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Roles of the Teacher in English Language Classrooms

Abstract:

India is a multilingual and multicultural country, where teaching a second or foreign language is a challenge. English language teaching has been practiced in India since a very long time. In present day scenario, when we talk about the democratization of classroom, this challenge turns out to be even more difficult. English bears a dubious status in India, in urban areas it is not a foreign language, it is a second language, but when we consider rural areas it becomes a foreign language for the learner, because the students do not have any other exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Under such circumstances, the role of the teacher becomes crucial. The present paper discusses various roles associated with a language teacher in the classroom.

Key Terms: Teacher role, CLT, Language classroom, Facilitator

Introduction:

The English Language Teaching has undergone dramatic changes in Indian education system. Today, the entire world favour the democratization of classroom, the student centric approaches and empowering the education through empowering the students. Under such circumstances, the role of the teacher becomes significant as long as language classrooms are concerned. Teacher is not just an instructor anymore, teacher is one who boosts the confidence of the students and aids them to produce good output without which language learning is not possible. The role of teacher varies in various approaches and methods of language teaching. The modern academic system favours Communicative Language Teaching in Indian classrooms, typically because of its democratic nature and the kind of output it produces.

The present paper will discuss various roles played by the teachers in modern day language classroom; the stress here is on English language classroom. The first section below discusses the role of English language in present day scenario and its importance for Indian society. The next section discusses the roles of the teachers in the classroom and student-teacher relationships. The last section provides the general conclusions to the discussion.

English: Indian Scenario & the World

Language plays an important role in human life. Out of all the languages in the world, English is considered as the international language. There are some reasons why English is so important and many people attempt to learn it. No exaggeration to say that English is sometimes determines the fate of people and even saves lives. English is currently the most wide spread language in the world, it is second only to Mandarin Chinese in terms of the number of people which speak it, but second to none in terms of the number of people learning it. It is currently the primary language used on the World Wide Web, in the political and business arenas. It has even become the language of today's pop culture. Therefore learning English is important.

Today the USA's influence on world information is dominant, English, being their native tongue, the same is true for Britain. The music and other types of media that come out of these two countries are broadcast around the world. Most of the world's largest pop stars record English albums, which are played and requested in all the corners of the earth. Imagine feeling baffled and confused when you hear a song on the radio, you don't know what is being said because you didn't bother to learn English and all around you the rest of the world is singing along. With the world steadily heading towards economic globalization it is essential that English is taught and understood around the world

so that the common man can keep up with world issues.

The same way INDIA is a developing country and everyone has to learn English because today everything seems to be English. When we consider about education in INDIA, children are forced to learn English starting at preschool in order to make their English better because the people of the world realized the value of English. As a result English is added as a compulsory subject at secondary level in INDIA. Even Universities are conducting almost all the studies through English medium. After completing a university degree, it's time to take up a professional course and of course those professional courses are in English medium. Hence one has to have a very good knowledge of English to be educated and to shine in the society.

The next fact is finding a job in this competitive society without the knowledge of English is almost next to impossible. Every boss is looking for qualified, talented, smart and confident employees. For example if you apply for a high class job and when you go for the interview, do you know what kind of employees are going to be hired up? Obviously qualified, talented, smart and confident employees with fluent English will be hired, because we already know that people deal with others in English language especially in the business world, scientific world and other. So the point here is that one can't get a pretty good job or a promotion without knowing proper English.

Everyone knows that modern man is the personality of a versatile and curious, seeking in his life to visit as many different countries and cities to get acquainted with the culture and customs of other nations. And how is this possible without knowledge of the English language? In tourist countries, whether Turkey or Spain, everyone who works with tourists speak English. This improves the quality of service visitors, and hence, attracting more tourists. And the tourists themselves, being in a foreign country, feel much more confident, knowing that, in case anything happens, will always be able to talk with the locals, ask for directions, to clarify the location of something, etc. On the contrary, how do we communicate with other people in foreign countries who do not speak our mother tongue? English helps to rise up tourism. English language makes the things go easier that's what I think.

Books! A massive quantity of books is written in English language. One must know the English language to gain some knowledge, to learn something new or to read more. Foreign books which are not written in English are translated to English language so that anyone who knows English well can read and enjoy those books too. The final reason is internet. All most all the information sharing on the internet is in English so one must know better English to understand what is it all about and also to communicate other people via internet.

To conclude, one should say that now-a-days people are using English more often, anywhere and everywhere in this era. Knowledge of the English language gives the opportunity to study in prestigious universities in our own country, also in abroad. Due to that not only people in developing countries but also government has realized the value of this English language. As a result the language which was frequently spoken by masses has got its place in Educational classes.

