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Multiple Intelligences, Blended Learning and the English Teacher

Prasanta Chakraborty, Ph.D.

Abstract

Taare Zameen Par is a stimulation to handle multiple intelligences in a classroom. In 1983, Dr. Howard Gardner proposed eight different intelligences asking the teaching community to take into account all the varieties of intelligences to assess the potential in the students.

Teachers should be trained to present their lessons in a wide variety of ways. The challenge is to involve many more teachers, school administrators, and others to adopt this unique teaching philosophy, to provide each child an opportunity to learn in ways best suited to his/her unique frame of mind. It may not be feasible for many teachers to handle a classroom full of students with multiple intelligences by their own but the modern communication technology, if adopted, could help them face this challenge.

Thus, blended learning can be seen also as the linkage among teachers of English, learners, and classroom located in two separate places. At times, blended learning might supplement English course readings and activities with online articles, simulations, video clips of events and other resources. Because of its flexibility, blended learning is preferred by the English teacher equipped with the know-how of modern communication technology. A teacher can introduce an English lesson on grammar in the classroom and then proceed online. The teacher's role becomes that of learning facilitator ensuring if it be a face-to-face interaction, an online course or a blended course.

There is social pressure on English teachers to prepare students down-to-business participation in an increasingly global society and give them opportunities to be at par with financially privileged professionals. Thus a programme on Business English can be implemented through a blended learning strategy. However, with computer, Internet in the classroom, it is the language teacher with his/her experience and knowledge that will identify the resource and the facilities suited for an individual learner with his/her unique intelligence and extend them the direction needed.

Stars on Earth

Taare Zameen Par (Like Stars on Earth) is a film depicting the story of an eight year old child, Ishaan who suffers greatly until he is recognized by a teacher to be dyslexic. The boy hates school; he finds every subject difficult and he fails in the tests and the exams. He also finds it difficult to throw a ball in a straight line.

Rather than helping him, his teachers and classmates constantly humiliate him publicly. But the same Ishaan has his own world, a rich one with wonders that are hardly appreciated by anyone – magical lands filled with colours and animated creatures. He is an in-born artist; yet, none realises it initially. His condition at home is no better. He fails summarily to live up to his father's expectations. His mother too grows frustrated. They find him getting poor grades and skipping school. At last, they decide to send him to a boarding school. There too he suffers from a sense of depression. Happily, a new teacher joins the boarding school; his name is Ram Shankar Nikumbh, and students call him "Nikumbh Sir".

With a teaching style innovatively different from his strict predecessor, he soon becomes popular among the students. He discovers that Ishaan is unhappy and that the boy never joins the activities in the class. He begins to review Ishaan's past work and is eventually convinced that all of his "failures" are actually symptomatic of dyslexia.

As a part of his intention to solve Ishaan's problems, Nikumbh visits Ishaan's parents in their house and he is amazed by the high standard of Ishaan's paintings. Nikumbh tells Ishaan's parents that he is a bright child who processes information differently than the other children in his class do. He also informs them that Ishaan's artistic ability is amply demonstrated by his paintings and creative works-of-art.

Specifically, he points out that Ishaan has neurological problems but in no way does he possess low intelligence.

One day, Nikumbh brings up the topic of dyslexia in the class, saying that famous people like Albert Einstein, Leonardo Da Vinci, Walt Disney, Agatha Christie, Thomas Edison, Pablo Picasso, and actor Abhishek Bachchan were dyslexic too. Nikumbh intimates the Principal of the school about the problems of Ishaan and seeks permission to act as the boy's tutor.

Initially, the Principal hesitates but he eventually gives his consent. Nikumbh starts coaching Ishaan using remedial techniques developed by specialists in dyslexia. Ishaan soon develops interest in language and mathematical skills and his grades improve. Towards the end of the year, Nikumbh organizes an art fair for both staff and students of the school. A renowned painter, Lalita Lajmi, is invited to be judge in the competition. Ishaan is declared the winner, while his teacher, Nikumbh becomes the runner-up.

The movie is an eye opener for me. In my long career as a teacher, I faced similar problems a number of times but hardly could solve any of them. Many teachers like me feel that there are students of multiple intelligences in the classroom but do not always know how to tackle their problems.

