

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 8 August 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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## Integration of Activities in Teaching English to Primary School Students

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### Abstract

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Integration of Activities in Teaching English to Primary School Students

This paper highlights the need for the integration of activities in primary school classrooms by the English language teachers. The paper discusses the types of activities that can be used in an English classroom for primary school children. English language teachers have to constantly look for innovative approaches to teach English especially to children at the primary school level.

ABL (Activity Based Learning) is one of the innovative approaches which has proved to be successful in teaching English language. Primary school children are in their crucial stage of learning, the formative phase of their lives. Activities should be an integral part of teaching English in primary schools. A gist of the advantages of integrating activities in primary schools is discussed in the paper. A brief overview of the teachers' role in designing appropriate activities for children in primary schools has been elaborated in the paper.

Activities develop physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth of a child. This approach gives children the freedom to think and learn creatively. A comparison between the traditional methods of learning and ABL is briefed in the paper. The learner-centred approach using ABL as a teaching approach is also examined. The paper expresses the view that language learning in primary schools through ABL should promote the formation of positive attitude to language learning in general. It should be a basis for secondary school studies.

## **Introduction**



Primary Schools are considered to be the basis for a child's foundation in English language learning. It is therefore very important that the right kind of approach is used to

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teach English to primary school students. There are various approaches to English language teaching adopted by the primary schools today. However, the search for the right kind of an approach continues among English language teachers.

It is generally observed that an English teacher today spends around 60-70% of the class time talking in his or her classes. Just 35% or less is left to the students. There should be exercises and activities given in the classroom that would bring teacher-talking time (TTT) down and the students talking time (STT) more. The Activity Based Learning (ABL) offers scope for the teachers to increase the STT and decrease the TTT in a classroom.

### **Learning by Doing - ABL**

Young children in primary schools are in a crucial formative phase of their psychological, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. This will influence and benefit English language learning positively for the students. A perfect context should be provided to primary school students to increase their language competence. Through activities, a fun- based environment is provided for the students to increase their language competence. Through 'learning by doing', the competence can be built naturally and gradually. It can be easily seen that this provides the basis for language learning in secondary schools.

Savignon (1983) cites Montaigne who says, 'Without methods, without a book, without grammar or rules, without a whip or without tears, I had learned a Latin as proper as that of my school-master'. This anti-structural view can be held to represent the language learning version of a more general learning perspective usually referred to as 'learning by doing' or 'the experience approach'. ABL is based on these perspectives.

Different types of activities are used by the English language teachers for primary school students. The advantages of integrating activities and the teacher's role in designing activities are put forth in this paper.

### **Types of Activities for Primary School Students**

It is seen that language-based activities lead to higher order skills like interpretation, evaluation, and also the use of appropriate language according to situations for primary

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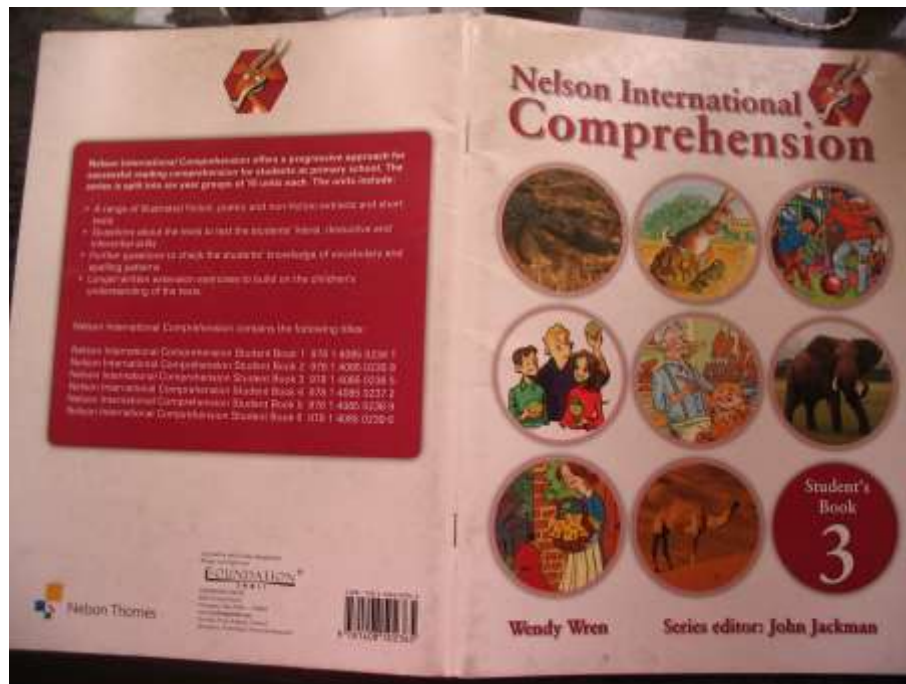
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school students. A generally accepted communication principle states that the activities which involve real communication promote learning. The task principle states that activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning.

