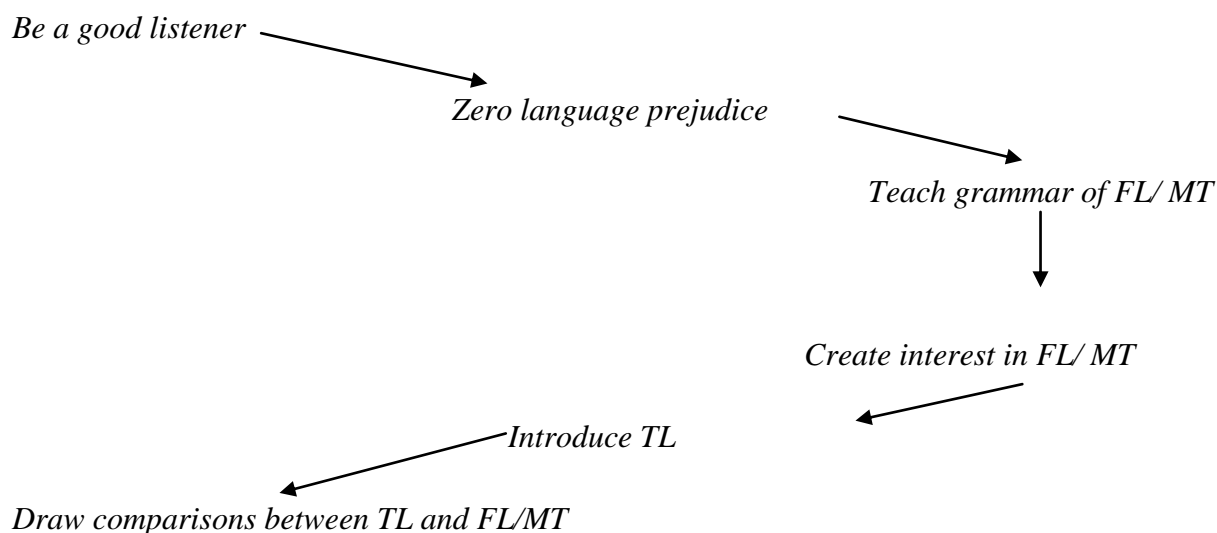
Of all the subjects that are taught in schools a language teacher is either the most loved or the least loved. The existence is always on the extremes. There is no middle path. Either the students love their teacher because they are free to express or they hate their teacher because their expressions are schooled. The challenge and agony is rampant. But a language teacher should not be discouraged. There is just a minor need to change the attitude towards language teaching, a mild reformation in the pedagogy that will pay huge dividends in the long run. One just needs to be a good listener first before becoming a teacher. She/ he should lend her/ his ears first and then expect the students to listen to them. This will not only help them to create rapport with the students but it will also assist them in knowing the linguistic aptitude of the students so that they can devise an effective pedagogy for language teaching.

The teacher must enter the class as a clean slate initially where the students feel free to scribble their ideas and opinions. When a child feels the joy and comfort of expressing only then she/ he can learn the various ways to express. If that joy is subdued there will not be any need of a medium to express. So as teachers the first duty is to nurture that joy and comfort in a child. The child must be allowed to speak in whatever language she/ he wishes to speak in. and if we pay a little attention to the National Curriculum Framework (2005) for school education: a set of guidelines passes by the Indian government we see that the need to nurture first language (FL)/ mother tongue (MT) has been heavily stressed upon. The language teacher must leave all his/ her own language prejudices behind the doors when he/ she enter the class. (Sinha, 2013) The idea should be to treat all languages equally. Children must be given contexts to speak freely. Or they can just be allowed to choose their own subjects for talking and discussion.

