

Adapting Materials to Meet the Needs of Marginalized Students of a Delhi Government School: A Study with Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

Training teachers in adapting and transacting materials along with sensitizing them to contextual factors is considered crucial in the process of working towards equity and social justice in language education. This paper reports a study where trainee teachers taught marginalized students from a Delhi government school and worked towards creating space for personal narratives of students with basic proficiency in English. Learner performance studied through guided writing and oral presentation tasks showed that learners engage differently with language across these two modes. The findings of the study suggest that personalized narratives allow a 'safe' space to create a 'personal multidimensional representation' and to make the text 'meaningful' for learners.

Keywords: context, materials, marginalized students, narrative

Introduction

The vision of providing access to and success in higher education through equity and social justice is the guiding principle behind the work in English language education at Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD). This paper reports a study that was part of a pilot School English Proficiency Course (SEPC) planned as an outreach activity of the university for Delhi government schools. The school proficiency course was also a component of a Certificate programme in teaching English, where trainee teachers were involved in adapting and transacting materials in the given context of the Delhi government school students.

The study reports the process of adapting narrative tasks and their transaction to cater to the needs of a group of marginalized students, who were from economically and socially deprived sections of Delhi. The paper argues that making space for students' personal narratives requires teachers to focus on task objectives while contextualizing the content of tasks. The trainee teachers attempted to examine that when conversational storytelling is used to elicit learner output, does that result in a deeper engagement with the target language (English)?

Narrative Tasks

In the context of adapting tasks and activities, it is relevant to discuss the structure and design of narrative tasks. Narratives are often associated with literary fiction or oral tradition but their frequent presence in everyday conversations and their role in language development is often overlooked. It is through narratives that experiences are rationalized constructing a coherent sense of self which manifests as one's 'life story'. Everyday conversations include personal narratives that are shared through anecdotes or recounts of daily life. Such interactions are essential in building and sustaining relationships with others (Ochs & Capps, 2001, as cited in Kiernan, 2005). If we are to prepare learners for conversational situations in 'real world' contexts, it is important for us to exploit the narratives present in everyday conversations by converting them into a series of sequenced narrative tasks. Such systematic use could be adapted to build young ESL learners' interactional skills and help them move towards independent recounts of personal stories to gain proficiency in their L1 as well as English as the target language.

Task designers and teachers can use sequenced tasks to create a framework for storytelling to simultaneously support and challenge ESL learners. In doing so, a number of interrelated factors could play a role in modifying and increasing learner output, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Those factors are defined as *task characteristics* (Robinson, 2001, p. 287). They are subdivided into three components – (i) '*task complexity*' (aspects of a task which require negotiation of cognitive resources to meet task demands like planning and reasoning) (ii) '*task difficulty*' (influenced by learner factors like motivation, confidence, and aptitude) and (iii) '*task conditions*' (the communicative demands of tasks like familiarity with the environment and members of the group and whether the flow of information is one-way or two-way). Teachers can

use all these three components as the criteria to sequence narrative tasks with increasing demands as presented in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1: Features of Task Complexity to Sequence Narrative Tasks
(Adapted from Robinson, 2001)**

<p>Model Narrative Structure <i>Simple language > complex language (lexically and grammatically)</i> <i>Simple story > complex story (number of characters, episodes)</i> <i>Familiar story > unfamiliar story</i></p>
<p>Model Narrative Mode <i>written > pictures > video > given theme</i> <i>(closed task > open task)</i></p>
<p>Telling Conditions <i>extensive preparation time > no planning time</i> <i>reference materials (pictures, notes) > no reference materials</i> <i>no time limit > time pressure</i></p>

This study reports the process of adapting materials for Delhi government school students who were from the marginalized sections of society. This required an analysis of the available research on materials adaptation. Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018) provide a detailed review of the literature on materials adaptation covering North America, UK, Europe, Africa, South East Asia, and Japan. Their findings suggest that most teachers around the world adapt materials for various reasons. These could be related to the teaching environment, learner factors, teacher factors, the course, and the materials. Tomlinson & Masuhara's procedures and techniques were used to adapt materials to contextualize the tasks and materials for SEPC¹ as indicated below:

**Figure 2: Steps to Adapt Materials
(Adapted from Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018, p. 104)**

- Step 1 Profiling of teaching contexts (e.g. learner needs, course objectives)
- Step 2 Identifying reasons for adaptation
- Step 3 Evaluating the existing materials
- Step 4 Listing objectives for adaptation
- Step 5 Adapting
- Step 6 Teaching (steps 3-7 are cyclical)
- Step 7 Revising

The Framework for the Study

To collect and select narratives, the trainee teachers referred to Tomlinson's (2013) framework of a 'text-driven approach'. This framework was relevant as it highlights the senses, feelings, views, intuitions of the learners, an important aspect for adapting and transacting materials for marginalized students. According to Tomlinson, such materials can "achieve a personal multidimensional representation in which inner speech, sensory images, and affective stimuli combine to make the text meaningful" (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 110).

Figure 3: Steps to Select Narratives (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 110)

Stages	Learner activities	Principles
1 Readiness activities	Thinking about something personal which will help the learners to connect with the content of the core text.	1 Personal connection. 2 Visual imaging. 3 Use of inner speech.
2 Experiential activities	Linking the images and thoughts from the readiness activities to the text when first experiencing it.	1 Personal connection. 2 Visual imaging. 3 Use of inner speech. 4 Affective and cognitive engagement. 5 Use of high-level skills 6 Focus on meaning.
3 Intake response activities	Developing and then articulating personal responses to the text.	1 Personal connection. 2 Visual imaging. 3 Affective and cognitive engagement. 4 Use of inner speech. 5 Interaction.
4 Development activity 1	Developing the text by continuing it, relocating it, changing the writer's views, personalizing it, responding to it etc.	1 Personal connection. 2 Visual imaging. 3 Use of inner speech. 4 Affective and cognitive engagement. 5 Use of high-level skills. 6 Focus on meaning. 7 Interaction. 8 Purposeful communication.
5 Input response activity	Focusing on a specific linguistic, pragmatic, discourse, genre or cultural feature of the text in order to make discoveries about its use.	1 Personal connection. 2 Visual imaging. 3 Use of inner speech. 4 Affective and cognitive engagement. 5 Use of high-level skills. 6 Interaction. 7 Noticing.
6 Development activity 2	Revising the first draft from 4 above making use of their discoveries in 5 above.	As for 4.

Data Collection

The materials used by trainee teachers were based on four themes: *Friends and Family*, *Growing Up*, *Festivals*, *Food and Culture and Leisure*. These themes were taken as they are aligned to the learners' level of

proficiency (A1 to A2: CEFR, 2001, p. 232). Furthermore, these themes frequently occur in their everyday experiences.

The trainee teachers enrolled in the Certificate of Teaching English programme at AUD worked with students (14 to 16 years old, enrolled in grade nine in a government school of Delhi) and 14 teachers taught the proficiency course in pairs over 28 hours. As the students were from marginalized backgrounds, they were promoted to grade 9 under the 'no-detention policy' of the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*; thus, their performance was not always grade-appropriate. Students attended proficiency classes in English as part of the SEPC programme and came after school hours, 4 days a week for two hours each day.

Data was collected for the study after three weeks of teaching. At this stage it was observed that the learners were able to read simple short texts and speak and write simple sentences using nouns and verbs in English. They continued to use Hindi to understand instructions and frequently searched for English equivalents of Hindi words. The tasks and activities the trainee teachers considered were aligned to learner needs. This was to ensure that the learners would not feel overwhelmed to attempt the tasks. Data was collected through classroom observations (faculty and peer), collaborative reflection sessions (post-class), interviews and teachers' reflective journals.