Multiple Intelligences

In this connection, let us try to understand what “multiple intelligences” mean. In 1983, Dr. Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University, suggested that the traditional notion of intelligence, based on I.Q. testing, is very limited, nay handicapped, in multiple ways. He proposed eight different intelligences and asked concerned people to take into account all the varieties of intelligences to assess the potential in a broader range in children as well as in adults.

These intelligences are:

1. linguistic intelligence,
2. logical-mathematical intelligence,
3. spatial intelligence,
4. bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence,
5. musical intelligence,
6. interpersonal intelligence,
7. intrapersonal intelligence and
8. naturalist intelligence.

What Do We See and Practice in Our Schools

In our schools, the teachers are mostly fond of students with linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence; they often fail to bestow equal attention on students whose talents come from the other intelligences. Artists, architects, musicians, naturalists, designers, dancers, entrepreneurs, etc. have always made contributions that are no less important in augmenting the world than those who have contributed their shares with their linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence.

Results of a Survey

Gardner made a survey of autistic savants in support of his theory on multiple intelligences. On the one hand, they have serious mental disabilities leading to afflicted social skills; on the other, they possess, like Nikumbh and Ishaan, such extraordinary mental abilities as are rare in human society.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 10 October 2010

Prasanta Chakraborty, Ph.D.

Multiple Intelligences, Blended Learning and the English Teacher

Affected people have striking feats of memory and they are often found to be endowed with unusual abilities in a specific field of knowledge which may include skills in art or music. There is actually a disproportionate regularity with which the common chord of blindness, mental disability and musical genius occurs in the savant syndrome.

Unfortunately, children with these gifts do not receive much attention and admiration in their schools. Many of these kids even end up being labelled "learning disabled," "ADD (attention deficit disorder)" or simply underachievers, as it was initially the case with Ishaan. Their unique ways of thinking and learning aren't addressed by a heavily linguistic or logical-mathematical classroom. Therein lies the limitation of the teacher.

Suggestions from the Theory of Multiple Intelligences

The theory of multiple intelligences proposes a major transformation in the way our schools are run. It suggests that teachers should be trained to present their lessons in a wide variety of ways using music, cooperative learning, art activities, role play, multimedia, field trips, inner reflection, and much more.

The theory is also interesting in the sense that it expands our horizon of available teaching/learning tools beyond the conventional linguistic and logical methods used in most schools (e.g. lecture, textbooks, writing assignments, formulas, etc.).

Application in a Literature Class

For example, in a literature class, when an English teacher lectures on a Shakespearian play:

1. (S)he may read the play,
2. point out to students typical Shakespearean phrases and expressions used in the play (linguistic),
3. make some critical assessment of the play (logical-mathematical),
4. use video-clips or pictures of certain scenes (spatial),
5. engage the students in acting certain parts of the play so that they can observe and realize how the basic emotions expressed in the play work in the natural world (bodily-kinaesthetic and intrapersonal);
6. or encourage those students to share among themselves the human relationship found in the play,
7. ask students for role-playing or
8. ask them how they would face and solve any problem if they were in Hamlet's or Macbeth's place (interpersonal);
9. involve the interested students to locate and share the common emotions from the play prevalent in their familiar environment (naturalist) and
10. even to write or to sing (or find an existing song) that would help them communicate their emotions.

The teacher does not have to teach all the students of the class in all eight ways. Existing possibilities could always be explored to decide on what particular pathways interest students most, or seem to be the most effective teaching or learning tools.

Growing Interest in Multiple Intelligences Theory in India

It is good that the theory of multiple intelligences has attracted the attention of many scholars, educational administrators around the countries, and hundreds of schools in several countries are currently using its philosophy to redesign their teaching materials as well as their approach, instruction and mode of delivery to educate children.

However, there are thousands of schools that still persist with their age-old tradition of monotonously dry lectures and boring workbooks and course-books that limit teaching only to those students with linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence. The challenge is to involve many more teachers, school administrators, and others who work with children to adopt this unique teaching philosophy, so that each child gets to learn in ways that suit best to his/her unique frame of mind.

Intellectual Handicaps of Teachers

In most cases though, teachers are handicapped – in some cases, intellectually; in other cases, by the load of course curriculum and other school-related matters.

