

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CUMMUNICATION SKILLS

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English has come to be recognized as the most important language all over the world. No other language has ever been spoken by so many people in different parts of the world. It is also used as a second language in many countries for certain official, social, commercial and educational activities. In fact, people with good knowledge of English have an edge over others. Whether it is a market place or some government office, conversation in English gives an added advantage to a person. The prospects of employment for a person knowing English are bright anywhere whether at home or abroad. Now-a-days it has become essential to be proficient in English for availing new employment opportunities.

Language is often called a 'skill' rather than a 'subject'. Though a skill does not altogether preclude intellectual activity, it is more a matter of 'doing' than 'knowing'. In learning the mother-tongue, the first skill that a child acquires is the ability to understand the spoken world-the skill of listening. Then he tries to reproduce the sound sequences to express his own desires and needs and thereby acquires the skill of speaking. for an illiterate person these two basic skills constitute his language ability. The skills of reading and w riting are matters of literacy.

But the purpose is to be literate in the language so reading and writing are included as basic language skills in the school curriculum. Language is thus a complex skill comprising of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Today, teaching of English is not confined to the teaching of literature and basic skills of language, it involves the teaching of spoken English and development of communication skills among the students.

The present paper intends to highlight different dimensions of English teaching with greater emphasis on teaching and learning English language skills.

Listening:

Language is primarily speech and knowing a language is often defined as the ability to understand and speak the language. Development of other skills, namely reading and writing would be comparatively easy it they are based on sound oral function. to acquire the skills of listening say of English, a learner needs to recognize the speech sounds, lexical meanings of words, understand stress and intonation etc. Intensive and 'Extensive' listening can impart a good car-training to the students. During 'Intensive' listening the students are trained in detailed comprehension of meaning and identification of particular features of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. During 'Extensive' listening they are trained in gathering information or enjoying stories, plays or poems etc. they can be encouraged to listen to radio programmes and watch movies and narrate in the class what they have heard or seen.

Speaking:

Though listening and speaking go hand-in-hand, it is the latter which makes the learner more active in the learning process. Therefore, it is necessary to provide maximum opportunity to the pupils to speak the language. As a matter of fact, in some advanced countries the effectiveness of a lesson is judged by the ratio of the Pupil speaking Time (PST) to the Teacher speaking Time (TST) in a lesson period. The greater the PST the more effective the lesson is likely to be.

In India, especially in colleges, where there are large classes, it is not possible to impart oral training to the students. In doing so other classes may get disturbed. In such large classes the students in the last row may keep repeating the wrong things. A more effective way to organise speech work in a large class is to divide the class into groups. One of the groups can be engaged in oral drill while the other groups write down the sentences spoken by the first group. After some time the roles can be reversed so that both the groups can practice speaking and writing alternatively. At the same time it is necessary to grade activities according to age-groups and the level of mastery attained by the pupils since the activities which are useful for beginners may not be so for the senior pupils. The teacher has to make this selection on the basis of his/ her own knowledge of the class. With increasing mastery over language the pupils should be given more and more freedom in their use of the language. The most controlled kind of drills are the imitation drills, recitation of rhymes and jingles etc., and as such, they are suitable for the beginners. On the other hand free use of language such as debate, story telling, free conversation etc. is suitable only for the advanced pupils.

Teaching individual sounds is easy but the teaching of characteristics stress, rhythm and intonation patterns is a challenge. Considering the importance of teaching stress, rhythm and intonation, the teacher should consult a good pronouncing dictionary and master at least some basic patterns in intonation. If the pupils are taught these patterns from the very beginning, they would not find them as difficult as they would otherwise find them to be.

Reading:

Like other language skills, reading is also a complex skill involving a number of simultaneous operations. As far as definition is concerned, to read is to grasp language patterns from their written representation. The process may be broadly divided into three stages i.e. recognition, structuring and interpretation. At the 'recognition' stage the learner simply recognises the graphic counter parts of the phonological items. At the second stage i.e., 'structuring' the learner sees the syntactic relationships of the items and thereby understands the structural meanings of the syntactic units. At the stage of interpretation which is the highest level in the process of reading the learner comprehends the significance of a word, a phrase or a sentence in the overall context of the entire discourse. This is the stage at which a person really reads for information or for pleasure.