Four narrative tasks used for the study were adapted based on (i) Robinson's task complexity features, (ii) steps to adapt materials by Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018) and (iii) task selection criteria by Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013 (refer to Figures 1 to 3). Note that the narratives were based on previous activities learners had done in class on talking about likes and dislikes and narrating personal experiences in simple sentences (A1 level CEFR, 2001, p. 232). Table 1 below summarizes the task features of the initial narratives identified by teacher participants:

Tasks 1-4 were sequenced from simple to complex based on the number of characters, storyline, clarity of the narrative, linguistic complexity, and changes in settings. The tasks were intended to provide a framework to help the learners to share their personal stories independently and were administered in the following manner: The teacher narrated an initial story orally and then presented it as text in print. The learners were instructed to retell the story. They were allowed to personalize and include their experiences in their short narratives. Finally, they

were required to present their narratives to their classmates in pairs and in front of the whole class. Learners used L1 (Hindi) freely while discussing and planning to construct the narratives. Interestingly, some of the learners preferred to first narrate the story in L1 before attempting to retell it in L2. It was expected that learner performance on this sequenced set of narrative tasks would help them use narration to improve ESL proficiency.

Figure 4: Summary of Task Features Identified by Trainee Teachers

SOURCE/ TASK	Task 1 (given materials)	Task 2 (picture story) Adapted from the original in Hindi by Banerjee (2007)	Task 3 (given materials)	Task 4 Adapted from Srinivasan (2013)
NO. OF CHARACTERS	1	2	4	4
STORYLINE	Asma narrates her likes and dislikes.	Ravi describes his home. He shares the place where his family keeps their footwear, where he hangs his clothes, where they keep their mats, where his mother keeps her sarees, where food is cooked and where he plays.	Asma describes her dog, Chiku and what they do together. Chiku barks at dogs and keeps thieves away. He guards their home.	Ravi describes all the things he can draw. He can draw his mother, father and sister. He can also draw his dog, fish, boats, planes, houses and trains. But he is not allowed to draw on the walls. His sister cannot draw like him. She makes a mess.
CLARITY	Clear storyline	Clear storyline	Clear storyline	Relatively longer storyline
COMPLEXITY	Vocabulary: easy (related to daily life) Grammar: subject verb agreement, present tense	Vocabulary: relatively easy Grammar: Action verbs, nouns, demonstratives	Vocabulary: moderately easy (bark, thieves, guard) Grammar: subject verb agreement, verbs, nouns	Vocabulary: many words in a single narrative. Grammar: verbs and nouns, subject verb agreement
CHANGE IN SETTINGS	No	No	Yes	Yes

Analysis and Findings

The findings from the study are presented in two parts: the first part presents teacher reflections and changes in awareness about the needs of the marginalized students and how to engage them with local materials to increase ESL proficiency; the second part presents learner productions to show the language benefits of using sequenced narrative tasks.

A set of interviews and detailed post-class group reflection sessions with teachers, after they used the adapted tasks, revealed that 10 out of the 14 participating teachers felt that adapting materials to the context of their learners was essential. The teachers observed that students' engagement in the tasks improved when they were allowed to personalize the tasks and bring in their own experiences, feelings and motivations to the narratives. Identifying learner needs, course objectives and carefully planning the objectives for adaptation, according to the three frameworks presented above, were considered crucial in adapting tasks and their successful transaction. The teachers reported that students from marginalized backgrounds have unique experiences and their life experiences are usually not reflected in textbooks and standardized mainstream materials for ESL education.

On actual transaction of the materials, the teachers reported that these learners found it emotionally difficult to talk about their family—*friends and family*—the first theme in the set of materials used in this study. When the materials were evaluated, it was found that the content of the other themes like 'Growing Up', 'Food and Festivals' and 'Leisure' were also not contextually relevant for this group of learners as it had narrative texts which assumed learners to have a certain level of 'privilege' in society. So, an important finding at this point was - the materials prepared for the proficiency course prior to transacting them with this group of students, were found to be less aligned to the learner needs because the unique experiences of the marginalized students were not represented entirely. The teachers reported that their adaptations of the given materials and tasks to the classroom context were to create a space for the 'voices' of their students. So, these materials challenged the mainstream notions of 'childhood'. In the process of working on these tasks, many sensitive issues around lack of money, lack of connection with family, issues of self-esteem and not having the time for leisure activities came up. Teachers reported that engaging with the learner's personal narratives had been a transformative experience for them.

