

METHODS ADOPTED IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN INDIA

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Abstract

This article presents a study investigating the teaching methods adopted in teaching English language to young learners in India. The findings suggest that teachers are limited in the choice of methods being adopted in class due to a range of constraints which exist within classrooms. However, teachers are using what Prabhu (1990) refers to as their 'sense of plausibility' to determine what works well for young learners and are relatively involved in a principled eclectic approach to teaching, using various methods that exist within the field of English language teaching. Teachers recognise that methods and approaches adopted should create a supportive learning environment and reflect the students' needs and requirements in order to lead to successful language learning.

Introduction and terminology

English has become a core subject at all educational levels in India and increasing numbers of students are learning the language due to the recognition that knowledge of English is a passport to a better career, advanced knowledge, and communication with the world at large (Thirumalai, 2002). As a result, parents are more interested in placing their child into an English-medium school, (a school where subjects are taught in the English language, rather than in a local language school.)

The field of English language teaching is to some extent continually innovating and re-examining existing methods. In the past 50 years alone, English language teaching has gone through a whirlwind of transitions in its methodology (Pica, 2000). There has also been increasing recognition that students have different ways of learning, and that many different learning and teaching methods can be effective (Baker and Westrup, 2000). With regards to the teaching of young learners, a number of methods have been observed in language classrooms. The grammar-translation method had, and probably retains, fairly widespread use around the world in that it treats language as an academic object of study. As has already been identified, the direct method also enjoys widespread use but so do methods such as the Total Physical Response method which Harmer (2001) identifies as being frequently employed with young learners, particularly at beginner levels. Ur (1991) points out that young learners tend to be highly motivated, so it is not so much the method that engages them as the actual tasks and activities, which is why discussions around teaching young learners often focus more on the use of visual and aural stimuli and the use of stories and games as being of major importance. With regard to the teaching of English in India, Thirumalai (2002) identified that the traditional approach to English teaching in India is recognised as teacher-centred and textbook driven, with a lack of interaction between teachers and students. This study, through the use of classroom observations and semi-structured interviews carried out in India with a range of English language teachers, examines the methods that they have adopted and their rationales for the use of these methods.

The terminology used to discuss the areas under discussion in this article can vary from writer to writer so for the purposes of this article, method is defined following Richards and Rodgers (2001, p.20) in that a method determines 'objectives, syllabus and content...' and specifies 'roles of teachers, learners and instructional materials', while the implementation of these is, following the same model, 'procedure'. An approach, is defined as the 'theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching'. As such, an approach may incorporate several methods without losing coherence as long as they remain in line with the underlying principles of language and learning. Finally, at the classroom level there are techniques and tools which are the activities and resources used in teaching.

Teachers' views of teaching methods

Teachers have differing views of teaching and methods with most teachers using methods which correlate with their style of teaching and are supported by their preferred teaching tools and techniques. Teaching methods have a hidden agenda associated with them, in that all teachers carry a set of beliefs about learning and teaching, and in most cases this determines the method adopted. Sowden (2007, p.308) points out that 'the qualities in a teacher are key to overall success in the classroom, although concern with the latest techniques and methods has tended to obscure this fact'. This highlights that it is the competence of the

teacher in being able to adopt appropriate methods which converge with the learner's learning requirements that lie at the heart of successful teaching. This choice also depends a great deal on the context (Tann, 1994). Bax (2003) also places emphasis on the teaching and learning environment and proposes that teachers need to understand their local contexts, and ensure situations are compatible with learners' backgrounds, beliefs, and expectations. Therefore, it should be noted that while choice of method is important, it is just one factor in successful language learning.

It has long been acknowledged that teachers tend not to employ only one particular method of teaching, but utilise a number of methods, extracting what the teacher considers to be the most suitable features to cater for the needs of their learners. The rationale behind what is termed 'principled eclecticism' was explored by Prabhu (1990) who argues that teachers use their sense of 'plausibility' in order to select the methods that they wish to employ based on their experiences and their awareness of the teaching situation and the wider context. Such decisions may not actually be articulated, but are part of an experienced teacher's 'unconscious competency' (Hawari cited by Mann, 2000).