Role of English Teacher in Indian Classroom

In any teaching-learning situation, the role of the teacher in the classroom is of paramount significance because it is central to the way in which the classroom environment evolves. Moreover, the role adopted by the learner in the classroom also depends on the role adopted by the teacher. Therefore, teachers must be clear about their role in the classroom so that there is no confusion between their perceptions of their role and what they actually practice in the classroom, leaving out of consideration the institutional or societal roles that they have.

i. The notion of 'role' and teacher roles in ELT

The term 'role', as Dörnyei and Murphey (2003: 109) point out, is a technical term "which originally comes from sociology and refers to the shared expectation of how an individual should behave. In other words, roles describe what people are supposed to do". In the domain of English Language Teaching (ELT), several methodologists (Littlewood, 1981; Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Tudor, 1993; Harmer, 2001) have suggested many potential roles for a language teacher. Richards and Rodgers (1986: 24) consider teacher roles as part of the "design" component of a method, pointing out that these are related to the following issues:

1. the types of function teachers are expected to fulfil,
2. the degree of control the teacher has over how learning takes place,
3. the degree to which is the teacher is responsible for determining the content of what is taught,
and
4. the interactional patterns that develop between teachers and learners.

Littlewood (1981: 92) conceptualizes the role of the language teacher broadly as the "facilitator of learning" in the context of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) instead of the rather narrow concept of the "teacher as instructor". According to Littlewood, a teacher's role as a facilitator entails the sub-roles of an "overseer" of students' learning, a "classroom manager", a "consultant" or "adviser", and sometimes "co-communicator" with the learners. Harmer (2001) looks at the term "facilitator" in a much broader way than Littlewood does, and points out that the ultimate aim of all roles is to facilitate the students' progress in some way or the other.

He talks about using certain "precise" terms for the roles that teachers play in the classroom: controller, organizer, assessor, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, and observer. Tudor (1993) looks at the role of the teacher in the context of the notion of the learner-centred classroom, a kind of classroom in which the focus is on the active involvement of the learners in the learning process. However, before considering what entails the role of the teacher in such a changed view of the classroom, it is worthwhile to have look at the traditional roles that an English language teacher has been performing (especially, in the Indian context). This is important for us if we want to understand the factors which have necessitated a change in the perspective, and if we want to consider to the extent to which that change is acceptable in the Indian context.

ii. Traditional role of English teachers

When I searched for the synonyms of the word "traditional", I came across many words: old, legendary, historical, handed down, customary, conventional, long-standing, established, correct, proper, etc. All these words (except the last two, perhaps!) could be used to describe the ubiquitous traditional method of teaching English in the Indian context. What, then, are the main features of this traditional method of teaching English? For one thing, the traditional method is largely teacher-centred, with the teachers hogging the limelight always. They lecture at length on particular topics and students listen to them with rapt attention – this has been the methodology for teaching English for decades now. Using this methodology, teachers have been teaching discrete points of grammar or phonology in separate lessons, focusing mainly on the formal features of the language at the expense of encouraging students to use the language. Repetitive practice, mechanical drills and memorization of grammar rules are certain important aspects of this approach to language teaching. This approach could be regarded as what Wilkins (1976: 2) calls a "synthetic" approach in which "different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up". Perhaps this sort of an approach has its germ in the belief that the purpose of all teaching is to simplify learning, and one way of doing that is to break down the contents into smaller parts and then present them in a sequential and graded manner. This "linear" approach to language learning is explained well by Nunan (1996: 65). Nunan likens it to the construction of a wall in the following manner:

"The language wall is erected one linguistic "brick" at a time. The easy grammatical bricks are laid at the bottom of the wall, and they provide a foundation for the more difficult ones. The task for the learner is to get the linguistic bricks in the right order: first the word bricks, and then the sentence bricks. If the bricks are not in the correct order, the wall will collapse under its own ungrammaticality."

The responsibility for constructing "the language wall" well is, of course, on the teacher who is viewed not only as the organizer and the controller of all classroom activities but also as the evaluator of the learners' performance. Thus, traditionally the English teacher has always played a very dominant role, perhaps based on the supposition that the teacher is the source of all knowledge. The learner, on the other hand, has always been viewed as a receptacle to be filled with the knowledge given by the teacher.

