

Teaching English in Class I

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Introduction

I was posted to the remote area of Diu, and was miles away from urban civilization and its benefits. When I was asked to teach Class I, I felt nonplussed. I was tired of everybody telling me, “teaching kids in this school is a fruitless job; if they manage to learn their a,b,c etc., it will be a wonder”. I began to wonder how I could teach children to read. As a child, I had been taught in a traditional manner, beginning with a year long practice of first the capital letters, then the small letters, followed by two and then three letter words, and finally short sentences. I had learnt many words by heart, and had been my teacher’s pet. But I still remember the pain in my hands and the boredom in my heart with hatred.

Teacher training

In my B.Ed. classes, I had been taught the importance of phonic drills which went on something like “bill, pill, mill, dill”. Then, we also had incremental drills such as “at, bat, it, bit”. We had been taught to create rhyming word lists such as “sat, cat”, or alliterative lists such as “sing a song”. It was like a parrot being taught how to speak. I wondered how all of that would lead to speaking or reading English in a meaningful way.

I wondered if the aim of learning and teaching was to teach how to write and read the alphabet, and a few words and sentences. Wasn’t the soul of learning lost in this meaningless repetition? I was in search of those tasks which

would engage and give children a joy of learning and discovery. I also wanted the children’s experience of learning to be meaningful and memorable.

The fateful day

At last the fateful day arrived, and I stood in front of an eager batch of children bursting with energy. It was very difficult to keep them in place, to stop them from fidgeting, and to listen

I told them many stories, and the stories would be woven around their lives, their mother and their father and fishing nets and fish. These stories were mostly bilingual, with Hindi syntax and English vocabulary. They also contained phrases in dialogues that were in English, for example “Come here”, said the fisherman’s wife. In the evenings, most of us would meet at the seashore, and go for a walk, where the sea, the fish and the fisherman’s wife would come alive. The children also told me stories of sighting of dolphins, the return of their fathers from long fishing trips, a marriage in the community, etc. I often retold these stories to them in English.

to me for a while. So I decided to listen to them. I just sat down among them and listened. Soon, we formed a circle and sang some songs. Most of the songs were in Hindi, which was children’s school language, and two songs were in English. The children tried to follow the songs, but most of them lost interest.

Then we sat down, and I told them that I had some colours—real water colours—for them. This triggered their interest immediately. We talked about what they would like to draw, what they had seen outside, what they had seen inside the classroom, etc. Most of this conversation took place in Hindi, but I surreptitiously sneaked in English words which they knew and understood, and some of which they did not. They seemed to understand the meaning from the context. I asked them what they would like to draw; some wanted to draw their house, others wanted to draw fruits, and it went on like this. We decided that we would give two names to each drawing, one that they would choose, and one that I would choose. And I would tell them the name I had chosen.

This interested them, and so I made groups and made them sit around a box of paints, water and paper. I went around, and sat with each group while they drew and painted. We chatted about colours. The words “red, blue and green” were discussed. Soon I was telling them in English to bring water from the tap, close the door, try green here, mix red and blue. They did not seem to notice the difference between the two languages. They were so engrossed in the task that they responded to me automatically; some children even started using English names for the colours.

Later, when their painting sheets were ready, I wrote in English the names of the things they had drawn on the sheets. Each child brought her picture to me; we chatted about the picture, wrote the names both in Hindi and English, and clipped the pictures to a clip board. Everybody looked at each other’s pictures, commented upon them and talked about them. We decided that we would talk about the pictures, and say which ones we liked. So children talked about the pictures, and when they asked me to comment, I said things like, “This should have been a little greener, red looks better”.

I then wrote down on the board under each picture the child’s name, what they had drawn. They started telling me the names of the things—some in Hindi and some in English. It happened quite spontaneously, and I too wrote them down spontaneously. Some children had drawn biscuits that they had taken during breakfast, others had drawn their houses, and some had drawn bananas and balloons that we had brought just the other day for our class picnic.

Every day we would do something similar. Sometimes, we would fill our water bottles with clean water from the tap, and then name each bottle, so there was a big bottle, a small bottle, etc. These names remained on the bottles for a short while, but they were etched on the minds

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of the students with permanent markers! And we would sit down and talk about them. Soon most of our talk was in English!

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Now, I started bringing big books to school, as our walls were chock-a-block with the children's work. We had named a lot of things in English, and put up their pictures on the walls. The pictures, with their name labels, hung like kites on the criss-cross wires, singing in the wind that blew from the sea. We often pointed to them and talked about how they looked, and removed some to replace them with better versions. Of course, the names of the things were written by me, but the children had started writing their own names, and very proudly too. We often sat under the banyan tree in the yard, reading the big book about the little mermaid or the fisherman's wife, with children drawing pictures in the sand.

Of course, I had to teach the alphabet, and it was fun to discover them in the books that we had read. More often than not, the children could read an entire word once they had located the alphabet in the text. We had read the books so many times that it evoked instant recognition.

All this happened when we started bringing to the class bottle labels, pamphlets, shampoo sachets, and empty packets of *kurkure*. We looked at them and read the names on the labels, and sometimes the instructions too on them. We stuck them in a large album that I had created out of old chart papers and covers, and the children wrote under them. The spellings were often funny; they were invented spellings and the letters were all awry, but they were all written by the children. I would sit down and ask them what they were writing. Each one was so special.

Conclusion

Thus, we started on our journey of literacy—a memorable journey filled with fun and lots of hard work, but the children were with me. Our bonds cemented with the glue of love.

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