Activities should be selected in a way that these engage the learner in authentic and meaningful use of the language rather than promoting merely a mechanical practice of different patterns of the language.



The range of activities attuned with a communicative approach is, indeed, unlimited. English language teacher needs to remember that the activities they choose to get their students involved should enable students to attain the communicative objectives of the language. The activities in the classroom should be designed to motivate students in completing tasks that are mediated through language, information sharing and these should involve negotiation of information.

### **Functional versus Social Communication Activities**

Activities can be broadly divided into functional communication activities and social interaction activities. Tasks like learners comparing sets of pictures and noting their similarities and differences; working out a likely sequence of events in a set of pictures;

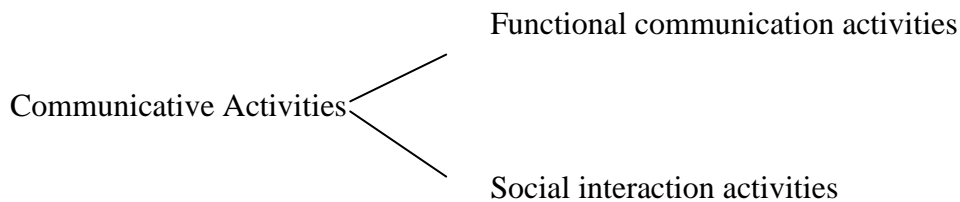
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discovering missing features in a map or picture; one learner communicating behind a screen to another learner and giving instructions on how to draw a picture or shape, or how to complete a map following directions; and solving problems from shared clues etc...are part of 'Functional communication activities.' Conversation, discussion sessions, dialogues and role-plays, simulations, skits, improvisations and debates become a part of 'Social interaction activities' Littlewood (1981:166) .



Communicative activities can be devised for the classroom, which highlights the functional aspect of communication. If the students are supposed to solve a problem or share information, they tend to use the language which is very convenient for them. They do not think of the appropriate language to be selected for the purpose. They do not even consider whether the language they use is grammatically correct or not. The main purpose of the activities is that students are encouraged to use the language they know in order to transfer the meanings as effectively as possible. The communicative demands have to be immediately met. Since the emphasis is on being functionally effective, activities of this type are called 'functional communication activities'.

A range of communicative activities help students to express communicative needs inside and outside the classroom. Nevertheless, activities should also be designed to meet varied social conditions. Social interaction activities can be devised to emphasize both the functional and social aspects of communication. Language is not only seen as a functional instrument but also seen as promoting the demands to satisfy social behaviours. Therefore, activities are framed to facilitate social interactions among students. This type of activities is called as 'social interaction activities'.

### **Task-oriented Teaching**

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The basis of activity-based teaching method includes task-oriented teaching. Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993) classify tasks according to the type of interaction that occurs in task accomplishment and classifies tasks as jigsaw tasks, information-gap tasks, problem-solving tasks, decision making tasks and opinion exchange tasks. All these tasks can be accomplished by framing effective activity sessions. Students learn to use their English language effectively and with confidence. Speaking in a new language also develops spontaneously without much effort.

### **ABC Milestones**

In Activity Based Learning (ABL), the classified competencies of each class are split into different parts or units and are treated as definite steps of learning. Each part is called as a milestone. In each subject, the different milestones are clustered and linked as a chain. This chain of milestones is called as a Ladder. The various activities that are used in ABL are :

- Initially, the teacher prepares *preliminary activities* for skill development of the students. This could be activities based on listening skills, speaking skills, reading skills and writing skills in English language.
- *Reinforcement activities* is the next step where few activities are designed by the teacher in order to focus if the students are able to apply the learned skills practically. Students' understanding, reflection and action are measured while reinforcing certain basic aspects of the language.
- Once the concepts and the purpose of the activities are understood by the student, many *practice activities* are given to them in the form of classroom activities or homework activities.
- Next, *evaluation activities* are framed by the teacher to assess the performance of students. This checks for their overall understanding of the skills and application after structured process of analysis and synthesis.
- If the evaluation activities prove that the student needs more assistance in a particular specified area of language, *remedial activities* are designed by the English language teacher. These activities studies the 'language gaps' and act as remedial measures to equip the students completely in the learning process of language acquisition.