Freire (1982) calls this the "banking" system of education in which the learners are considered to be similar to bank accounts into which regular deposits are made to be drawn later for specific purposes like examination. Obviously, the onus here lies on the individuals making the deposits for it is they

who are responsible for earning the money and it is only they who can make the bank accounts swell. Using this analogy for the traditional language classroom would inevitably mean that the teacher is almost like the Titan, Atlas, of Greek mythology. Just as Atlas bore the earth and the heavens on his back, the teacher here bears the burden of the whole class on his shoulders and the learner merely listens to the teacher and may be sometimes repeats or reacts to the teacher's directions. Hence, the learner is reduced to play a passive, reactive role with no control over content or methods. This authoritative role of the teacher, I believe, stems from the long-cherished traditional notion that pedagogic success depends on how articulately a teacher teaches.

However, it is a fallacy to believe that learning depends on articulate or "eloquent" teaching for, as Kumaravadivelu (2006: 44) points out, "teaching, however purposeful, cannot automatically lead to learning for the simple reason that learning is primarily a personal construct controlled by the individual learner". Hence, the teacher can at best create and maximize learning opportunities by involving the learners in the learning process because teaching and learning are essentially collaborative in nature. This is quite unlike what has always been traditionally considered sacrosanct - that teaching is basically the transmission of items of knowledge, and learning accretion of them.

iii. Innovative role of the teacher in task-based language teaching

In the current paradigm of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), which is basically an offshoot of communicative language teaching, learner-centeredness has found a new expression. The main conceptual basis for TBLT is, as Nunan (2004: 12) points out, "experiential learning" or "learning by doing". In this way, TBLT goes a long way in breaking down the hierarchies of the traditional classroom because the very act of trying to complete a communicative task involves planning and using strategies on the part of the learner. A communicative task has been defined by Nunan (2004: 4) as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form.

Hence, we see how in a learner-centred approach to language teaching, like TBLT, for instance, the role of the learner is significantly altered, as the learner is in the thick of all classroom activities getting a hands-on practical experience of using the language for communicative purposes. But does it mean that the role of the teacher in such a case is diminished? The answer is a firm "NO", because though the teacher is not really the focus here, the teacher performs an important "meditational" role (Feuerstein et al., 1991) which encompasses a wide range of responsibilities, albeit qualitatively different from the traditional role of the teacher as the disseminator of information. In teaching through mediation, the teacher becomes a true facilitator of learning for the language learners, guiding them through dialogic communication (Vygotsky, 1978) as they co-construct knowledge with the teacher. In this process, the teacher's role of the instructor who teaches new language to the learners is not shunned altogether, but it is restricted. The teacher is expected to be "a guide by the side", an advisor who advises his learners after monitoring their strengths and weaknesses. S/he also plans the tasks for the future and stimulates the learners' intellect by presenting new language and motivating them.

One important thing that needs to be understood is that however much teachers teach, they do not have any real control over a learner's natural process of acquiring a second or a foreign language and achieving communicative ability in it. Therefore, the teacher could at best create a classroom environment that is conducive to language learning. The communicative skills of the learners can be developed if they are motivated. Hence, teachers should facilitate this process by creating diverse communicative activities, especially intended for pair-work and group-work, which are interesting and challenging to the learners, as they progress in the path of acquiring and using the target language beyond the textbook and the classroom.

Conclusion

The innovative role of the facilitator that a teacher is supposed to play in a CLT or a TBLT classroom is absolutely different from the role of the controller and organizer of all activities that s/he plays in a traditional classroom. Facilitation involves empowering learners by giving them more initiative and responsibility. Whereas in the traditional teacher-fronted classroom, the learner is always under the firm control of the teacher with the latter determining who says what to whom and when, in a learner-centered one, the teacher (or rather, facilitator!) is expected to let go of some of his or her

power. In other words, learner-centeredness allows the learner to have greater say in the determination of the course of the lesson. However, though this sounds well in principle, in practice, especially, in the larger Indian context, it would be quite difficult for a teacher of English to play the innovative role of the facilitator given that our education system is strictly syllabus- and textbook-oriented and examination-driven. Moreover, our learners and teachers might not be ready for such innovative roles in attitudinal terms. Of course, this can be surmounted by orienting the learners and the teachers towards the benefits of the innovative practices. One more crucial issue that needs to be mentioned while advocating the case of innovative teacher roles is the importance of the social context in which the language classroom is situated. What I have suggested here is the overhauling of the power structure of the traditional classroom, and a re-conceptualization of the whole process of language learning. However, this "overhauling" and "re-conceptualization" should not jar on the cultural beliefs and assumptions of the teachers and learners regarding the modes of behavior in the language classroom. Hence, cultural patterns should be taken into account while considering the innovative roles of both teachers and learners in the language classroom.

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