

Generating ideas – the importance of thinking in language production

A reflection on how children of third grade started to describe and create conversation between the characters in any picture they come across.

In earlier ways of teaching language, we would have a pre- decided idea or word in our mind and we would be asking questions targeting this fixed response. Students are expected to come out with the exact idea/ correct answer and we would start the lesson from there. In this process we were actually cutting off the other ideas which get generated in their minds while posing the question.

I would like to present two illustrative practices:

Practice 1: Teacher poses a question: ‘What game do you play in your free time?’ Teacher expects ‘swing’ as the correct answer. Students’ may come out with multiple responses: ‘rolling and chasing the tyre’, ‘spinning top’, ‘playing snake and ladder’, ‘hide and seek’, chasing, pallangkuzhi...’

Expecting the word ‘swing’, the teacher asks a second question: ‘What do you see in the park?’

Once again multiple responses come: ‘Ice cream, children, trees, flowers,’

Practice 2 – Teacher shows a rose and says, ‘This is a rose.’ Students start thinking about several things associated with the rose. Many ideas (mental texts) related to the rose get generated in their minds. For example, ‘I have seen a rose in a temple.’ Some of them may be thinking about the ‘Three Roses’ ad, or may be thinking about other things like, rose milk, rose powder or other flowers and materials in rose colour. The students will reply as per their understanding. The target sentence, ‘This is a rose’ is not registered through

this activity in their minds.

We were following practices like the above and couldn’t locate where the problem was. After I attended the Acquiring Competence in English (ACE) programme conducted by Dr. Anandan organized by Azim Premji Foundation I was able to sense the problems involved in the teaching of English and those related to the children’s ways of understanding.

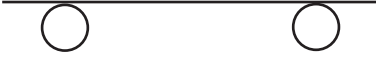
In both the practices mentioned above, students’ ideas are not taken into account in the discussion. There will be only one correct answer and once it comes out there is no need for others to think further. There is a gap between how children think and what the teacher thinks about how children think.

As human beings our mind tries to understand new things with its prior experience; new things get accommodated in the minds in addition to the previous experience.

Every student is unique in his thinking capabilities, so when we pose a question, there will be divergent ideas generated in the classroom. When these ideas are taken up, they will have the ownership of those ideas, words/sentences. These ideas can be fruitfully capitalized for facilitating language acquisition. We can generate ideas with the help of pictures taken from the text book or from other sources. The interaction that takes place in the class can be streamlined to create descriptions, conversations, narratives and poems.

I would like to reflect on what I experienced in the classes 1 and 3 while trying out discourse oriented pedagogy.

Class 1



I drew a part of a car and asked students, 'What is this?' (to identify the figure), one said 'frog', another one said, 'mickey mouse,' and a third one said, 'car'. I completed the diagram step by step and asked the question again. All of them answered, 'car'.

I wrote (under the picture) 'This is a car'. And I coloured it in red. Then I asked, 'What is this?' Students said, 'red car'.

Now I wrote 'This is a red car'.

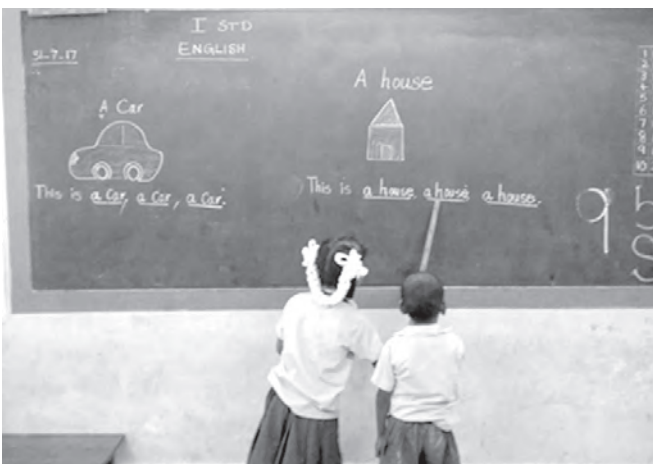
Similarly, I asked students to draw things around them which they liked and I helped them to write the names of those objects in English.

But we can't draw the picture of every object and generate sentences in a similar pattern. Instead, we can go with a picture that depicts a few objects and ask questions to elicit ideas related to each object. I was able to work out a few sentences with the picture in the lesson, "A Happy Child".

