

Professor Rama Kant Agnihotri, Department of Linguistics, University of Delhi is an eminent linguist and a pedagogue. He has been instrumental in setting up Equal Opportunity Cell(EOC) at the University of Delhi. Here in an interview with Ruchi Kaushik he shares his thoughts and experiences about various aspects of interaction with students in the classroom.



**Ruchi:** How would you define “classroom interaction” that is meaningful and learning rich?

**Professor Rama Kant Agnihotri:** I think any classroom in which the teacher is willing to become a learner, is a meaningful classroom. Since teaching is a give and take process, a teacher has a lot to learn from what students bring to their institutions. Therefore, increasingly, we should evolve classroom processes and strategies where the space for learners is more and the space for the teacher, although extremely important, is less and less in terms of time. This would ensure that each child gets the opportunity for articulation and interaction which, in fact, would lead to a learning rich environment.

**R:** Though in the Indian traditional culture, the “guru-shishya parampara” evokes images of respect and obedience; students nowadays seem to have no regard for the teacher. What reasons have attributed to this change? Do you think there is a possibility of this relationship between students and teachers getting better?

**RKA:** In my opinion, a classroom should engage and challenge students. The day students feel that their teacher is trying to do so; they will begin to have real respect for the teaching community. To find out what the cognitive level of one’s students is, to find corresponding texts and to

pitch it at their level and to create engaging tasks is the responsibility of the teacher. The role of the teacher is far more complex than to merely speak for forty minutes.

**R:** Many researchers working on classroom interactions at the tertiary level have noticed that two-thirds of the class time is spent on teacher talking to the students with the teacher playing the dominant role. Students mostly are seen as patient recipients of information. Are you in agreement with this finding of the researchers?

**RKA:** Yes. I reiterate that our effort should not be on simply sharing information because there is no dearth of material that we can pass on to the students. However, a teacher’s focus should be on taking such constructive and creative steps that enable a child to become an autonomous learner.

**R:** Unhurried conversations over several cups of tea in the canteen or unending debates in the corridors and staircases of an institution also play a vital role in shaping a student’s beliefs and attitudes. What is your view of this informal interaction?

**RKA:** This is an extremely important question. To begin with, I think, we need to distinguish between formal and informal learning. After all, the skills that you require to talk to a friend

on the phone are quite different from the skills you require to write an essay on, Shakespeare, for instance. So for the latter, there is formal training that is structured and for which one has a syllabus and a teacher and this kind of interaction is important. But having said that, I will also mention that there is no disjunct between formal and informal learning. On the contrary, there needs to be a connect and to make that happen, is the responsibility of the teacher. For example, there are hoardings all over the city that you can ask your students to analyze. Ask them if there is anything common about their script and grammar. The day a teacher does this, a student's perspective of the outside world changes and she/he gets initiated into interpreting and analyzing things around her/him.

**R:** Considering that a lot of schools and colleges are moving towards virtual classrooms and internet-based learning, do you think that there is a significant shift in the meaning and scope of the term "classroom interaction"?

**RKA:** Of course, the audio-visual interactive sessions are useful and the internet-based learning is student-centric, where a student may learn when he likes to and try out an activity several times over, yet, in my opinion, there is no substitute for a real classroom and spontaneous interaction between students and the teacher. Also, my take on this issue is that technology is beyond us and it is here to stay. Why not use technology in a subversive sense to make poor people at the margins aware of how they can fight for their right to equality and justice and also to education. After all, virtual learning has a vast reach and it is cost effective.

**R:** Lectures, question and answer sessions, group tasks, peer work- there are several pedagogical tools that a teacher can choose from for an interaction with students and yet, ironically, everything fails if the students are unresponsive or indifferent. How does a teacher create an environment wherein there is a lot of meaningful dialogue between the students and the teacher and also among students?

**RKA:** Let me specify that, we as teachers ought to have absolute faith in the learning potential of our students. If students of today are unresponsive or indifferent then we are largely responsible for making them so. There is an urgent need to identify the reasons behind this sad development so that solutions can be found. According to me, rigid boundaries around disciplines need to be broken. For instance, in a X standard Physics class, a teacher should discuss theories of physics

with as much interest as she/he discusses Ganesha drinking milk. Also, more opportunities need to be created for recreation of students where they may watch a film, or play a game of cricket or for that matter, read a novel. I think the indifference or disinterest that you are referring to, also emerges partially from boredom resulting from a repetitive and predictable academic schedule.

**R:** Would you agree that the size of the class directly affects the quality of interaction?

**RKA:** Definitely. The smaller the class, the fewer the students, the better the interaction. My request to teachers reading this interview is- please get to know the social, psychological and linguistic profile of your students and not merely their names. Use this information as a strategy to interact with each of your student at an individual level.

**R:** There has been a lot of research on how the classroom interactions reflect the gender divisions in society and in many ways contribute to their continuation. What is your take on this issue?

**RKA:** This is a very sensitive question. I think the more we do about problems related to gender and may I add, disability, the less is the effort. Gender stereotypes are so much prevalent in our society. A frail, young girl of eighteen who was training to become a pilot was so taken aback by someone minutely scrutinizing her physique that she exclaimed, "I am not going to pull the aircraft with my hair!" In my opinion, we need to sensitize our students about gender issues from a very early age. The same holds true about the disabled. Instead of taking pity at a blind man, it is important to realize that we are all disabled in one way or another. Someone has weak eyes; someone else has a weak heart and so on and so forth. Instead of sympathizing, think of ways in which some of their practical problems can be resolved like having special paths for them to walk on, putting names in brail etc.

**R:** Drawing from your own personal experience, please share some interesting classroom discussions.

**RKA:** I will share a few things. I teach linguistics and so when I talk people think that there can be nothing common between me, my students, language and primary education. You see, this is one barrier I have tried to break. To give you another example, one year in my department, we had a regular seminar where people would talk about their social, linguistic, political and pedagogical experiences in primary school education. Through the narratives, students as well

as teachers shared and learnt a lot. To give you another example from my field, I like to introduce my students to the universal law that there cannot be too many consonantal sounds in any word taken from any language. I may do so by giving a detailed lecture. Instead I give my students an interesting activity. I ask my class to write around twenty most difficult words they know and I give them the liberty to choose it from any language they are familiar with. Then I sit down and ask the students to come and write them on the

board. Once they do so, I ask them if they notice anything particular about the words they have written. Initial common responses include that they have different sounds and different meanings. But gradually students themselves explain that any structure of human language is predominantly an alternation of consonant-vowel sounds.

**R:** Thank you Professor Agnihotri for sharing these experiences. It was a pleasure talking to you and I am sure that our readers will benefit from your views on classroom interactions.