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ACTIVITY BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Learning a new language is always fun when the student is interested. Traditional way of language learning may not be applicable in today's classrooms where the teacher teaches the same old grammar based language lessons without any scope for practicing the language in real time. This traditional language teaching brings aversion to the target language. This paper focuses on activity based language learning and activities that would help keep the classrooms active and interesting. It also outlines the role of a faculty member in these activity based classrooms. This will in turn reduce the teacher talk time and increase the students talk time, thus giving the students with more practice time. Activity based language learning is the need of the hour in Indian classrooms where the self-learning components of language such as poetry, novels, essays and non-detailed get more priority than the spoken aspect. The result is very obvious that students who had studied in English medium throughout their school days are not able to talk in English confidently. Even if they talk most of them make plenty of mistakes in their basic sentence structure and this is due to lack of correction. Lack of correction is directly linked to lack of practice. This paper suggests that Comprehending essays, poetries and novels could be given as self-learning components with a comprehension at the end of the activity as an assessment and the regular classrooms should accommodate more activities that would give space for the productive skills and this will definitely create more participatory classrooms as against the traditional one way, book based classrooms.

Keywords: Activities, language learning, group tasks, second language.

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Introduction

It was always a puzzle for people in higher educational institutions and employers alike about why students who had learnt English for 15 years are not able to speak English confidently and without grammatical mistakes. The reason may be because English is taught only as a subject in the schools where the possibility for speaking is very minimum. The classrooms are limited to the traditional one way teaching which kills the interest in learning English as a language. Everyone is able to score more than 80% of marks in schools and colleges but when asked to speak for three minutes on a given topic on their own they are not. This may be due to various reasons including lack of such practice in the school days.

Activity-based learning may be defined as a method of instruction, where activities of different types, suitable and relevant to specific subjects are integrated seamlessly into the regular instructional materials and methods to involve students in the teaching – learning or instructional processes and engage them fruitfully (Suydam and Higgins, 1977). According to this definition, activity based learning involves different kinds of activities relevant to the subject are performed by the students on a regular basis to bring in participatory learning.

Traditional programmes of education and training usually put tremendous emphasis on content (Tan, 2003). It was always about completing the syllabus and the syllabus will have all the good to know areas rather than need to know aspects. So every teacher will be under tremendous pressure to complete the prescribed syllabus without spending much time whether the students have understood them or not except through the exams. Before the students digest whatever they received they will be dumped with new information.

Williams and Burden (1997) claim that socio-cultural theory advocates that education should be concerned “not just with theories of instruction, but with learning to learn, developing skills and strategies to continue to learn, with making learning experiences meaningful and relevant to the individual, with developing and growing as a whole person”. Of course the definition of education is very clear but it’s only in theory. Education should teach the students to learn to learn but at present students are taught to study and score marks, forced to gather knowledge rather than developing skills. It provides same amount of knowledge for everyone rather than catering to the individual needs. It focuses only in a particular subject rather than developing a complete human being with the knowledge connected with that subject.

Wertsch 1985 claims that the secret of effective learning lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skills and knowledge. There will be different students in the same class. There will be mixed ability students who will have different learning speeds which our education system hasn’t taken into account. There will be students from different family backgrounds, boards of studies, economic backgrounds and social backgrounds. Teachers consider everyone equally in terms of learning and performance. In this set-up most of the slow learners are compared against the good performers and branded as good for nothing.

“The thinking required while attending class [traditionally has been] low level comprehension that goes from the ear to the writing hand and leaves the mind untouched” (Dodge, 1998). Our system has only reading comprehensions and essay writing session during the regular class hours. This leaves everyone get a pass in English but struggle in spoken aspect.

It’s really important that the learners are motivated and counseled to make sure that they take charge of their learning and development. In current scenario all the schools focus on scoring marks and the aim is always 12th standard. They pressurize the students to go for rote learning and bring good results to the institution, thus leaving no scope for individual attention.

In contrast, the success of ABL is to make students feel responsible for their learning and to support their own individual development (Cohen, 1990). This paradigm has been changed in the newer methodology of activity – based learning which was piloted in a few schools in Chennai and in now being implemented in the entire state of Tamil Nadu. Here the teacher is considered as the facilitator and the students are self-learning through the medium of a detailed array of learning cards (Anandalakshmi, 2007). Of course activity based learning has happened with all the subjects except English because it also involves the ability of the teacher to conduct such activity based learning. This is again true with the government schools but the private schools, especially the matriculation schools produce only mark scoring machines, thus leaving the students as bookworms.

