Communicative Activities in English for Vernacular Medium Students

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Abstract

Right from the first standard, the vernacular medium students of India have English as their second language. They begin turning the pages of the new English books with much pride and enthusiasm; pride because it is English and enthusiasm because it is a new and foreign language. When they complete their higher secondary education, as they turn back the pages of their school lives all their efforts seem to have been only motiveless adventures; they have struggled a lot all the years with English but for no gain and not to its mastery. Only their progress reports display some traces of the existence of the English subject and not their actual progress. They have neither been trained to realize or believe they have the wings to soar high nor been provided with the necessary scaffolds by the teachers, the syllabus or the system. They do read and listen to a good amount of English text during their school days, but they get disappointed when it comes to its transformation into productive skills. This research paper takes up this issue earnestly and comes out with the following observations. Firstly, it proves that these students, with their present English vocabulary and knowledge can be tested to communicate in English. Secondly, even if they feel they are wingless or their wings are tied up or broken, Communicative Activities such as language games, rhymes and songs, language tasks, storytelling tasks and communicative exercises can enable them the wings to fly. Thirdly, Communicative Activities can supply the vernacular medium school students with the exposure to the use of language, purpose of having an English course in their school curriculum, meaning behind learning the language of English, exposure to communicate the real-life happenings, and the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably and accurately. Lastly, Communicative Activities can prepare the vernacular medium students who are streamed as 'language deprived' section in our education system to get along with 'the language producing stream' by the time they join the junior college or the under graduation.

Key Words: Disadvantaged vernacular medium students, Proficiency, Teacher-centred, Globalization, Information technology, Competence, Activities, and Adolescents.

Introduction

English has become very fundamental for a successful life in today's fast developing world. "English in the knowledge era is a language of opportunity, Even when least loved, it is a must have skill in this globalized world", states Francis Peter (1). The rich and the elite are able

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to get this English and get it right by their wealth and influence whereas the poor and the disadvantaged sections are denied this opportunity to master it and thus enhance their ability and employability. Our students in all the vernacular Medium and the rural English Medium schools have been learning English from standard one onwards. Yet they find it extremely difficult to express themselves in English even after completing standard Twelve or junior college. Led by their sheer optimism, they march towards colleges thinking that the lacuna created in those twelve full years will successfully be filled with 'English Proficiency' in just four semesters with a magical wand in the hands of the professors. What does happen actually? Where does the problem lie? Is it with the system or with the learner? Is it with the teacher or with the methodology? Grappling with these questions and issues, this paper comes out with a design made of Communicative Activities, the right intake and application of which can lead the vernacular medium students to the next step towards successful mastery of English.

Discussion
1.1. Conditions of Teaching and Learning of English
      The present condition of teaching and learning of English in vernacular medium classrooms in India calls for an urgent scrutiny and an immediate revamping of the entire system. The language input given to the learners, the method of reaching the learners with the input and the support systems provided to them need to undergo a paradigm shift if the teaching and learning has to bear the intended fruit at all.

      The existing pedagogy which is "an environment where teachers are the narrators and the students are the recorders" (2) cannot be accounted for a methodology. The knowledge commission report (3) says that the quality of English language teaching is simply not good enough, and the support systems, such as the number of teachers or the available materials for teaching, are neither adequate nor appropriate. 'The Hindu', a leading daily of India in its editorial (4) laments over the fall of standard in English as "What must cause concern however is the rapid decline in the standard of English language teaching (ELT) in the educational institutions in the country with both the teachers and the taught not being in a position to use it effectively" (p.6). At present, learners are expected to succeed in learning English in a teacher-centered classroom where the teacher takes all the decisions and does most of the talking while learners sit passively. The teacher seems to believe that all learners learn in the same way, and that the teacher hands down all learning. The teacher-fronted chalk and talk method used today is truly outdated. The impact of this methodology on the learners is boredom and indifference. In short, to quote Gupta (5), irrespective of the methods adopted, "classroom methodology remains the same teacher-centered, lecture-based, and exam-centric dull procedure". Though the youth of the country have prepared themselves for so many English exams and successfully completed them they aren't in a position to express themselves because for them the process of learning English was never an enjoyable activity, but a drudgery carried out with disgust. So all the input they received in the English classes throughout their school days did not amount to any intake at all. Our first responsibility, therefore, is to make our students enjoy what they learn and learn what they enjoy (6).

1.2. The Need for a Change in Methodology

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"Poverty, famine and disease are instantly recognized as the cruelest and least excusable forms of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition but one nevertheless of great significance", cautions Robert Burchfield (7) referring to English language deprivation. The reasons for such an alarming condition may be manifold such as students' lack of motivation, incompetent teachers, lack of understanding of objectives of teaching English, faulty methods of teaching, not so helpful learning material and unsuitable examination system.