Remedial Processes

In recent years, organizations like the British Council has felt the enormity of the challenges posed on the teacher facing students of multiple intelligences and so such organizations have come up with teachers' training programme on how to effectively use stories, pictures and songs in the classroom to resolve crisis to commendable extent.

But the scope of such training programmes for the teachers continue to be limited. It may not be feasible for many teachers to handle a classroom full of students with multiple intelligences by their own but the modern communication technology, if adopted, could help them face this challenge.

Blended Learning

The mixing of different learning environments is what we may call **Blended Learning**. The phrase has many specific meanings based upon the context in which it is used. Blended learning gives learners and teachers a potential environment to learn and teach more effectively.

This approach can combine face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. Computer, cellular or smart phones, satellite television channels, video Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 10 October 2010

Prasanta Chakraborty, Ph.D.

Multiple Intelligences, Blended Learning and the English Teacher

conferencing and other emerging electronic media can be effectively utilized for this purpose. Learners and teachers can happily work together to improve the quality of learning and teaching. The ultimate aim of blended learning is to provide realistic practical opportunities for learners and teachers to ensure a learning-friendly environment that is useful, sustainable and ever growing for all the students in a class.

The classroom teacher has now enough options to cater to the needs of each student. (S)he can tap the resource from various knowledge-sources through the Internet and choose different modes to communicate the same according to the preferences of students.

Links between Various Persons and Places

Blended learning can be seen also as the linkage among teachers, learners, and classroom located in two states, provinces, regions, countries or continents. At times, blended learning might simply supplement course readings and activities with online articles, simulations, video clips of events and other resources.

The English teacher can now either read the play himself/herself with the students or (s)he can take the help of his/her colleagues in other colleges within the state or in a different state, show video-clips from a certain play and ask some to enact some roles, develop listening skill with the help of programmes telecast in TV channels like Cartoon Network, teach them grammar through games, arrange on-line test for their own pronunciation and accent, even go for other activities that employ computer-aided technology.

Characteristics of a Mixed Ability Classroom

In this connection, it must also be kept in mind that all students in the classroom do not have the same level of comprehension-ability; their socio-economic and cultural background are not identical and as such not every student can keep up the same pace with other students in the classroom. Plus, many intelligent and serious students suffer from exam-phobia. But in the face-to-face learning system, there is no option for the teachers to treat each student individually - especially when both the number of the students in the classroom and the syllabus are sizeable.

Blended learning is a good option for the teacher, mainly because of its flexibility. Students in these programmes can learn at their own pace and, at the same time, benefit from personal instructions in the classroom. A teacher can begin a course with a well-structured introductory lesson in the classroom and then proceed with follow-up materials online.

Critical Role of the Teacher

The teacher's role becomes critical as this requires a transformation process to that of learning facilitator. He is to ensure and determine whether a course should be a Language in India www.languageinindia.com

face-to-face interaction, an online course or a blended course for which he has to depend on the analysis of the competence of himself as a teacher and the taught, the nature and location of the audience and the resources available.

But blended learning takes time for both the teacher and the learner to adapt them to a relatively new instructional concept. Some of the advantages of blended learning include cost effectiveness for both the learning institution and for the learner, as well as flexibility in scheduling and framing routine for the course-work. The disadvantages include limited access to computer and internet, limited knowledge in the use of technology, study skills, etc.

Growing Social Pressure on English Teachers

There is social pressure on English teachers to teach English more effectively. The main goal is to facilitate students' down-to-business participation in an increasingly global society and give them opportunities to avail an equal chance of success while applying for jobs — or for any such matters — to make them at par with professionals from more privileged economic sectors or those who had greater opportunities to learn foreign languages.

Core Concepts for ESL Curriculum

Some of the core concepts that help designing an ESL curriculum are multimodal L2 input exposure, enhanced input, learner-fit content delivery, interaction (human-computer, human-human, and intrapersonal) through computer supported collaborative and individual learning tasks, as well as a more human-like dimension for positive and corrective feedback.

The Business English programme in any third world country and especially in India aims at developing integrated linguistic skills, with an emphasis on listening comprehension and oral production and a focus on learning for authentic communication. It can be implemented through a blended learning (b-learning) strategy.

Features of a Model Curriculum

A model curriculum may combine

- (a) learners' independent work on a dedicated platform with available *English Online* software,
- (b) face-to-face ESL classes led by teachers who are also students' online tutors,
- (c) online monitoring carried out by these teachers, and
- (d) weekly conversation classes with native speakers of English so as to improve the oral and listening skill of the learners.