Many educationists such as De et al., (1996) have raised quality issues in our education system such as poor infrastructure facilities, motivation and commitment of teachers, respect for the child’s time in school. It’s really a concern that the present education system has got poor infrastructure where anyone can start a school if they have few buildings at their disposal. Very few schools have the required infrastructure that the curriculum demands and they are very costly which the common man cannot afford. Teaching has become a job rather than a profession and as a result the job is done but the human natures such as motivation and

commitment is given least important. This may be because the teachers are forced to produce results only in terms of marks and pass percentage.

Previous trends in teaching the English language, particularly to second or foreign language students, have included grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual approach, communicative language teaching and task-based learning (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). All the methods mentioned by Larsen-Freeman & Anderson was not bearing fruit and was not able to bring in more participation, so activity based learning with the right amount of feedback started gaining momentum.

In a recent research in ELT in Malaysia, Ting, Mahadhir and Chang (2010) proposed role play as a viable alternative to the traditional method of teaching, when they found their students showing improvements in proficiency towards the end of the course using this approach in their teaching. Role play is discussed in this paper as one of the easiest and important pair or group activity. It's true that students would like to work with their fellow students which they will find comfortable.

This paper proposes few activities that would keep the classroom alive and give enough practicing time to the students. It also suggests few error correction techniques and peer tutoring techniques that will strengthen the language learning further.

The following activities are proposed in this paper for bringing in active learning. All these activities are implemented for a single class by the author of this paper and found to be useful, interesting and interactive. Activities are grouped into three categories, Group, Pair and individual. Some activities could be done both in group, pair or even individually.

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|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Story Telling | - Group & Individual |
| 2. Skit | - Group |
| 3. Debate | - Group |
| 4. Group Discussion | - Group |
| 5. Adzap | - Group |
| 6. Case study | - Group, Pair & Individual |
| 7. Interview | - Group, Pair & Individual |
| 8. Role Play | - Pair |
| 9. Just A Minute | - Individual |
| 10. Picture Description | - Individual |

Proposed Activities in a new dimension

The following activities are proposed in this paper for bringing in active learning, **Story Telling, Skit, Debate, Group Discussion, ADZAP, Role Play, Just A Minute, Picture Description, Case study, Interview and Adzap**. All these activities are tested in the author's classroom and found out to bring in more participation and kept the classrooms alive. Although these are already existing activities, the way they are administered has been given a new dimension.

There are also few correction techniques the facilitator can employ in during different stages of the activity in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication. **On the spot correction** where the facilitator corrects the student as soon as the students makes a mistake. **Delayed correction** where the facilitator waits till the activity gets over. **End of class feedback** where the facilitator notes down corrections from all the teams for that particular session and shares it at the end. **Peer correction** where the facilitator assigns few students by giving them the rubrics to provide feedback. At times, the facilitator picks up different students randomly and asks them to provide feedback. **Individual feedback** where the facilitator, instead of giving the feedback in the classroom in front of everyone, calls the student individually and shares it or write it in the student's note book. **Group feedback** where the facilitator gives feedback to an entire team and not to an individual student.

1. Story Telling

Story telling is one of the amazing and interesting activities a classroom can have. It will not only improve the student's language skills but also his/her creativity. This activity will also improve the student's presence of mind as they have to carry the story over from the previous person.

It's a group activity where 4 to 6 students are asked to sit in front of the class in a single row close to each other. The facilitator will announce that all those students sitting in front of the class are going to tell one single story. It's like many authors writing one story together. The students are asked not to tell any existing stories and the chances are less that they will tell an existing story because there are 4 to 6 people as authors. Each one's version of the story will have new twist and turn according to their imaginations. Each one is asked to tell at least two sentences and maximum five sentences at a time when their turn comes within 15 seconds. Students are encouraged to introduce more characters to make the story interesting and strengthen the plot. The activity will run until the facilitator feels that everyone has taken at least 10 turns. The story will be left without giving a proper ending that's the climax to the story. On a regular activity without much time interval between the participants, it would take 15 minutes to complete the entire story. The facilitator can provide feedback both for language and the activity as a whole.

All the other students are requested to follow the story carefully because they will be picked randomly and asked to brief the story in regular intervals. All the students except the participants of the activity will be asked to write the story and bring it to the next session. Stories with best ending or climax will be chosen and read in the class thus recognizing the best stories and the students.

