



ELT in Mixed Ability Classrooms-Teacher Challenges and Strategies in the Rural Context

Ms.S.Sunila Sailaja,

Assistant Professor, Dept of Humanities and Basic Sciences, Godavari Institute of Engg.& Technology, Rajahmundry- 533294,A.P.,India

Ms.D.Vijaya Lakshmi Santhi

Assistant Professor Dept of Humanities and Basic Sciences, Godavari Institute of Engg.& Technology, Rajahmundry- 533294,A.P.,India

Abstract: Learner analysis plays a vital role in the language learning process. The four walled class room is the plat form where exchange of information, training for real life situations, understanding the social needs is possible in an organized way. The role of the teacher and the performance of the learner are the two major activities that strive for satisfactory exit at the end of the learning process. English being the official language and link language across the globe, English teaching has been given high priority since technological progress. The present paper focuses on the importance of teaching English and required ambience in the language learning classrooms. Emphasis is laid on mixed ability class rooms with a view to present different challenges faced by Language teacher in such classroom teaching. Different types of learners in the class had been under discussion, considering the candidature of rural learner who is in need of individual attention to be part of global cultured community. Problems in English language learning and teaching were discussed and effective strategies that can be employed to improve the learning capability of a language learner in general and rural learner in particular is given prime importance.

Key Words: challenges, communication needs, English language teaching, mixed ability classrooms, rural context, strategies

Introduction:

Irrespective of the geographical conditions communication plays a vital role in every walk of life. The concept of globalization had indirectly introduced the need to be communicative particularly in the academic and professional scenario. Since all the social needs are linked with the factors related to effective communication, special focus is laid on effective communication and required skills to posses' effective

communication skills. It is evidenced from various researches that language plays an important role in communicating effectively. Because of the enormity existent in respect of population and their mother tongues across the globe, the literary experts tried their best to bring a common means of communication that could better cater the communicative needs. Looking at the easy adoptability, widely spoken feature, also there being more native speakers to English, it had been accepted as official



language, link language and finally asserted as Global language. English language at present became the only medium of instruction in the higher education, it is the link language in international trade and business and also the mandatory means of communication in arts, science and technology. The given status to English gave a quick change in the teaching and learning of English. The conventional English classes were forcefully be equipped with technical interventions and teacher centered classed became student or learner centered classes. It made the teachers think of the classroom and the type of learners, the methodology suitable and also the problems and preferred solutions.

CLASS ROOM –AN EXCLUSIVE SCHOOLING PLATFORM:

Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man” – (Swami Vivekananda)

The growing importance for English as the global means of communication increased the importance of language teaching and its pedagogical usage. When the employers in the corporate field are approaching the engg. Campus with greater professional expectations, the undergraduate engg. Students are stepping back in the recruitment drive due to language lacunae. Though they are with good subjective expertise the inability to communicate their subject cutting them as a sorry figure in the recruitment drives. After 19th century looking at the communicative needs of the professional students in the language classroom the language teacher has changed the methods and techniques and opened the doors for Communicative

Language Teaching (CLT). It replaced the conventional class rooms with student centered class rooms. The role of teacher also shifted from traditional authoritative speaker to modern mentor and guide in the learning process. The English also stopped being a subject and started appearing like a language and a prime means of communication. English language teachers are preparing to place new and innovative methods to improve the linguistic ability. Particularly in professional and engineering colleges it acquired key importance since it is the only medium of instruction right means to impress the employer in the job market. The English text books prescribed for the study are also not equipped with drama, poetry or short stories but tasks that can galvanize the linguistic and communicative ability of young learners. Just like other science subjects Physics and Chemistry, for English also language labs and activity rooms are being provided to create ambience for the practice of real life situations. English teacher began to act like a guide on his side encouraging, correcting the errors, motivating, preparing innovative aids that can enthuse the professional learners. Teaching being part of mentoring the teacher finds different learners with varied learning capabilities. These diversified features made the English Class Room Mixed ability class room.