A Modular Plan

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 10 October 2010

Prasanta Chakraborty, Ph.D.

Multiple Intelligences, Blended Learning and the English Teacher

A standard Communicative English Programme may be made up of four modules that would run for a considerable period in an academic session. At the beginning of the term, each module may have some time for system familiarization and for problem-solving evaluation and certain periods, say one week at the end of the term for final assessment. Each module will contain enough time for interactive language learning tasks depending upon the learners' needs.

Keeping this in mind, the first two modules may facilitate the learning of the use of the language by the students to meet their daily needs. Module three may be dedicated to prepare ambitious students who wish to travel to English-speaking countries to pursue further studies or careers. How to work in an English cultural environment is to be taught in the fourth Module; students get training in job interviews and learn about interpersonal relations, customs, and traditions.

Class-Teacher's Purpose

So, the class-teacher's purpose to help students with multiple intelligences communicate effectively in English may be achieved with these modules. There is no doubt that some tech-savvy learners would get more opportunities for exposure to L2 input and interaction, with the possibility of many hours of independent work at their own pace.

By doing so, students can attain two goals: learn English effectively and at the same time master Information and communication technologies.

A Combination of Task-Oriented Approaches

An effective English programme integrates a combination of task-based language-learning approaches with content-based instruction and computer-supported collaborative learning. The curriculum framers should also take care of adding a strong cultural component aiming at the development of the learners' cultural awareness both of the target language (TL) and of the source language (SL) speakers so that the learners can identify and appreciate both the cultures of the two different civilizations for an effective use of the TL.

If face to face mode and online mode work together, conversation classes may become the appropriate platform for discussing their commonalities as well as their differences. That would help encouragingly exchange information about different cultural backgrounds. It has been observed by the researchers that developing a positive attitude towards the target language culture or nurturing an integrative orientation focusing on similarities between L1 and L2 cultures facilitates language acquisition more.

Seeking Relevance for the Language Teacher

So, the question is - wherein lies the importance of a language teacher in such a highly technical classroom situation? Here, computer provides the setting and Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 10 October 2010

Prasanta Chakraborty, Ph.D.

Multiple Intelligences, Blended Learning and the English Teacher

amenities, which a classroom with multiple intelligences demands. Internet provides the necessary resource. But who will guide the young learner? It is the language teacher with his/her experience and knowledge that will identify the resource and the facilities suited for an individual learner with his/her unique intelligence and extend them the direction needed. The teacher is also expected to be adequately equipped; in other words, (s)he needs to be 'tech-savvy' to handle the new situation.

Interestingly, the concept of blended learning and its application in a classroom with students of multiple intelligences is seldom found in countries like India and other developing nations. Only in some developed countries, blended learning primarily functions as a replacement for or extension of face to face environments. But this is not enough.

Blended environments can bring pictures, charts, graphs, animations, simulations, and video-clips that the learner can call up and manipulate. The blending of delivery mechanism, instructional approaches, technologies and learning situations will evolve to support learning which is individualised yet collaborative and interactive. Increased authenticity may occur during blended learning through real world scenarios and cases. The difference between workplace training on the use of English language and the formal education of English in schools and colleges will definitely disappear increasingly.

True, we have improved a lot in the world of information technology but in the classroom and especially in the face-to face mode, we are yet to consider the application of modern communication technology. Not that it is costlier; our conservative mind is responsible to hold back such openings. Even in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of education, Universities depend more on printed reading material.

Of course, no body is absolutely sure of the success of blended learning in a classroom of students with multiple intelligences, especially in schools. Theoretically, it is said that students with any category of intelligence can attain their heights with the help of Computer and Internet but it needs several practical tests to justify the worth of blended learning.

So, let us apply modern communication technology, may be as a pilot project, right now and help children like Ishaan to grow up both physically and mentally in order to prove their intellectual ability in the society instead of branding and excluding them as "learning disabled," or "ADD (attention deficit disorder)". This may rapidly increase the number of participants to enjoy and contribute to the fruits of knowledge.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 10 October 2010

Prasanta Chakraborty, Ph.D.

Multiple Intelligences, Blended Learning and the English Teacher

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