2. Skit

Everyone likes skit and the extended version of it is present today in the forms of drama and movies. Skit can be a follow-up activity of the story telling activity because we have got the stories already from the story telling activity. One thing to be added is the dialogues in the story. It's also a group activity.

The class will be divided into different groups with the required number of characters. Students will be asked to prepare a script with the necessary dialogues and scenes. The same story will be given to all the groups because the way students construct their scripts will be different. Students will be given enough time to sit in their respective teams to practice their skit before performing it in front of the class.

Students will be asked to bring their own costumes as the skit will be more interesting with costumes and materials that could be used in the skit. Each team will be given a maximum of 10 minutes to present their skits. Feedback will be given by the rest of the team and the facilitator on language, performance and the dialogue construction.

3. Debate

Debate is one of the vibrant activities that would bring lots of voluntary participation because the activity is based on argument. It could be conducted for the entire class by dividing it to two groups or two groups with 4 to 6 students per group. This activity can also be conducted between two sections of the same standard if it is school and same year if it is college. A debatable topic such as "which is best, hostel life or day scholar life" could be given in. One group will talk for the topic and the other group will talk against the topic. The students will be asked to make notes of whatever they like to talk in the first round because the second round will be always arguing on someone else's talk.

This activity is considered to be the best because everyone likes to argue and until they feel that they have convinced the other person, they will keep talking. This activity will also bring more funny anecdotes which will entertain the whole class thus keeping the energy and enthusiasm till the end. Most of the classes when this activity was conducted, the facilitator has to stop the activity for want of time.

All the students who were not participating in the activity could be asked to summarize the entire discussion and present it in a form of a write-up. The write-ups thus submitted could be archived for future reference and a copy could even be kept in the library in the reference section. The facilitator can provide feedback at the end for both verbal and non-verbal communication. The feedback could be a consolidated feedback and at times could be individual if any students ask.

4. Group Discussion

Group discussion is considered to be a mature and very standard activity. It will best suit adult students considering its seriousness. The number of participants could be decided by the facilitator and could range from 4 to 8. The number shouldn't exceed more than eight because it will create a sense of repetition. Topics could be anything of current affairs that is connected to the society. This will ensure that the students follow

the society and share their opinion on the happenings ranging from politics to sports. It's not only about talking about the society but also about learning to respect other people's point of view too.

Group discussion can be conducted in a different manner in order to give opportunity to everyone in the classroom. The students will be divided in groups of 6 and each team will have a coordinator who will make sure everyone talks and everyone talks in English and a reporter who will make notes of the discussion and brief the team at the end of the discussion. 15 minutes will be given for this step. The facilitator will go around, sit with each team and brief about the important areas the students will be assessed in a GD. The facilitator will observe the activity for a while and provide feedback. This stage will be bit noisy because at least 8 people will be talking at the same time, of course in their respective teams. So the students need to focus on the discussion in their team, alternatively the students can be taken out in an open space or a big hall, so that each team will have considerable distance.

After 15 minutes the facilitator will call the students back to their places. In second stage one from each team will sit for a common GD. Another 15 minutes is allotted for the common GD. The person from each team should not be the coordinator or the writer but someone else. This time the students who sit for the common GD will have more points to share as it will be the collective points of the respective teams. Besides, each team might have discussed the topic in a new dimension. At the end of the activity, other students who are not part of the GD can add any point that was discussed in their teams but their team mates missed. The facilitator provides feedback at the end of the session.

This activity will help the students to put forth their opinions assertively and disagree with others politely. It will teach them leadership qualities such as coordination and encouraging others to participate. It will also prepare them well for the GD round in their placement process.

5. ADZAP

Adzap is yet another group activity which will be very interesting and engaging. This activity is about developing an advertisement for a given product considering all the factors such as price, slogan etc. first round students will be given a product and they will be asked to develop an ad with a slogan in groups of 4. One will be assigned or asked to volunteer to lead the team. 20 minutes will be given for the first round. During the second round students will be asked to enact the advertisement for the given product. Each team will get 2 minutes to present their advertisement.

This activity will help the students improve their team work, communication skills and creativity. It will give ample opportunity for the students to talk in front of a group and come out of stage fear. It will also make them engage well in teams.