MIXED ABILITY CLASSROOMS: A REGULAR RURAL INDIAN FEATURE:

Since ages India stands as a platform for innumerable cultures, diversified life styles, different traditions and customs. This also has influenced the field of Indian education where different learners with divided learning capabilities are



taken for learning together. It leads to multiple learning expectations in the multilingual learners. In the countries like India English had been taught as second language. Since it is a second language teacher's role is crucial in creating interest in learning. Classroom environment also plays a vital role in influencing the learning process. The existence of various cultures, usage of number of languages in a single region, prevalence of different life styles and cognitive difference in the selection of education lead to mixed group of learners in the field of academics. Hence the classrooms are treated as Mixed-ability classes. "It means classes where students differ greatly in ability, motivation for learning English, needs, interests, educational background, styles of learning, anxiety, experiences and so on (Ainslie, Susan. (1994)". In the mixed ability class rooms' teacher gets either opportunity to use his multiple skills or finds it difficult to use multiple medium in the instruction process.

TEACHER CHALLENGES IN THE MIXED ABILITY CLASSROOM:

The basic role of a teacher is imparting factual knowledge to the learner in an interesting and understandable method. The era of pre -industrialization stand as a symbol for conventional learning where the teacher is a sage on the stage and student is allowed to exercise only listening and writing skill in the four walled class room. The advent of Industrialization brought tremendous change in the education institutions particularly in technical colleges. The presentation skills started working out well in the career building. Class rooms became platforms for practicing different fields of study. The main aim of learning

is to know the operational or demonstrative value of each subject. The subject English is also viewed in the same way. Hence all the universities supported the argument that English teacher should act as a facilitator, guide and mentor and English had to be taught in the student centered environment till Post graduation. Even English teaching classes were named as language development sessions where one can experience, demonstrate, use the global language also it allows to rectify the committed mistakes to raise his efficiency up to native speaker. Since engg. Undergraduates are good at creative thinking skills English language teaching is encouraging to use these creative skills to develop other subject. Tomlinson (2001) suggests that "teachers only need to differentiate instruction types in diverse-classrooms to strike a healthy balance and enhance the learning process."

Mixed ability classrooms are entirely different from normal classrooms. The learners in the classroom differ in everything. During teaching time the teacher should satisfy the poor learner, average learner and expert learner at a time. If he is successful it surely makes the teacher a magnificent incarnation in the classroom leaving life time impact on the learner. Hence it is quite challenging to handle mixed ability classrooms. Particularly the educational institutions with rural geographical boundaries face different problems. Some of the challenges can be as follows:

- **Heterogeneous class results ineffective learning**

Since the learners are from diversified backgrounds teachers' face difficulty in



reaching to the students. When a task is prepared to test their ability few students feel it is very easy and few students demand lot of teachers' time and presence to perform. Even in small classes language teacher finds it a challenge to consider the interests of every student to make his teaching effective.

- **Luke warm learning conditions**

In the student centered classes, teacher role is less and student role could be more. But many of the students who are foreign learners to the target language sit in the class half minded. Though teacher is trying his best to enthuse they prefer to take a second chance to participate. It may consume lot of his time and energy. In spite of repeated counseling some of the teachers find no difference because the learner is more concerned of his comfort zone than his social improvement.

- **Disinterest in prescribed syllabus**

Generally the syllabus prescribed for particular course by the university is homogenous in nature. It may not cater the various communicative needs of different language learners. Hence some of the students may not find interest in the syllabus prescribed. But the language teacher finally is answerable to the syllabus completion.

- **Poor infrastructure:**

The educational institutions in the rural geographical region generally are not well equipped with technical infra like public addressing systems, overhead projectors and software labs. It results in less exposure to technology which hinders their effective teaching capabilities. He

may miss the impact of audio- visual learning

- **Domestic life of target group is different:**

Learner from rural background will get different domestic living conditions at home. As he spend majority time with the family members where fore fathers are completely uneducated, parents have lot of mother tongue influence, neighbors have a different accent and pronunciation, surrounded by people with no mind for using exclusive vocabulary, visiting places where even basics of foreign language is not necessary, the learner does not find even little chance to use the target language. It demands lot of effort from the language teacher to bring required change.