This is a tree. The tree is green.

This is a house. The house is red.

This is a girl. The girl is happy.



This discourse method helped students to understand the concept very clearly and now they are able to speak, read and write about objects on their own.

Class 3

When I started the whole class description for class 3 with a picture, all the students tried to say something about the picture. So there was a lot of noise in the class. Then I fixed some ground rules: "Those who want to say something, please raise your hands. No shouting. All of you will get a get chance to say things."

Initially, the students were able to say only the things/objects which they could see in the picture. I wrote whatever they said on the blackboard. Whenever I mentioned the word later they were able to read it correctly. They also knew the owner of the word.

Eg. green tree, beautiful butterfly, happy students, three boys, two girls, hot sun

Once all the students gave their words, I framed a few questions on a particular thing (for example, butterfly)

T : 'Where is the butterfly?

(Students answered in chores)

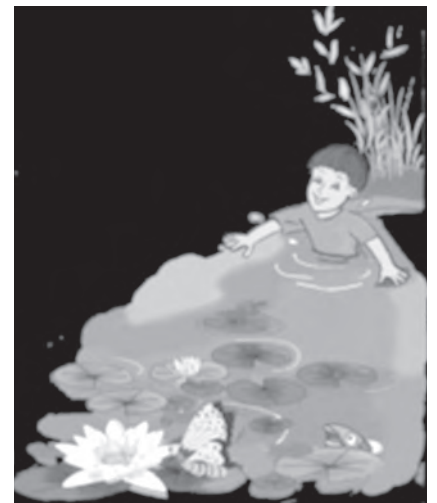
T: 'Senchudar, can you show me the butterfly?'

(S e n c h u d a r pointed at the butterfly in the picture.)

T: 'What is the butterfly doing?'

S: 'Flower sitting.'

T: 'Is it "flower sitting" or "sitting on the flower"?'



My interaction with students went on in this manner and I was able to elicit a few answers from them. I wrote them on the blackboard. After that we tried to figure out some actions going in the picture. Some were able to state the actions in English and some shared ideas in their mother tongue. I had to negotiate with the students for the English equivalent of the Tamil word. I wrote the fragment of the sentence which the students said, on the black board. They were able to read the sentences because they were generated by them.

Here is the transcript of the questions and the responses:

T: What is the older girl doing? - (watering the plant)

What is the boy in red doing? - bird ku theene vaikaran (feeding the bird)

What is the boy in blue doing? - Kuzhi thondaran (digging the ground)

I asked the students to frame a sentence with "three boys" and "two girls"

They were trying to frame the sentence; I gave them some time for this. Then I gave them an example, "There are two pencils and three pens."

Now students said, "There are three boys and two girls in the garden."

There was a small issue I faced in the classroom. The students are able to generate the ideas in mother tongue, sometimes the ideas which they framed were long sentences. I found it difficult to translate them into English. We have to expect these kind of unexpected situations in our classroom.

Improvement in learning

Now my class III students are able to write a description/conversation about a picture on their own.

In my classroom, there is a picture that shows Raju drawing something and Bheem looking at it.

The students generated a conversation between Raju and Bheem (The cartoon characters).

Bheem : Raju, what are you doing?



Raju : I am drawing a forest.

Bheem: Your drawing is beautiful.

Raju : Thank you.

They can also identify the errors in the sentences.

Eg. 1. The boy catching the butterfly.

While editing the description, I asked there about the missing word in the sentence. They were able to identify the word 'is'.

Eg. 2. There is two boys in the garden.

The students identified the error and replaced the word 'is' with 'are.'

The low proficient learners too can read the sentences which they generated. Unknowingly they could read the word graphically, a process that helped them to read the sentences.

I now clearly understand that the role of the teacher is merely that of a facilitator. We need to

create an environment for learning and facilitate the process. We should also elicit the answers from the learners which will reduce the teacher's. Generating ideas through interaction is the most important process in language learning. I can see a lot of changes in their way of reading and understanding the concept.

We organized an expo to showcase the learning outcomes of the students. We offered an open invitation to all the teachers in the school.

The other teachers understood that the ACE programme was working for our students. I also suggested them to try the same in their classrooms.

As the discourse method is working well with my students, I would like to continue the same in my forthcoming classes. Now, we are preparing the transaction modules for each class, for the prose lessons, poems and exercises in the textbook.



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