6. Case Study

Case study is an activity where the students will choose a problem area, conduct a field research and submit a report. This could be given as a group, pair or individual activity. Students will be assigned with a societal problem and a week's time will be given. They will go to the problem area, talk to the people concerned, check the already existing reports on the same problem and prepare their report. The presentation could be done through a chart, PPT or even as a skit although a separate report for 10 pages should be submitted. The report will contain the data collected and analyzed, photographs of people interviewed and recommendations and solutions for the chosen problem.

Case study is an excellent activity because even the problems in the schools and colleges can also be part of it, thus the students can come up with useful solutions to the existing problem in the campus and make the administration or management know about them. This will improve their confidence level in communicating with the higher officials and motivate them to investigate more problems around them and report it in a professional manner. They can also send the reports to local news papers to get it published which will in turn boost their confidence.

7. Interview

Interview could be an individual activity where one student meets someone and interview them or a pair activity where one student interviews another or even a group activity where group of students interview one student. This activity will demand the participants to prepare enough questions for all formats (Individual, Pair

or Group) of the interview. This activity will build the confidence level of the students in asking questions in a formal manner and building questions from the interviewed person's answers.

In individual activity, each student will be asked to choose someone of their choice and prepare enough questions about their life, profession and opinions. They will then get an appointment with the person they want to interview and meet them. Once the activity is over, they will type all the questions and answers and submit an interview report. It's also suggested to record the entire interview to make sure the interview is authentic.

In pair interview, two students will form a team and each one will interview the other and this could even happen in the classroom.

In group interview, one student will be interviewed by 8 to 10 students. It's very similar to the news reporters who try to interview a celebrity at a given time. The interviewed student will be asked to act as if he or she is a celebrity (i.e. Sachin Tendulkar) and the students who will interview the celebrity student will prepare enough questions to ask.

8. Role Play

It's a very familiar activity which is used in practicing conversations in language classrooms. It could be a pair or group activity where each person gets a role and acts accordingly. For example, if the scenario is a restaurant, the roles will be restaurant owner, supervisor, chefs, waiters and customers. Unlike other activities which require lots of pre-task preparations, role play is a spontaneous activity where the conversation is expected to take place without much preparation because most of the scenarios are familiar to the students.

If it's a pair activity, the students will take different roles such as friends, teacher – student, father-son etc. This activity will not only make the students understand about the pros and cons of different roles in reality but also help them frame questions and answer them in a social context. The facilitator provides feedback in terms of language and the activity.

9. Just a Minute

Just a Minute is yet another interesting activity. It's an individual activity and the time required is one minute per student as the name of the activity suggests. The facilitator will project plenty of topics such as poverty, transportation etc. on the screen and the students will be asked to pick one topic and talk for a minute. The topic will be given one minute before they talk and the one minute is considered as preparation time.

This activity can form part of the assessment process because it'll check the readiness to speak, originality of the talk and flow of the language. One important characteristic of this activity is that it will build the confidence level of the students as it is an individual activity. Usually, students feel comfortable in a group activity but in an individual activity, they may feel shy or reluctant to stand alone in front of the whole class.

The facilitator can provide a solid feedback at the end of the activity on aspects like content, eye-contact, language and body language. These rubrics could also be given to few other students who could act as the first hand assessors who could also provide feedback and the faculty can enhance the feedback further and give a score.

10. Picture Description

Picture description is an individual activity which is very interesting and provides more scope for language practice. The facilitator will give one picture to each student or project one picture per student and ask the students to describe the picture. The descriptions will include whatever is in the picture, the activities that are going on and the student's inference about those activities.

This activity will help the students practice their tenses and learn more new words. It will help the students to improve their creativity. It will also help the students to write stories out of the pictures that are presented. The description can be presented through a talk or write-up. The facilitator provides feedback at the end.

Conclusion

As the generation and their attitudes change, the need for innovative practices in education sector becomes unavoidable and the need of the hour. There is definitely a generation gap between the teachers and the students but the ones who are reluctant to update themselves are the teaching community by failing to understand that yesterday's teaching methodology will never suit today's students. Technology plays an

important role in changing the attitude of the students, so unless the classrooms are interactive and participatory learning is not going to happen. Students will study and scoring marks but the struggle will continue in real life.

The proposed activities will definitely keep the classrooms interesting and maximize learning for long term. Theoretical sessions are going to be one way and boring but activity based classrooms will change this scenario of one way, teacher oriented classrooms to student oriented, participatory classrooms where the teacher will become a facilitator who will run the activity, provide feedback and assistance wherever necessary.

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