- Further, teachers also engage themselves in designing *enrichment activities* to enrich the language learning experience for the students. A variety of activities are designed and used in classrooms by the language teachers. Their aim is to enrich the learning of the students by providing more activities which are of same relevance.

Numerous activities can be chosen in such a way that it improves motivation and allow natural learning to happen among primary school students. They should create a context that stimulates the learning environment for students. English language teachers need to integrate the different kinds of activities throughout their lessons based on the language competencies of the students in their classroom.

### **Advantages of Integrating Activities**



The Activity-Based Learning offers 'Joyful Learning' for primary school children. Gauldwell Cook's 'Play-way method' noticed that the learners had more freedom and interest in their learning. When children learn through play and activities, they engage in meaningful learning. Activities help them learn individually, learn in pairs and learn in a group. Activities

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develop physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth of a child. This approach gives children the freedom to think and learn creatively. There is scope for children to enhance their level of confidence and communication skills. Active participation of children ensures the process of learning. Play is the natural instinct of children. The fun based approach offers a joyful learning experience for students at the primary school level.

Activities facilitate meaningful interactions between the student and the teacher and among the students themselves. This approach of teaching avoids monotony in English classroom. This makes the learning process interesting and easier. 'This educational initiative could well be a forerunner for a positive change in educational standards across the country. We are now at the threshold of a silent revolution' (Anandalakshmy 2007). The 'silent revolution' of ABL is considered to be more an evolution in today's teaching approaches to primary school children. 'If we look at the history behind this reform and its current functioning it is only appropriate that we term it as evolution' (Krishnamurthy 2009).

### **Impact on Students**

By integrating activities in an English classroom, the students are encouraged to take individual responsibility for what they think the function and purpose of the activity is about. It is easier for the teacher to find out what the students already know, without making them conscious that they are being the focus of the attention. Little do students realise that serious work is happening in the context of an activity. There is a great deal of involvement from the students in the given period of time to complete the given activity and feel the sense of accomplishment. The competitive spirit of the students is also triggered off in a healthy manner through inclusion of activities in the classroom.

### **Help to Teachers**

Activities help an English teacher to plan the lessons easier. They can be used in the classroom with very little preparation, especially if the materials made are made in such a way that they can be used more than once. Including activities while teaching English lessons help to gain control over the class and get a group of unmotivated children moving around, being more receptive and participating in the class.

### **A Learner-centred Curriculum**

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Activity Based Learning approach follows a learner-centred curriculum. It has an interactive way of designing activities for primary school students. It offers fun based learning and encourages 'learning by doing'. A learner-centred approach is framed to provide students with effectual learning strategies, to encourage students to set their own objectives and to develop students' skills in self-evaluation.

The teacher supports, guides, aids, stimulates and facilitates in activities where learners discover, investigate, explore, analyse, research and interpret the texts. The entire process is learner-centred. Very little scope for the exposition of the teachers' understanding or application is seen in such an approach. Since the learner becomes the centre in activity based learning approach, a learner directed approach follows a learner-centred curriculum. The activities used in the classroom engage the children actively in the language learning process.

The traditional methods of teaching would be mostly teacher-directed. The classroom used to be dull, solemn, monotonous and boring for the students. The advent of innovative teaching approaches like activity-based teaching has changed the idea of a classroom situation itself. Today, we can witness a classroom where the teacher follows the ABL approach to be filled with lots of fun, enthusiasm, happiness, competitiveness, better understanding of the text and learning with involvement among students. When teaching happens through activities, it is seen that it increases the emotional and intellectual participation of the student in primary school classrooms.

### **State of the Art Teaching**

Learners are exposed to ABL 'as the state-of-the-art teaching style, stressing reflective inquiry through questioning and reflection' (Stoblein 2009). Students are encouraged by their teachers to indulge in an active inquiry process where they ask lots of questions, seek answers for the questions and reflect on their interpretation, observation and understanding. These types of activities enrich effective communication skills among students.

### **Key Assumptions**

Teaching through activities can be related to the key assumptions of task-based instruction summarized by Feez (1998:17) as

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- The focus is on process rather than product.
- Basic elements are purposeful activities and tasks that emphasize communication and meaning.
- Learners learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in the activities and tasks.
- Activities and tasks can be either: those that learners might need to achieve in real life and those that have a pedagogical purpose specific to the classroom.
- Activities and tasks of an activity based syllabus are sequenced according to difficulty.
- The difficulty of a task depends on a range of factors including the previous experience of the learner, the complexity of the task and the degree of support available.