Prior to carrying out this current study, the researcher identified a range of methods that have been reported as being used for teaching English in India. Traditionally, the Grammar Translation Method was in vogue but was abandoned due to ignoring work on phonetics, pronunciation and fluency in speech (Patel, 1958). Grammar Translation gave way to what was known as the Structural Approach, which shares many of the principles and techniques of the Direct Method. In the 1980s, the Procedural Approach was introduced into schools across the South of India. The basic assumption underlying the approach is that 'form is best learnt when the learners' attention is on meaning' (Prabhu 1982, cited in Brumfit, 1984, p.234). Thus, the primary emphasis is on comprehension. Brumfit (1984) identified that the approach assumes minimal use of technology with teachers relying on the blackboard and chalk. Indeed, Chalk and Talk itself has been identified as a method and continues to be a widespread method of teaching languages throughout the world (Thirumalai, 2002). Chalk and Talk is used widely in third world countries like India, where children rely on teachers to conduct talk with the use of blackboard drawings to build up a complete situation. However, Chalk and Talk has little claim to method status as it lacks many features such as an implied teaching process, roles of teachers and learners or theory of language acquisition (Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, 1986) and is probably best labelled as a tool or resource. Nevertheless, many teachers identify Chalk and Talk as being a method.

Instruments & Participants

A qualitative approach was necessary in order to obtain detailed descriptions of teaching methods adopted in teaching English to young learners in India and to explore with practicing teachers their rationale for their use. Semi-structured interviews were used alongside classroom observations. Classroom observations were necessary in order to cross-reference what Borg (2001) describes as 'beliefs-in-action' with 'espoused beliefs', that is to examine whether what teachers say happens in the classroom is what they actually do.

Less structured data-collection methods were favoured so that the resulting data had a greater richness of context. Data was retrieved from four schools in Mumbai (North West India); two in the suburban areas and two in the city. A total of six primary and secondary school teachers of English were interviewed and observed. All of the participating teachers were of Indian nationality and had completed a two-year teaching course making them fully qualified to teach English as a foreign language. They were aged 30-48 years old, and had taught from a minimum of 6 years to a maximum of 25. The teachers observed and interviewed were predominantly female, due to the researcher visiting two convent schools. Only one male teacher was observed and interviewed due to limited availability. Additionally, nine classroom observations were conducted to view teachers' practices. The classes observed were of mixed gender and ranged from 5 to 16 year olds. The students were from lower-middle-class, middle-class and higher-middle-class communities.

Consent for the research was gained from the head professors at all four schools. The procedures of the research study were explained and assurance provided that data collected would remain confidential. Interviews took between 20 minutes to an hour to complete and were held in English, so no translation was required. All the teachers were interviewed individually using the semi-structured format. This allowed the interview to develop naturally, avoiding rigidity and meant that issues raised could be explored in more depth. Observations were conducted during a 30 minute taught lesson. The researcher's observations were recorded through class notes and interviews were audio-taped. In reporting the study, the participants were given pseudonyms.

Major findings

Methods and approaches used in terms of teaching young learners

The research confirmed that there are numerous methods being adopted across the schools sampled in India; with different schools advocating different methods in terms of teaching the English language to young learners. Teachers are also using other methods in class for which they have received training.

Teachers identified the Narrative Method, Chalk and Talk and the Unit Test Method as the most widely used methods. The Narrative Method lays emphasis on the use of stories to teach English, and as one teacher pointed out, children enjoy learning through stories. This is supported by Ur (1991) who identifies the use of stories as a key way of engaging young learners. Each teacher was observed using Chalk and Talk in class and one teacher stated that she relied heavily on the traditional Chalk and Talk as her main teaching method. She felt that her students learnt well from illustrations displayed on the blackboard and teacher-explanations using what she termed 'real' and relevant examples to support the students' learning.

However, what was termed the 'Unit Test Method' proved to be the most popular amongst teachers, due to the great emphasis placed on tests. Teachers often taught out of a textbook, with the textbook itself being the main teaching resource. Teachers adhered to it in order to cover the content in each unit. While the textbooks did not overtly endorse any single method, they did promote a focus on developing all four-language skills as well as grammar, vocabulary, and a strong emphasis on communication skills. The textbooks gave systematic instructions for teachers to follow, with a 3-stage approach to teaching reading and listening. The textbooks also encourage teachers to engage students in pair/group work activity, however, these activities were frequently omitted by the teachers in favour of working with the class as a whole. One teacher stated that conducting pair/group work was difficult to organise and supervise, as the class became uncontrollable. Nonetheless, four of the six teachers interviewed were actually in favour of group work, but unable to carry it out due to time constraints, large class sizes and excessive syllabus objectives which had to be covered in the given timeframe.

Three of the least used 'methods' were the Context Approach, ETC (Education Through Computers) Approach and the Phonetics Method. With the first of these, the Context Approach teachers appear to share the same belief as Barkhuizen (2008) that teachers teach best and learners learn best in situations that are compatible with their backgrounds, beliefs, and expectations. Despite the teachers' interest of teaching in context, it was not always possible to do so, due to the emphasis placed on covering all the content within the syllabus in the allocated time.