Learner narratives across oral and written modalities are now presented to show whether learners experienced any changes in content presentation and ESL proficiency across the two modalities. For the first theme, it was observed that pauses were a common feature for learners at this stage. Furthermore, they were bewildered when asked to share their likes and dislikes. Most of them said, '*pata nahi*' (I don't know). On

probing further, the teacher realized that they had never been asked to share their likes or dislikes. The idea of articulating one's preferences was alien to these learners. The narratives of one learner is presented below:

Learner 1, Task 1

Oral Presentation

I am...Naved. I liking class.... I not liking, not liking?...my home. Father hitting..... I cry. Mother also cry. I like....NGO teacher.

(... pauses)

Guided Writing

I am Naved. I like my class. I don't like going home. My father is angry. My mother is working. My sister help me. I like NGO. I like many stories. I like teacher.

The oral text of this learner reflects an attempt to communicate a few ideas centred around likes and dislikes and give reasons for them. This learner was being helped by an NGO where he went to study after school hours. He seemed particularly inspired by the teacher who taught him there. The learner has been able to use a combination of simple and progressive present tense with a few instances of third person sub-verb-agreement errors (e.g. *My sister help me*).

For the fourth theme 'leisure', the productions of another learner are presented to show the changes in the learner's performance across the two modalities:

Learner 2, Task 4

Oral presentation

I am big boy. I can....draw. I can make.....I draw mother. She is sitting. I draw sister.....she not sitting. Father 'gussa' (angry).....anger. Not sitting. I not drawing on walls.....I draw my dog. I draw 'patang'(kite). I making boat.....also plane.....I drawing house. I liking train. My sister making problem. She not making anything.

(pauses....)

Guided writing

I am a big boy now. I can draw. I can make things. I draw my mother. She sits still. I draw my father. He doesn't smile. I draw my sister. She does not keep quiet. I draw manything. I don't draw on the walls. I can make things. I make a drawing of my dog. I make a fish. It is small. I make paper boats. I also make

*plane. I make house and trains. My sister make mess. I can make many thing.
But my sister cannot!*

For learner 2 we notice that the texts are longer and there are considerable differences between the oral and written versions of the narrative. Since the written version was a guided writing task, where learners discussed their answers with their partners and were also helped by the teacher, errors in sentence structure, tense, pluralization, and subject-verb agreement are fewer. However, the oral version actually reflects the construction of the narrative in the learner's mind and an attempt to present a meaningful narrative. In the third sentence the words 'many things' were forgotten, and the learner didn't attempt substitution. However, in the eighth sentence, the word 'angry' was substituted with its L1 equivalent 'gussa' and in the twelfth sentence, the word 'kite' was substituted by the L1 word 'patang'. The progressive present tense is preferred instead of the simple present tense. Pluralization is sometimes done correctly (e.g. *I not drawing on walls*) while in some instances it is dropped (e.g. *I can make many thing*).

From the two data sets presented above it is observed that the learners experience an increase in ESL proficiency in the written mode over the oral mode. This is observed through an increase in text length and use of a variety of lexis and sentence structure and grammatical elements such as pluralization, sub-verb agreement and negation. Learner attempts to construct personal narratives in a language that they do not have at home and yet use it for speaking and writing shows that when sequenced tasks are used, they can lead learners to a greater engagement and modify ESL output to the benefit of the learners.

Conclusion

Overall, the task adaptation presented in this paper was done to increase learner engagement and create opportunities for learners to participate in constructing personal narratives and improve ESL proficiency. It was observed that the use of the series of sequenced storytelling tasks using the criteria of Robinson's task characteristics is a way to prepare learners to compose personal stories. The process of working with personal stories also brought out aspects of 'inner speech and affective stimuli' to make the tasks meaningful. The study showed that ESL learners are positioned within a 'discursive process' whereby the self is located in the 'life story' as an observable, subjective and coherent participant.

Finally, it was found that teachers felt the need for contextualized local frameworks as this can allow them to include the interactive and reflexive positioning of their learners. Teachers' responses showed that more contextualized and localized frameworks like that of Tomlinson (2013) and Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018) were required in the Indian context which needs to be made readily available to teachers through teacher training programmes. This observation is in line with the arguments presented by McGrath (2016) for systematizing materials design for classroom teachers by providing them with standard frameworks which can be readily used for materials adaptation and is likely to constitute an important area for future research.

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