### **Freedom of Learning**

The ABL approach provides complete freedom of learning to the students in the classroom. The fear of rigorous assessment and examination procedures are removed. This approach creates opportunities for the students to learn according to their interest and choice. Students also learn at their own pace. Individual learning, group learning, self directed learning, learning by doing, learning through reinforcement activities, learning through enriching and extending activities, learning through practicing activities, learning the right use of language through remedial activities, assessing through evaluation activities are some of the activities through which a learner gets permanent learning experience. It offers a joyful experience of learning. The approach helps the students to comprehend the contents and the concepts. The learning activity becomes a student's individual enriching experience.

### **Teacher's Role in Designing Activities**

Language teaching can be seen as something more than the transmission of knowledge. Through responding to what happens in the classroom, through noticing the responses of the students to activities, through collecting feedback in multiple ways in which we can, the learning experience of students and teachers is enriched by the continuous process of teaching and learning.

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Teaching a foreign language is viewed as a creative process. When teachers use various techniques to activate the imagination or to stimulate creativity, students' developmental aptitudes and the processes are developed in language learning simultaneously.

In primary schools, textbook lessons have the format of the exercise predominantly with ideas through activities. Activities are not viewed as just a supplementary to the concept which is given through words rather they have become the vehicle for instructive work. The activities designed by the teacher should be used as a central part of the students' learning process. Language learning should not be considered so serious and should be treated as fun in a classroom. Activities should be framed in such a way that it focuses the energy of the student to master and internalise language learning. The inclusion of activities is one way of focussing this energy of young children on language learning.

### **Assessment of Learners' Performance**

It is important to view assessment of learners' performance in an affirmative way, by laying emphasis on their strengths in using English as a means of interaction. It is also important to create activities in such a way so that learners can communicate as caring and compassionate users of English. It helps the students to realise that the entire process of learning a language is not only cognitive but also affective.

### **Teacher Intervention**

However, appropriate intervention from the teacher is required in order to correct the students while they make mistakes and to ensure accurate use of the English language.

When the students find themselves difficult to cope with the demands of a given activity, the teacher can guide or provide the necessary language items. If the nature of activity given is a group activity, any kind of a disagreement can also be resolved among the students based on the given activity. In other words, the teacher is available for the student as a source of guidance and help. The presence of a teacher in the classroom is primarily seen as a psychological support for many students. This aids such students who need to develop independence in working on an activity.

The activities given by the teacher should be able to recognise the weaknesses of children as specific signs of learning needs. It is therefore essential that the teacher develops controlled activities where competencies of children are also addressed. Reinforcement activities and remedial activities will help the student to meet the language requirements. The role of the teacher is defined very clearly in such situations.

### **Mother Tongue Interference/Intervention**

There might be moments when the students resort to their mother tongue when they are not sure about the words they have to use in the target language. The role of a teacher during those times would be to discourage students from resorting to their first language or mother tongue in moments of difficulty. Let the teacher supply the needed word promptly.

We should also bear in mind that there is universal practice in India among the educated to code switch from one language to another, and to mix words from English and the Indian languages in the same sentence. There is also a strong tendency to add affixes from English to words from the Indian languages and vice versa. We need to discourage such practices when students learn and use English in the classroom. For this also teacher intervention is necessary.

Therefore, we see that the role of an English teacher in activity based approach is varied and multiple. It is clearly a student-centric approach and not a teacher-directed approach. They play the role of facilitators rather than being mere language teachers for the students. Their role also extends to acting as a counsellor and as a guide for the students. The teachers not only offer linguistic support for the primary school students but also offer psychological support through many ways.

### **Conclusion**

Primary school education must bring out the hidden talents and the creative skills of the students in order to sharpen their language competence. In the ABL approach of teaching, the students are seen to be active learners rather than passively receiving the information given by the teachers. Adopting the ABL approach will help implement the suggestions offered by several education reports brought out in recent years. For example, the Yashpal Committee-2007 consisting of academicians and educationists strongly expressed its concern Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

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to bring down the burden of the primary school curriculum and use the activity based approach to provide a child-friendly environment in the primary school education. The teaching approach used should create a joyful learning atmosphere in the classroom and should offer multiple opportunities for all the learners to participate in the teaching learning process. Fostering the communicative skill of the students and developing self-confidence of the learners are also recommended in the National Curriculum Frame Work - 2005.

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