The ETC Approach utilises an LCD (Laser Crystal Display) to present the language to the class. Observations demonstrated teachers used the LCD to illustrate visuals to the class, and as one teacher identified, it was extremely effective and saved the time of having to write everything on the blackboard. This was used at a school where children came from higher-middle class families, where consequently the fees were higher than at an average school allowing the institution to invest in more advanced technology.

The Phonetic Method, where the emphasis was on oral expression as the basis of instruction, was the least popular with teachers. However, one teacher stated that grammatical rule giving should be avoided and the focus should be on enhancing children's pronunciation in English. However, reading, writing and speaking in English are considered to be the most important skills to master rather than having good pronunciation skills.

The Procedural Approach as mentioned in the literature is employed by teachers in India, but its use was not explicitly referred to by the teachers in the study. The primary attention during teaching was on comprehension; teachers engaged a great deal in concept checking to ensure students comprehended the messages being conveyed to them. Moreover, as suggested by Brumfit (1984), teachers were making minimal use of technology and used the blackboard & chalk to teach English to young learners. Generally, it was quite evident that teachers were practicing principled eclecticism. Teachers were combining various features from different methods unconsciously, namely, the Direct Method and the Audio-lingual Method. However, these methods were not explicitly referred to by the teachers in the interviews.

The majority of teachers had a good understanding of their class and utilised their personal conceptualisation of what seemed to work well and least well with children, and how their teaching supported children's learning. The belief was that the majority of children learnt English well when explanations were provided, accompanied by the use of authentic and relevant examples; with visual aids

playing a key tool towards effective language learning. Teachers believed that excessive amounts of teacher-talk and limited interaction are detrimental to the children's language learning. Teachers are encouraged by their institutions to continuously promote interaction in class and believe that using interactive activities, encouraging children to converse in class and being well-versed in the language with sufficient linguistic knowledge, all played an essential role in children performing well in English.

Views held about teaching methods

The teachers in the study are content with the teaching methods adopted to teach English in class, however, they stated that they would appreciate greater freedom of choice in the content being taught to students. Teachers felt they were limited in their choice of teaching methods due to various constraints (class size, lesson time, unit tests and limited availability of resources) that exist within classrooms, which did not allow certain methods to be carried out effectively. The majority felt the need to remove the frequent tests that appeared throughout the academic year; with the intention that other activities can be conducted, such as, promoting students to listen and observe the target language in operation with some form of media equipment installed into the classrooms. A great interest has been shown in increasing use of technology within classrooms in the coming future. Nonetheless, some teachers would welcome the return of more traditional methods to teaching on a national level, such as the Structural Approach (currently removed from educational institutions due to a lack of interactive activities), due to a perception that it proved to be effective whilst the teachers themselves were learning English as learners.

Pedagogical implications and discussion

The findings of the present study indicate four areas for discussion regarding methodology and teaching:

1. The equating of methods with activities
2. Textbook as instigator of method
3. The washback of tests on the classroom
4. Different methods and approaches for different students

The equating of methods with procedures, techniques and tools

The findings indicate that teachers often fail to separate a method from an activity. Chalk and Talk, Unit Test and ETC are referred to as methods, but they appear to be more of a procedure, technique or a tool, lacking an over-arching theory behind the teaching. Anthony (1963, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001), suggests that a method is procedural whereas the Chalk and Talk is a resource rather than with an implied or fixed procedure. Likewise, ETC did not emerge to have the quality that would make it a method; it appears teachers are stretching it into a method in the belief that it implies a logical structure in teaching the language. The Unit Test Method also appears to fail to meet the requirements of a method; it is merely a teacher following the textbook. It can be seen that perhaps other methods are being used alongside these activities, but it is not explicitly stated as to what those methods may be.

Textbook as instigator of method

Thirumalai (2002) asserts that the approach to English teaching in India has often been primarily textbook driven. Consequently, the findings from the present study suggest that the current education situation in Mumbai continues to remain textbook driven. The teachers in the study consider following a textbook to be a method of teaching so the methods implied by the textbook becomes, to some extent, the method of the class. Having analysed the results obtained from the research, it seems apparent that the textbook shares similarities to the PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production) procedure, which denotes that the Unit Test Method may well be more of a lesson framework than a method.

