ADOPTION OF LEARNER-CENTERED PEDAGOGY IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Teaching of English in India has undergone a paradigmatic shift with regard to approaches and outcomes. Learner-fronted teaching has become a major preoccupation in the teaching of English at different levels. Teacher training programs and professional development programs have recognized the paradigmatic shift from teachers' chalk-talk method to learner-centric approach and began to adopt novel approaches to draw teachers' attention to pedagogical methods and approaches that put the learners' learning preferences and needs at the fore front. This paper presents the findings of the research work carried out with undergraduate teachers and their students in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The findings suggest that teacher programs aimed at catering to the learners needs could yield positive outcomes. The study yields some pedagogical implications. Students should be allowed to speak for a good amount of time in the classroom. Teaching/learning atmosphere should be relaxed and tension free. Teachers should take recourse to peer work, group work, and role plays to develop students English and communication skills and focus on job related tasks so that students are ready for their future job market.

Keywords: Learner-fronted teaching, Teacher training programs, learning preferences and needs, peer work, group work, English and communication skills, job related tasks, job market

INTRODUCTION

Learning of English in India has acquired varied dimensions. Globalization, liberalization and computerization opened up new vistas. Job market demands and societal pressures are shaping the way English is being viewed and learned. Deepti Gupta (2005) comments, 'Due to its association with the British coloniser, English started life in India as not just a foreign language, but as a much-hated language. From the despised instrument of oppression to the reluctantly adopted lingua franca to the status symbol of the upper classes to its position today as a second language, English has come a long way.'

Technological advances and increased travel have made it possible for today's young generation in India to experience different varieties of English. Attitudes to English and reasons for its learning have changed. These necessitate changes in the context of the teaching paradigm. To grapple with the changing context, teacher training programs lay emphasis on upgrading teaching methods and approaches. Teachers are encouraged to be inventive and collaborative to enhance learners' communicative abilities.

India has witnessed tremendous growth in the Business Process Outsourcing Projects and Call Centre Jobs. This has given rise to new aspirations. Learners in undergraduate colleges aspire to improve their English and communication skills and grab coveted jobs soon after they graduate.

To enable learners to use English for communication and to enhance employability skills, teacher training programs focus on providing hands on practice in activities promoting real life communication through simulations and role plays.

Application of newer methods and practices to teachers' classroom situation involves adoption of new roles for teachers and learners. Diane Larsen-Freeman (1986) mentions the roles of teacher and students, 'The teacher facilitates communication in the classroom. In this role, one of his major responsibilities is to establish situations likely to promote communication. During the activities he acts as an adviser, answering student's questions and monitoring their performance. He might make note of their errors to be worked on at a later time during more accuracy-based activities. At other times he might be a 'co-communicator' engaging in the communicative activity along with students. Students are, above all, communicators. They are actively engaged in negotiating meaning—in trying to make themselves understood and in understanding others— even when their knowledge of the target language is incomplete. Also, since the teacher's role is less dominant than in a teacher-centered method, students are seen as more responsible managers of their own learning.'

In the learner-fronted teaching, language skills are taught in integration and process approach, rather than product approach, is adopted to improve oral and written communication abilities. David Nunan (1999) differentiates the 'process' approach from the traditional product-oriented approach: 'Whereas the product approach focuses on writing tasks in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms teacher supplied models, the process approach focuses on the steps involved in creating a piece of work. The primary goal of product writing is an error-free coherent text. Process writing allows for the fact that no text can be perfect, but that a writer will get closer to perfection by producing, reflecting on, discussing and reworking successive drafts of a text'.

The government of AP has geared towards addressing the aspirations of the students and decided to upgrade the teaching skills of the teachers. Apart from a compulsory orientation course and occasional refresher courses, English teachers generally have little or no training in modern teaching methodologies. Realizing this, the government of AP has arranged the Retraining Program to reorient the teachers of English towards a better understanding of teaching approaches and methodologies that need to be followed to deliver the expected goods. It is now being increasingly realized that teachers need to have a repertoire of techniques and methods to make their teaching relevant to the needs of their students. In other words, the teachers of English will have to fine-tune themselves to make their teaching more effective and meaningful.

The present research project examined what classroom procedures and teaching/learning approaches are adopted in undergraduate colleges in AP to develop students' English and communication skills.