STRATEGIES SUGGESTED FOR STRENGTHENING TEACHING IN MIXED ABILITY CLSSES:

The following verse from Confucius talks about the expectation of a learner from teacher.

I hear and I forget,

I see and I believe,

I do and I understand. – Confucius

Analysis of Learners in the Mixed Ability Class Rooms:

Learners in mixed ability classes generally depend on the teacher as every learner has a different style of learning that can better be understood by the teacher than his peers. In such class rooms learner's generally belonged to different cultures and living backgrounds. They differ not only in the dressing style and food habits but also in understanding, strengths and



weaknesses, approaches in learning etc. "Notably, there are many factors which may differ from one student to another such as their attitude, motivation, and self-discipline (Lightbown & Spada, 2006)". The learners entertain the differences because of the difference in nativity. "Ansari (2013) for instance describes a mixed-ability class as comprising of not only learners with various capacities but also those that have a broad range of preferences and learning styles". The variations in the cognitive skills are more apparent when the teacher takes a class aiming at the average learner the learner with high understanding get bored of the lesson. At the beginning collaborative and cooperative learning may not be possible because of their multiple social backgrounds.

A rural learner- reason to be treated as rural learner: the learners from underdeveloped social background live and take education when they feel it is important to get their livelihood. These learners are generally pre-occupied with several other personal delicacies and sit as learners to drive some of the inhibitions. Compared with urban educational system it is rather difficult to deal with but it is highly challenging. "Teaching gifted learners in a diverse-classroom has revealed success, but is not consistent in having all learning abilities involved (Tyler, 2006)".

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES:

- **Needs technology intervention:** Technology based education is to be introduced well like software labs with headphones and speakers, public addressing system, video recording and displaying their performance and also

giving listening components in native accent to drive away mother tongue influence.

- **Modifications in the existing syllabus:** Syllabus should include some open ended exercises like extempore, JAM sessions, Caption writing, chart making and group presentations, where learner feel free to think innovatively. The given tasks to be prepared as per their interest, where teacher gives autonomy in learning. Group work facilitates strength as he works with co-ordination.

- **Material Preparation:** Topics can be selected from their own cultural background and their involvement can be invited while preparing material for the language activities. Example Festivals celebrated across the globe can be taken for Extempore. Care should be taken that learner hailed from a particular region should get his topic on known festival or own and exclusive festival celebrated in his own region. The learner may not sit with half mind in the class due to its familiarity.

- **Division in the class:** Heterogeneous classes can be handled by dividing the learners into internal groups based on their regional language or area of interest or based on the particular language skill they want to develop. In such a way learners with same interest will work together to achieve the target output.

- **Handling Multiple Intelligences:** Learners in the classroom will be with multiple intelligences, it can be handled well unless the teacher satisfies the majority of the learner with their area and method of interest.

- **Real life situations for familiar learning:** The enormous situations that drag the learner from foreign language learning will make the teacher extra



efficient. Home work can be given that involve people at home or neighbors staying along with them. Example learners are asked to-do any article preparation or seminar content related to their home town or family history or their father's profession etc. Then the family started involving in what he is trying to learn and they were also exposed to the terminology he is using for his content. In the course of time it may be used for domestic purpose.

CONCLUSION:

Teaching and learning plays an important role in the field of academics. Socio-economic development of a country can be achieved through strategic advancement in all the fields connected to growth and development. Since communication is an influential factor, role of language teacher is predominant in preparing young professional graduates for the future communicative needs. Hence Language teacher is expected to employ new and innovative strategies that can better cater social communication of young products. Keeping the abilities to learn foreign language in view, class room techniques to be employed. Mixed ability classrooms are both a challenge and an opportunity to prove teacher's language teaching.

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