The washback of tests on the classroom

A question that arises is why do teachers adopt methods advocated by their individual schools rather than opt for their own teaching method? Findings identified that there was a great emphasis placed on tests, which occurred frequently between lessons. Teachers felt that these tests limited their choice in methods, one teacher stated that these tests do not allow teachers to do what they think they ought to be doing in the classroom and as a result they could not adopt certain methods of teaching. This could either suggest

that schools might consider striking a balance between assessments; moving away from repeated testing to larger-scale summative tests delivered at the end of the year or that teachers might review which objectives should be prioritised.

Different methods and approaches for different students

There is a lack of consistency in young learner's education in India; with different schools adopting different methods to teaching. Children from schools in the suburban areas of Mumbai are disadvantaged from the opportunity of learning English via technology such as ETC; they may not experience exposure to the language in different forms or obtain the full benefits of learning the language. The potential implications of such different approaches on young learner's education is that it can result in breaking the child's sequence of language learning and cause an impediment in enabling the child to reach their highest potential. This is supported by Broughton et al (1978) that young learners learn well by unbroken sequence of teaching English. During this study, the researcher observed that children at schools in the city of Mumbai were educated to a much higher standard, with greater knowledge of the language and better pronunciation skills compared to children in schools in the suburban area of Mumbai. It can be suggested that the state governments across the country could work together to deal with this problem. If government support was readily available, then schools could invest more in technology and utilise numerous methods and approaches to teaching English.

Conclusion

The educational context in India is heavily encircled by the exam-orientated atmosphere. Students are put through numerous tests and have no choice, since most of these tests are compulsory. The emphasis placed on tests signifies that teachers will adopt such methods and approaches that will allow them to prepare students sufficiently to the level required by the school. Teachers adopt methods that are learner-centred and emphasise the role of the learner as an active participant but tend towards using methods advocated by their individual schools and are inclined to rely on a textbook.

Teacher's interest in methods is limited; with a far greater interest being in techniques and tools within classrooms. Nonetheless, teachers in India are engaged in principled eclecticism; unconsciously using various features from existing teaching methods; with methods varying from teacher to teacher and from institution to institution. The methods being adopted are considered appropriate for young learners; however, due to the excessive content in the syllabus, it is believed that justice is not given to the language. Those teachers interviewed also voiced a desire for a single national syllabus to ensure that there is consistency and continuity in a young learner's education. The view was expressed that a child should be able to move from place to place and continue with their English language education at the same level, irrespective of whether they come from a rich background or a poor one. If this small-scale piece of research is accurate and Thirumalai's (2002) observation that text books exert considerable influence over classroom practice in India, then the creation of such a syllabus upon which the text books could be based would seem a logical step. However, it would almost certainly necessitate the re-examination the types of methods implied by the syllabus and further investigation of teacher practices and beliefs with regard to methods.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

INTERVIEW

This interview is aimed at finding out teachers' choice of methods in order to teach English to children, and to identify methods that are overlooked. The information provided will be of great value and help to my research.

Name of Teacher:

Number of students in the class:

Age of students:

Section 1: about the class and teacher

- 1) Which grade(s) do you teach?
- 2) On average, how many English lessons does each class have per week?
- 3) How long do the lessons last?
- 4) On average, how many students are there in a class?
- 5) How is the furniture arranged in the classroom?
- 6) What textbooks do you use in your class (if any)?
- 7) How do you think children best learn a language?

Section 2: methodology

- 1) What teaching methods and/or approaches does your School advocate using?
What do you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses?
- 2) What teaching methods and/or approaches do the textbooks promote?
What do you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses?
- 3) What teaching methods have been replaced and why?
- 4) What teaching methods and/or approaches do you usually use in your teaching? Why?

What do you consider to be the strengths and weaknesses?

- 5) What approach (s) do you believe work well with children?
- 6) What approach (s) do you believe work least well with children?
- 7) What is the nature of student-teacher interaction in the classroom?
- 8) Do children have the opportunity to determine what they learn in class?
- 9) Do you give your instructions in the L1 or a combination of L1 and L2?

Section 3: young learners and the language

- 1) How far do the children enjoy learning the English language?
- 2) What motivates the children to learn the language?
- 3) What learning strategies do you think the children employ?
- 4) How are the feelings of the children dealt with?
- 5) How do you deal with children with different levels of ability?
- 6) How is language viewed? How is culture viewed?
- 7) What areas of language skills are emphasised?
- 8) How do you measure children's performance?

Section 4: suggestions

- 1) What would you change about the current way of how English is taught in your own lesson? at a national level? and in textbooks in your school?
- 2) What teaching methods and/or approaches would you like to see being implemented in the classroom in the coming future?
- 3) What aspects do you like about the teaching of English language in your School? And which aspects do you least like?