Globalization and information technology are two sides of the same coin. If globalization is the end, then information technology is the means to achieve that end. In this technology driven world, how can English teaching and learning take place successfully without adapting itself to the changing circumstances? Moving beyond the textbook to design tasks and activities which children would feel nearer to their lives or from the lives would be one of the purposes of teacher facilitating learning. Anything in the context, natural or authentic text would do justice and serve the purpose of realizing the aims of language learning-teaching. Communicative Activities and Task based methodologies would do justice in placing the learner to get engaged with peers, with the community and with the language to make meanings (8). A number of ELT experts like Prabhu, N.S and Krashen, S have stressed that language is acquired when attention is focused not on language form, but on the meaning of messages.

1.3. Teacher Competence and the Need for Capacity Building

While it is believed that the teachers need to be provided with the necessary ongoing training and technological supports, it is also the duty of the teachers to keep themselves updated and open for change if any good has to take place out of their teaching and learning of English. Stone and Larry Eugene (9) find teachers extremely instrumental in creating an effective classroom environment. They found teachers to be the promoters of positive learning environment. Franklin J. (10) has reported that the language mastery of teachers teaching English to secondary school students is not so good because of their poor competence in oral, reading and writing aspects. Dandapani S. (11) observes that teachers cannot afford to rest on their oars and allow complacency to set in. They need to constantly improve on their skills. Only when the English teachers start owning responsibility for improving the proficiency of their students will they be able to proudly say that teaching is the profession that teaches all the other professions.

Littlewood (12) conceptualizes the role of the language teacher broadly as the 'facilitator of learning' in the context of communicative language teaching (CLT) instead of the rather narrow concept of the 'teacher as instructor'. According to Littlewood, a teacher's role as a facilitator entails the sub-roles of an 'overseer' of student's learning, a 'classroom manager', a 'consultant' or 'advisor', and sometimes, a 'co-communicator' with the learners (p.92). Harmer (13) looks at the term 'facilitator' in a much broader way than Littlewood does, and points out that 'all roles, after all, aim to facilitate the students' progress in some way or the other'. He talks about using certain 'precise' terms for the roles that teachers play in the classroom: controller, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, tutor and observer.

1.4. Communicative Activities for Wings Enabled English Learning

The present NCF (14) proposes five guiding principles for curriculum development. They are (i) Connecting knowledge to life outside the school, (ii) Ensuring that learning shifts away from rote methods, (iii) Enriching the curriculum so that it goes beyond textbooks, (iv) Making examinations more flexible and integrating them with classroom life, and (v) Nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country. This research paper has carefully crafted and tested five activities having in mind the theory and principles discussed above.

Activity 1: Language Game
Name: Shooting a country
Level: Lower secondary vernacular medium
Aim: Learning to interact in group, opening oneself in front of the class, and knowing what an imperative sentence is
Duration: 15-20 minutes
Procedure: The class is broken into groups of four members and each group names itself after a country. The name they choose is usually difficult one that the other groups struggle to pronounce. No two countries are to have the same name. Each time when the teacher signals to start the game, the first member of the group shouts, 'Come on', the second member 'Get ready', the third one 'Shoot' and the fourth one shouts the name of a country chosen by one of the groups. As the name of a country is pronounced, now it is the turn of that country to come out with the same four commands. As the game is continued in the same way by all the groups, the teacher only intervenes to eliminate the group that makes mistakes in their commands while playing. The teacher might eliminate a group for the following reasons: If there are two persons from a group speaking at the same time, if the fourth player wrongly pronounces the name of a country, if the fourth player shoots his own country or the country that has already been eliminated, if the flow of the game is interrupted by silence or any other noise etc. The group that survives to the end will be declared the winner by the teacher.

Activity 2: Rhyme / Song
Name: Row row-row your boat
Level: Lower secondary vernacular medium
Aim: Singing and having fun, getting along with group, knowing what an imperative sentence is, and pronouncing the words and phrases correctly.
Duration: 10 minutes
Procedure: The teacher teaches the following rhyme to the class.

> *Row row row your boat*
> *Gently down the stream*
> *Merrily merrily merrily merrily*
> *Life is like a dream!*

The class is divided into four groups and they are taught to sing the rhyme in a variety of ways with the appropriate actions of 'rowing'. The entire class singing together, each group singing in a competitive way, each group singing only one line of the rhyme etc., can be the different ways of singing the rhyme. In the final round, the first group starts with the first line and

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continues singing the entire rhyme several times as required by the teacher. When the first group goes to the second line, the second group begins the rhyme with the first line and they continue singing the rhyme several times till the end. The third group begins their first line as the first group begins the third line. And the fourth group begins their first line as the first group begins the fourth line. This type of singing that goes on for several rounds in a harmonious way can help the learners master the structures perfectly and pronounce the words accurately.