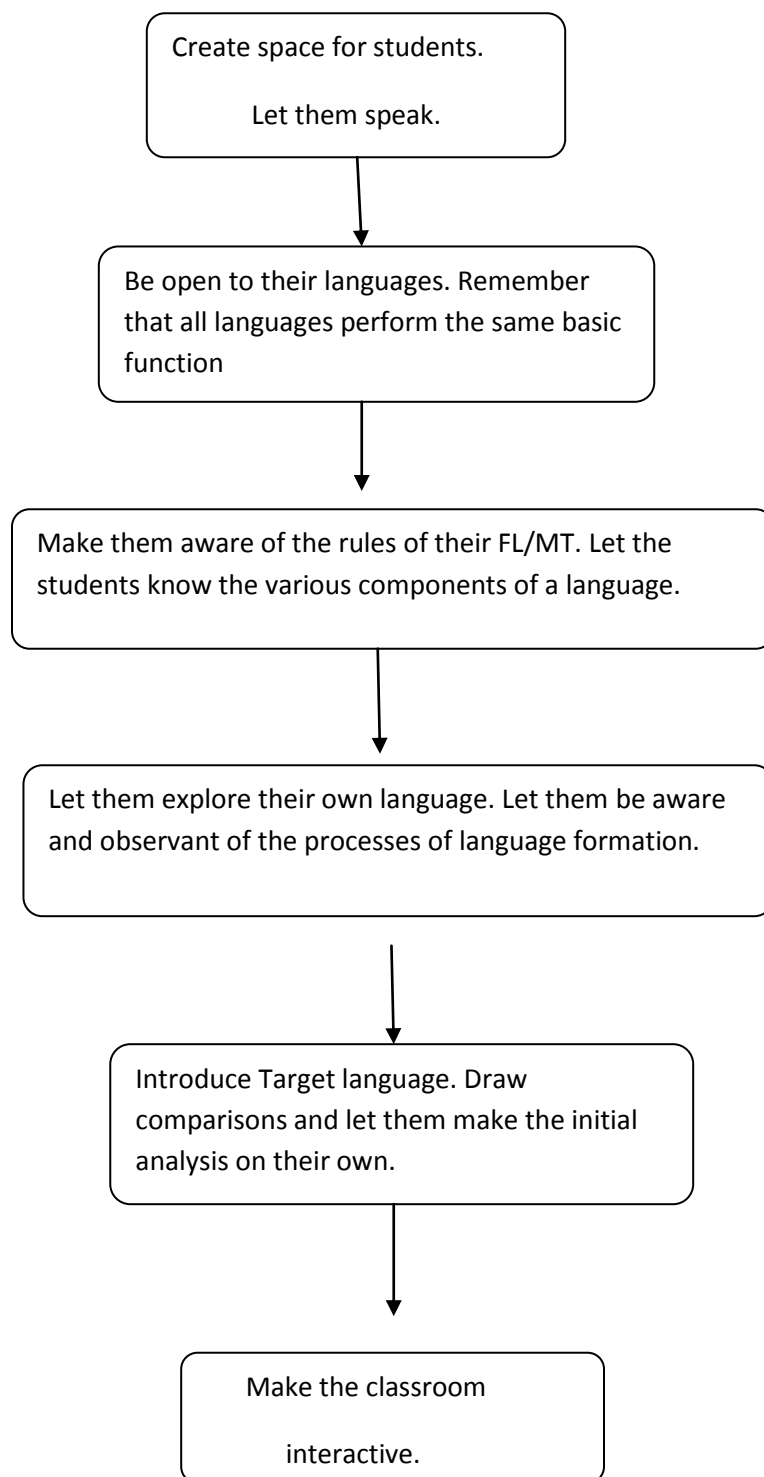
This is the first step towards language teaching. The teacher must keep one thing clear in mind that only if we respect our own language only then can we respect and learn other languages. If we condemn our own language we have a tendency to condemn other languages also. It is as simple as the fact that if we love and respect our own parents only then can we love and respect others' parents. After all 'charity begins at home'. Once this is done the teacher can create awareness about simple grammar of language. Such simple rules that one does not consciously think while speaking. This kind of exercise will create awareness among the young

learners. Such grammar rules can be pointing out the basic word order in the language, phrase movement, verb agreement, singular/ plural and masculine/ feminine. This will not only make them interested towards their own language but it will also make them analytical and inquisitive about language rules. Once this target is achieved then the target language (TL) must be introduced in the class.

The young students will learn the rules of TL with the same interest and vigor. After a stage the teaching can be more directed and controlled whereby they are given particular contexts to talk about or write. This will help in channelizing their creativity and their ability to learn a new language. The students can also be given exercises which tend to compare TL and their own FL or MT. This will help them to know the similarities and dissimilarities between both the languages. This way the importance of a language does not get demeaned in front of the other and the learning is also fast paced. The following arrow diagram explains the steps that a language teacher needs to undertake.



This scheme of teaching can be represented better through the following flow- chart. The paper recommends an elementary teacher to pay close attention to the different stages of language teaching in the prescribed sequence. This would not only make language learning easy and interesting but it would also ensure better output.



If the target language is English then the task becomes even more interesting because the teacher can also use technology for language education. Most of the electronic gadgets like mobiles and computers come with commands in English in most of the places. In such a case the

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language teacher can employ the method of 'E- description' where the students can write their assignments in the form of e- mails and SMSes to their teachers. (Sinha, 2014)

## 5. Conclusion

It does not matter what language we as teachers appreciate more, what matters is when we teach language at elementary level we need to be very careful because language is very much intrinsic to the personality building process in young learners. The teacher needs to create a just and prejudice free environment where the learners can bloom without any biasness. We must never forget that language is just another aspect of our identity. Questioning the credibility of one's language or mocking one's language is similar to questioning or mocking one's identity. The elementary language teachers should therefore lay example for the entire human society that irrespective of the need of a popular language or culture the lesser known languages and cultures have the same right and dignity to be expressed.

The teacher must try to incorporate the virtue of being a good listener in order to excel in the class of language teaching. He/ she must try to make the learner aware of the grammar of his/ her own language before teaching another language. This will not only inculcate immense confidence but it will also increase the language proficiency among the learners and needless to say, the teacher will be much loved and revered in the class.

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