TECHNIQUES AND METHODS FOR PROMOTION OF LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS

The retraining program covered several activities and practices that are crucial to create learner-centeredness in the English classroom. These include roles of teachers and learners, creating tension free classroom environment, interactive and collaborative approach, pair and group work, and communicative approach.

Roles of Teachers and Learners

Teachers act as facilitators, co-communicators, whereas learners take the responsibility for their learning.

Tension Free Classroom Environment

Teachers create opportunities for learners to express themselves freely and help them to stay tension –free. Errors from students are tolerated. Students can take up topics of their own for discussion.

Interactive and Collaborative Approach

Teachers do not as know- alls. Instead, they elicit more information from their learners than giving the information directly. They also encourage their learners to learn from each other. Types of interaction such as student to student, and student to teacher are promoted.

Pair and Group Work

Pair and group work allow all learners to express themselves fearlessly. Learners can learn from each other. However, there are chances that dominant speakers take the most talking time. John Wheeler (1994) has an answer to this concern. He suggests the teachers to assign roles when using group work. He states: 'To avoid one learner taking over the activity and others becoming passive observers, I assigned roles to each of the members of a group: a "secretary" notes down what the group members say; a "leader" governs role taking as different members speak; and a "presenter" reports on the final conclusions reached by the group. Even if the teacher does not follow up on each member's task after the activity is finished, the assignment of roles is often enough to act as a catalyst to get the group speaking. It is a good idea to assign tasks to dissimilar learner types. For example, let the usually taciturn learner be the reporter, the noisy one be the secretary, and the sheepish learner be the leader.'

Communicative Approach

Communicative approach stresses meaningful use of language over form. Sanders (1987) comments: '...accuracy and acquisition of the formal features [of the second language] are less a measure of successful language learning than are fluency and an ability to get something across comprehensibly to a native speaker.'

In order to encourage meaningful language use, many popular communicative activities involve 'elements of puzzle-solving, role play, or simulation' (Hadfield, 1990). They encourage learners to do things with information such as guessing, searching, matching, exchanging, collecting, sharing, combining, and arranging.

As stated by David Nunan (1991) communicative approach makes use of the following five features:

- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

The present paper reports the responses of the teachers in implementing pedagogical principles they received in the retraining program to strengthen learner-centeredness in their teaching practice and also reports the feedback from the learners. The descriptive data for the study was collected through the conduct of personal interviews with the teachers who underwent the retraining program and the students who experienced the teaching techniques their teachers implemented from what they learned in the program. The following responses were collected randomly from the sample of teachers and learners. The teacher respondents were asked to reflect on various aspects related to the training program they attended and the students were asked to reflect on classroom practices such as learner roles of the teacher and the taught, classroom learning atmosphere and opportunities for using job related tasks and activities.

FINDINGS

Teachers' Responses

The following are some of the responses from the teachers who underwent the Retraining program at Hyderabad when researcher contacted them during his field work:

Teacher- 1:

"I emphasize more on spoken skills as they are more important for our students. Of course, I also think in terms of completing the syllabus. I have no issues with pair and group work. I manage to have them without disturbing the furniture."

Teacher- 2:

"I was really benefitted by the Retraining Program. It gave me several ideas. My students are eager to learn English now."

Teacher- 3:

I don't teach much, but facilitate a great deal. I don't tell them, but I elicit a lot from my students. My favorite techniques are TPS (Think, Pair and Share) and TOWER (Think, Organise, Write, Edit and Rewrite)."

Teacher- 4:

"Students in our college feel excited about English classes. They look forward to English classes to have fun and to learn very useful things too"

Teacher- 5:

"As a result of using task based approach my students are developing higher order thinking and becoming very analytical. They are more communicative and are feeling confident about facing interviews, participating in group discussions and giving presentations."

Teacher- 6:

"Though I use group work in the class sometimes, but I'm not very happy as my students complain that rearranging the desks after the activity is a big problem for it wastes a lot of time."

Teacher- 7:

"I find it difficult to strike a balance between giving language expressions useful for career and everyday life and complete the syllabus. Therefore I use both traditional teacher-centered approach and learner-centered techniques we learnt at the retraining.

Teacher- 8:

"I find that learner-fronted approach is good. But finding resources/activities is a challenge. I'm not happy with the kind of resources I have at my disposal. However, I'm also trying to get ideas from others by attending follow-up workshops and informal exchanges with other teachers."

Teacher- 9:

> "Transformation from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness is a big challenge as we are teaching under difficult circumstances- large class, lack of textbooks with many students and improper infrastructure."

It can be interpreted from the above responses that most teachers were trying to implement modern, innovative and learner-fronted approaches to create a tension free classroom environment so as to enhance students' English and employability skills. However, some teachers also reported that the shift from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness is a big challenge as they are grappling with practical problems such as class size and infrastructure facilities.

Students' Responses

Student-1:

> "One interesting thing about our English class is that we get to discuss and debate over many things. Our teacher wants us to speak freely, no matter how many mistakes we make."

Student-2:

> "We need more practice in reading and listening skills."

Student-3:

> "I have great fun when participating in role plays and group discussions."

Student-4:

> "I have a lot of stage fear. I can't speak when I'm on the dais.'

Student-5:

> "I find phonetic symbols very confusing. My teacher explained them to us. But I didn't understand clearly."

Student-6:

> "I like my English teacher and her way of teaching. I want to speak like my teacher."

Student-7:

> "I like group activities in the class. I feel free to speak with my friends."

Student-8:

> "We learnt many useful tips on interviews and resume writing."

Student-9:

> "We want more practice in listening and reading."

Student-10:

> "My English teacher encourages me to speak. But I feel shy in front of others."

Student-11:

> "We take part in pair work only sometimes."

Student-12:

> "I find reading comprehension very difficult."

Student-13:

> "Phonetics and reading comprehension are difficult to me."

Student-14:

> "We sometimes participate in group activities. But my friends speak most of the time. I'm trying now."

Student-15:

> "I like reading and writing. I want practice in mock interviews, resume writing and interview tips."

It can be interpreted from the above responses that students participate in variety of activities to improve their English. Most of them like their English classes and they felt that their English teachers encourage them to express freely and focus on preparing them to learn English for their career.

Researcher's Observations

Presented below are a few observations the researcher has gleaned from the informal discussion and interviews with the teachers.

Most teachers are catering to students' instrumental motivation for learning English. Motivation, as suggested by Gardner and Lambert (1972) is of two types: i) integrative motivation – the desire to learn a language to integrate oneself with the target culture, and ii) instrumental motivation – the desire to learn the language in order to get a better job or meet a requirement.

Apparently, increasing demand for good English communication skills in job market is a major driving force for this type of motivation in the undergraduate students of Andhra Pradesh. It is an established fact that there are a plenty of job opportunities for those who have good communication skills in English. This particular need of the students for studying English must be effectively catered to in the classroom. Moreover, appropriate measures must be taken in designing the course content that is reflective of these needs.

A significant number of teachers is promoting student – student interaction. This is indicative of the fact that a serious effort is being made by teachers in adopting learner fronted approach in their teaching.

The type of interaction that goes on in the English classroom is dependent mainly on the type of teaching and the kind of activities that take place. Teachers who want their students to develop their communicative competence must concentrate on giving opportunities to their students to interact among themselves and reduce teacher's intervention.

In the modern classroom, teacher talking time (TTT) must be kept to a minimum. It should be controlled and appropriate. To facilitate learners to speak more teachers should select materials and activities that are relevant to the needs of student. Classroom activities should necessitate the teacher intervention only when needed.

Teachers utilize pair work and group work and they are comfortable when pair work and group work is conducted in the classroom. These procedures are highly relevant to allow learners to interact among themselves and to practice English meaningfully.

Teachers want to overcome practical problems and prepare their students for the future job market, stressing on activities such as presentations, group discussions and interview skills.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the students at the undergraduate colleges are highly motivated, active in class, teaching/learning setting should not be disrupted by lack of resources such as textbooks and infrastructural facilities.

Many students felt that the classroom atmosphere is relaxed and tension-free and that they are allowed to express their ideas freely.

More concerted efforts are required to help the students develop good English language communication skills and competencies required to become readily employable.

It is suggested that the duration of the similar training programmes must be increased so as to facilitate in-depth discussion on not only innovative, learner-friendly approaches but also on practical constraints.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that teaching/learning is becoming learner-fronted in terms of implementation of modern techniques of teaching/learning for improving students' knowledge of English and communication skills. The study noted that teachers are successful in implementing modern practices while following certain traditional elements. The impact of Retraining Program by the researcher in the actual teaching situation and elicitation of introspection on usefulness of classroom activities contributed to the strength of the findings.

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