Activity 3: Language Task
Name: Kitchen Imperatives - Recipe
Level: Lower secondary vernacular medium
Aim: Having fun, competition, real-life communication, producing meaningful language
Duration: 30-40 minutes
Procedure: The class is divided into groups of five or six and each group chooses to get ready with a recipe. All the members sit together and carefully plan the imperatives used in the process of preparing the recipe. While demonstrating in front of the class, one member dressed as the chef delivers the sentences and the others carry out the orders. Various sentences from buying the necessary goods from the shop to serving the recipe to the guests are uttered in a creative and realistic way. As each group comes out with a different recipe, a delicious language meal is possible with this communicative activity. The overall class menu can include a glass of lemonade, variety of juice items, tea, coffee, dosa, idli, fish curry, mutton biryani, chicken 65 etc.

Activity 4: Storytelling
Name: Storytelling
Level: Lower secondary vernacular medium
Aim: Learning to tell a story, producing meaningful language, developing sequencing and narrative skills
Duration: 30-40 minutes
Procedure: The selection of stories for the storytelling activity is more important. As it is for the lower secondary vernacular medium students, stories with simple and flawless language could be suggested by the teacher. The students also could be supplied with the colourful pictorial story books that guide them to choose a better story. This activity may be conducted as a pair work that enables each member to rehearse telling the story of their choice to his partner first before telling it to the class. Storytelling activity benefits the learners' mastery of sentence structures used in the story, acquisition of words and phrases, pronunciation and development of sequencing and narrative skills. Storytelling can be used as a powerful tool of second language acquisition as it prepares the learners to tell stories and real-life happenings which form the actually the real and day-to-day communication of any normal human being. Students get more involved and interested in this activity. However, it is time consuming if the class has a larger population.

Activity 5: Communicative Exercise
Name: Dos and Don'ts
Level: Lower secondary vernacular medium
Aim: Producing language, real-life language, learning to request or command positively and negatively

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Duration: 15 minutes

Procedure: Each group in the class is given a topic on which the members prepare 'dos and don'ts'. The topics could be like dos and don'ts used in the bus, the church, the temple, the mosque, the classroom, the ground, the hospital, at the railway station etc. The members practice the imperatives in the group and deliver it to the class by acting out after creating an appropriate setting. If only the members keep themselves open to the input and the instructions, the group has got a lot to educate its members. This activity can bring various external life settings into the classroom and help the students speak sentences relevant to those settings. Learning imperatives is also the basic for mastering other sentence structures using different tenses.

These activities were tested for communicative use in the vernacular medium classrooms with the following benefits:

- Communicative Activities supply the vernacular medium school students with the exposure to the use of language.
- Communicative activities offer the learners the purpose of having an English course in their school curriculum.
- Communicative activities attach meaning to the learners as they learn the language of English.
- Communicative activities provide the learners with the exposure to communicate the real-life happenings.
- Communicative activities enhance the learners with the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably and accurately.
- Communicative Activities prepare the vernacular medium students who are streamed as 'language deprived' section of our education system to get along with 'the language producing stream' by the time they join the junior college or the under graduation.

2. Conclusion

Activities occupy a significant place in the process of teaching and learning. Both the teachers and the students deliver and intake the input effortlessly. In this way of learning through activities as Nunan states, "spoken language provides a means of interaction for the learner. Because learners must interact to achieve understanding, access to speakers of language is essential. Moreover, learners' failure to understand the language they hear is an impetus, not an obstacle, to interaction and learning (15)." Informal learning helps in breaking away from the stereotyped process of passive listening, practiced in formal teaching. In this way of learning through activities, input is not imposed by the teachers upon the learners, rather, this method reaches out to the students, continually focusing on their learning capacities.

The teachers are to develop a friendly climate in which all learners feel recognized and valued. Even after classifying them as the Language Deprived, one has to be aware of the fact that they carry their vibrant individuality which is to be accommodated. Sometimes, as they fail to fit into the framework of the teachers, it is only that they need a better scaffold with which they might begin to take off. The learners are to be supplied with quality input and this input and the necessary support is provided by Communicative Activities. The time the learners spend on

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various activities must not be the time for filling the blanks or reproducing the texts but the time to focus on their productive capability and to produce the language. The activities are to carry language for use and they are to be drawn from real life for bearing better fruits. The learners need to be given opportunities for meaningful output through interaction i.e., in a communicative way. The system with the learners that they receive the input now and produce English one day in the future after mastering everything does not work. As the campus, the classroom, the teachers, the co-learners, and even the exam halls are different avenues that help them produce or communicate in English, the Communicative Activities can elevate them with a feel of wings enabled English learning.

Lightbrown and Spada state that "Comprehensible Input remains the foundation of all language acquisition" (16). These Communicative Activities will be highly advantageous to the underprivileged learners of the vernacular medium schools of India if they are to be administered with a rhythmic chant of i+1, a little beyond the current proficiency level.

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