The task of teaching '**how to read**' can be divided into different parts as:

Reading Aloud:

Reading aloud means speaking what is written. Reading is an art, a skill. Not all the native speakers of a language are able to read aloud effectively. It is an effective means of testing a student's ability to read in general. In reading aloud the student is confronted with written sentences that he has not spoken immediately before and with sentences which he has never spoken but whose elements he can speak.

Intensive and Extensive Reading:

In 'intensive' reading, the students read not only for detailed comprehension of meaning but also for mastering the structures and vocabulary. In 'extensive' reading the pupils read for information or simply for the pleasure of reading.

The ultimate aim of 'how to read' is to enable the students to comprehend written English without the help of a teacher. The amount of exposure to the language during college hours is too meager to learn a language. Such an exposure, at the best, can only lay the basic foundation and show how language can be learnt. The rest of the work, including the expansion of vocabulary must be done by the student independently. Apart from the dictionary, the teacher should recommend a small list of suitable books on English grammar and usage and insist upon the students to use them to resolve their doubts and difficulties.

The habit of reading newspapers and journals in English is also very useful. This will teach the students not only the art of extracting information from written materials but also keep them abreast with current usage in English.

Writing:

To write is to put down the graphic symbols that represent a language one understands, so that others can read these symbols if they know the language and the graphic representation. Writing is often regarded as the visual representation of speech. Speech and writing are used in different situations and hence they serve different social functions. There are not many situations where there is a free choice between speech and writing; in most cases the user is obliged to use only one of these two modes of communication.

As in the case of other skills, we may say that a person who can express himself in writing English can write the letters of the alphabets at a reasonable speed; spell the words correctly; recall appropriate words and put them in sentences; use appropriate punctuation marks; link sentences etc. A student who knows the language and how to represent it in script must be taught to present his information in a format acceptable for the occasion e.g. an informal friendly letter or a business communication, a report to the teacher, or an article for publication etc.

Since the object of writing is to convey information with a particular point of view, clarity and effectiveness are desirable. To improve spellings the teacher should have some idea of the process of acquiring correct spellings. Various devices can be used for fixing the spellings of troublesome words e.g. copying, focusing on trouble spots and use of mnemonics. There are numerous language games that can improve a pupil's writing ability.

Communication Skills:

Communication presupposes two or more people talking to each other. To talk may revolve around something which is taking place at the moment, has already taken place or is likely to take place. In a real act of communication the situation or setting, the language and the cultural themes are integrated. Suppose a child meets another child in the corridor (setting) and says (using the sounds, grammatical patterns and words of the language), "Let's have lunch together". Neither the speaker nor the listener stops to think of the setting, language, or cultural aspect as a separate entity. The three get blended for understanding the meaning.

Communication skills are those skills through which ideas and opinions are clearly and effectively communicated to others. These skills may be best acquired if the learner is exposed to language through active interaction with teachers, parents and peer groups. Lack of self-confidence on the part of the learner acts as a stumbling-block in the way of communicating effectively. Therefore, shaking off his shyness, the student should be encouraged to come out with what is in his mind. A good deal of communicative skills in English can be acquired by students if they are encouraged to use language for the act of dramatization in the classroom. Simple stories, short plays, poems etc. can be dramatised to overcome hesitation. Dramatisation enables the teacher to communicate an experience to his class by acting it out with suitable gestures, movements and facial expressions. The technique of dramatisation can be used with profit while narrating popular folk and fairy tales. The teacher can use a number of pictures or real objects to which he can point out at the appropriate time. A teacher will have to use all the dramatic ability at his command to make the story come alive. The stories can be got repeated by competent students with a similar dramatic artistry.

As a part of conversational responses the students are required to use expressions of time, dates, normal courtesies, expressions of gratitude, regret, appreciation, polite forms of request, instructions, agreement or disagreement. These expressions have to be acquired for effective communication.

Hence the role of a teacher is very important in the process of teaching and learning English language skills. The role is not only confined to the teaching of literature and the basic language skills but also to help the students develop communicative skills by maintaining a fine balance between literary English as well as the requirement of the ever expanding global market. Thus to make students competent in the use of English language, the need is to make teaching interesting and to motivate the students to learn and master these basic skills of language.

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