

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Importance of Ambience in Language Acquisition

Mrudula Lakkaraju, Ph.D.

Comfort Levels of Mother Tongue versus Other Tongue

English is not our mother tongue. It's a close cousin. The comfort level we have with the mother tongue is missing in the latter. Our education system has embraced English as a subject into the curriculum thus fixing the parameters and limiting the scope of its teaching. All the workshops, seminars, conferences both national and international are efforts from our side to explore how well we can do, how resourceful can you get and how best can you ensure results within the rigid framework. Within the scope of a classroom, within the scope of limited time, within the scope of marks and examinations the whole purpose of English is lost by the time the learner reaches a stage where his proficiency is the key to his future. In spite of scoring high marks in the examinations many learners feel the need to take up spoken English classes privately by paying huge sum of money. We as teachers and trainers understand very clearly the implications of this situation. Studying a language with its intricacies and nuances is beneficial for teachers in their professional development and researchers in publishing papers. The learner needs to acquire the language and through that secure a job in his dream company or a seat in his dream Institution. He is not bothered by the fact whether he is a primary learner, intermediate learner or an advanced learner. Neither does the learner understand the grammar translation method or the communication skills method. At the end of the day what matters most to him is

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whether he is able to communicate effectively and efficiently in English. Our present set up to teach English is not sufficient. Change has to be brought. In this paper I shall be discussing about the ambience one can develop for acquiring English very successfully.

Fascination with English – A Love-Hate Affair

There has been an ample opportunity to study, understand, evaluate and experiment the situation our English teaching and learning process is in. During our colonization the language was a divide. If Indians wanted to socialize with the colonizers he/she had to adapt the language and accept the culture that comes attached with it. There was a scorn and an unending fascination with the language in the same breath. The colonial hangover continues till today. Learning English has become a love-hate affair. Urban learners because they have access to various opportunities and the best of the facilities to acquire the language do well in their professions because of the exposure they have learnt to communicate effectively and efficiently. That is an ideal kind of a situation but the learners who are at the most disadvantage are the semi urban and rural learners.

Urban, Semi-Urban and Rural Schools and English

Most of our schools in semi urban and rural areas still opt to teach in the regional medium to enhance the literate number. Our educational policies too had to adapt to indigenous methods to help the model work. But the story at the other end is different. The corporate boom and the thriving job market with its numerous opportunities are unable to recruit these learners from semi urban and rural areas. There is a divide in the learning model and the demand of the time, the burden is on the English teacher at the undergraduate level to minimize and equip the learners with the tools for him/her to pursue their career.

Crucial Position of the Undergraduate Courses

The undergraduate course in a way becomes crucial for the learner because it becomes his last opportunity to learn the language before entering the professional world. If the undergraduate teacher understands the implications wonders can be done here. Three or four year course is a wonderful opportunity, if rightly utilized to repair the situation to a major extent.

On Defining Ambience

The concept of ambience is discussed within the above stated criteria. As is the belief of people to believe in things that are tangible so is the “English teachers”’ belief of tangible progress. Everything needs to be recorded, evaluated and graded. Immeasurable factors are not considered. A class needs to be controlled, pin drop silence, the teachers are supposed to impart Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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knowledge; by default the learners are mute listeners. The learners' performance is awarded purely on the performance in the written examinations at the end of the course.

What ambience, all we have is the classroom? How important is Ambience? Do we need it? It's not mentioned in the syllabus!! It's not mentioned in the duties roster!!

Yes, very important in the greater plan of language acquisition. Allow more clarity on this issue.

Levels of Ambience

Ambience represents itself on three levels. One representation is on the physical level, two on the syllabus level and three on the attitudinal level.

On the physical level, make the ambience comfortable, less rigid, more open and free so that the learner is not intimidated. Do not treat a language class as a regular class. Make it conducive to learning with little effort. An open room with stackable chairs can be one option. Change of scene will help the learner shake away his inhibitions. Stackable chairs ensure more flexibility and the space can be used for many activities. Conduct the class under the tree, in the lawn, on the terrace, in the corridor or any other unconventional place. A few eyebrows might raise, the teacher might feel awkward as he is moving out of the comfort zone, but the learner is going to thoroughly feel relaxed, enjoy the class and on the whole have a great time. His sense of perception of the English classes will be much more devoid of inhibitions. By creating the physical ambience for learning the learner is shorn of all the fear and anxiety of classroom learning, where mistakes would be focused and maybe ridiculed by peers. By moving out of the classroom even the method with which the learner might process the learning and correction will be less harsh on his/her psyche.

On the syllabus level...the teacher should go ahead and teach but should learn to be resourceful in their thought for making it a memorable lesson and an opportunity of language acquisition for the learner. It is still perceived in many language teachers, the underlining the difficult words and preparing answers for questions given at the end of the lesson still is the preparation for a lesson. That is not the only way a lesson can be taught, but that is the easiest and the most ineffective way a lesson can be taught. The learner would end up having marks because he/she has learnt by heart all the meanings and all the answers. In the final round of recruitment when he/she has to answer questions real time, which answer learnt by heart will help in securing a job or a seat? The teacher should make effort to bring the lessons closer to life. A teacher should allow the learner have an opportunity to relate to the narrated experience in the lesson. Activities have to be designed based on the lesson which can help him learn in his own unique and the most effective way.

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And finally on the attitudinal level, the teacher needs to practice the attitude committed to encourage learning. As learning a language is a skill and we understand that skills can be acquired with practice. And practicing encompasses the experience of making mistakes and processing the knowledge about correcting them. The teacher needs to inculcate the attitudinal ambience of not being judgmental about the learner's mistakes. The moralistic approach of the wrong and the right intimidates the learner into not trying again. If the teacher can be empathetic in the feedback, accepting mistakes as normal and counseling the learner on his/her areas of improvement it can help the learner tremendously.

What Needs to be Done?

On all the three levels of ambience that is discussed, physical ambience, syllabus level ambience and attitudinal ambience, requires very minor changes in the mindset of all the people involved. Having not disturbed the framework of timetable, syllabus and exams and within the existing framework the paper is an effort on how best can we cater to the learners' language acquisition skills helping him/her fare well in the chosen career options.

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