Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign/Second language: Importance of Learning Strategies

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Abstract

‘Teacher is the pivot of civilization’ as said by Dr. S. Radha Krishnan, every teacher has the primary goal to shape the future of his/her learners. His/her role begins with the student in particular and culminates in society in general. In order to attain perfection in any given field one need a guide, teacher or a coach to mentor in the stages of learning. More specifically the teacher of English has more responsibilities on his/her part to teach the content in respect of grammar and pronunciation for accuracy and fluency body language in respect of decency and to train the students in a committed and devoted manner and transform into competent students to face challenges in career capture and life settlement.

The present paper discusses the different approaches in language teaching and defines different learning strategies and emphasizes the importance of learning strategies. This paper concludes with the best learning strategies adopted by the good learners in learning English as a foreign or second language.

Introduction:

English is a language used to reach across the borders and bridge the gaps. It is used to communicate anything from microchip to oil. Due to increasing importance of communication in English, we as English teachers need to teach language skill with a multifold onus. There is a requirement to learn language skills to fulfill the ever growing demands of English. The methods and approaches adopted or followed by teachers in the past to teach English language was constantly evolved.

Present scenario:

Along with the regular curriculum, it is very important for a budding professional to develop soft skills. They are part of communication skills. They form an important feature of learning process, more so in learning and teaching a language. Many professionals in the BPO, medical transcription, IT and ITES add to the importance and relevance of English in every walk of life. In the past students were introduced to English in their sixth standard. They were not given enough exposure to the language skills. The emphasis was on subjects like mathematics, physics and chemistry and got very little opportunity to use the language within as well as outside the school. But in the present day scenario as English has turned into a universal language its presence and value in the world has expanded enormously compared to the past decades.

Language teaching approaches:

The context of English language teaching and learning has changed and the focus is on communicative competence. Language teachers have adopted and followed different methodologies which are discussed below to teach the language skills.

1. Grammar translation method: This method was used by the teacher to teach young children where teacher explained every word to students in the native language to make him understand and learn English. But in this method there was at least one disadvantage. Both the teacher and the student concentrated more on l1 rather than l2. In this method English language class seemed to be l1 class rather than l2 class. Students got only limited benefit through this method. Unfortunately this method is still in use in many rural schools throughout India. This method is also supported by the methods used to teach mother tongue in our schools.
2. Bilingual method: This can be declared as the favourite method in our schools. Most teachers follow the bilingual method to teach the students in Indian schools, where the teacher first of all explains the entire English sentence in l1 and then asks the students to perform activities in English. Here it used to be a main assumption that only the teachers have the freedom to take the help of l1 and students are not supposed to use it. However, this constraint is found mostly on paper, not in the classroom when a student is in the process of composing his or her English sentences abundant help through the use of mother tongue sentences is provided. This method does not help fluency and naturalness in language expression. Thus this method became beneficial to students in learning the second language only up to some extent.

3. Direct method: Earlier, teachers used to follow the direct method to teach Indian students mostly in private schools, which usually charge a higher tuition fee, etc. These teachers will stick to the practice of using only English, without depending on l1. Here teacher is not supposed or authorized to use any single word from l1. This forced seclusion made students from many families with no past history of learning or using English face great difficulty in understanding certain words and their meanings. But this method turned to be more useful for the students to learn language than any other method as this method creates more encouraging language environment for students in the class room.

All the above methods have their own advantages and disadvantages, where the students learned English only as a subject rather than as language. They were also unable to put their learning into practice due to lack of a favourable environment. In addition to the above constraints, the teachers used to have very limited teaching hours, mostly from three to six hours per week which are not enough to teach the language elaborately giving emphasis for the basic elements of language. It has become examination-oriented only. Another limitations seen in Indian teachers is that some of the English teachers are not familiar with the latest developments in ELT pedagogy.

Challenges before the English language teachers in India are apparent and enormous. They should be able to cater to the practical needs of learners, to make them competent enough to interact with one another and also to retrieve information all over the world. The challenges visible before the English language teachers are diverse and it is the need of the hour to equip the English language learning strategies which should be integrated with the approaches and methods of language teaching.

Integrating Language learning strategies with language teaching approaches:

Research shows that students do not learn a language at the same pace. The levels of competence for the learners are also diversified. Surely, the teachers cannot be held responsible for this difference in learning ability of the students in a classroom. However, they can motivate the students make sure that they become involved in the learning process. Learning is an activ3 process of translating new knowledge, insight and skills into behavior. Cawley and his associates have identified three domains of learning-cognitive, affective and psychomotor. The learners have their own preferences to learn by adopting either of these strategies suitable for their environment. These preferences are known to be an individual’s own style of learning a language. The learning is usually accomplished more rapidly and retained longer if it is presented in ways that the individual prefers and on its competency to meet the learners’ needs. Claxton and Murrell consider that is the teachers’ instructional style and the students learning style match; there is usually a productive language learning environment. It is important that the teacher should be aware of the learning style preferences of the students and accordingly adjust his/her own method of teaching. Boylan points out that learning is more productive when teachers are conscious of the learning strategies they are going to apply in a language class. Subsequently, another significant researcher in this area, Davis, came out with the suggestion that students can be taught what strategies the teachers are going to apply in the language class, which improves learning efficiency no matter what style the teacher uses. As students practice a variety of activities, they become aware of various strategies that can be used. The language learning strategies are defined by many researchers. Some of them are as follows:

Learning strategies have been described (Wenden and Rubin,1987)as any sets of operations, steps, plans, routines used by the learners to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information(p 19). It
was argued (Richards, Platt and platt,1992) that learning strategies are intentional behavior and thoughts that learners make use of during learning in order to better help them understand learn or remember new information(p209). Learning strategies were also illustrated (O’Malley and chamot,1990) as special thoughts or behavior that individuals use to help them comprehend learn or retain new information(p 1). Hence, learning strategies were seen as special ways of processing information that improve comprehension, learning or retention of the information(oxford 1990)defines language learning strategies as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations(p 8). It is indeed a reflection of what the learner intends to do and the specific actions he can take.

As the knowledge of second language acquisition increased during 1970s, teachers and researchers concluded that no single method of language teaching and research findings would mark the start of universal success in teaching a second language (Brown, 2007). It was realized that certain learners seemed to be successful regardless of methods o teaching techniques. Certain people appeared to be endowed with abilities to succeed others lacked those abilities (p 132). Observations and research studies led researchers (Rubin, 1975, Stern 1975, Rubin and Thompson, 1994) to describe good language learners in terms of personal characteristics, styles and strategies. They believe that good language learners:

1. Find their own way, taking responsibility for their own learning.
2. Organize information about language.
3. Are creative, and try to feel the language by experimenting its grammar and words.
4. Create opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom
5. Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting confused and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.
6. Use memory strategies to bring back what has been learned
7. Make errors work for them and not against them
8. Use linguistic knowledge including knowledge of the first language, in learning a second language
9. Use contextual cues to help them in comprehension
10. Learn to make intelligent guesses
11. Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalized routines to help them perform beyond their competence
12. Learn to use certain tricks to keep conversations going
13. Learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence.
14. Learn different styles of speech and writing and learn to vary their language regarding the formality of the situation.

Conclusion

However, being aware of the characteristics, techniques and strategies of a good language learner facilitates students’ language learning and help them enhance learning efficiency. In addition, with this knowledge and awareness, students’ language learning can be improved through learner training by their instructors.

References: