Old Wine in a New Bottle: Using Traditional Methods in an Online Set-Up

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Abstract
In this article, I write about the strategies that I used to teach English language skills, in the online mode, to BA Programme students, in the fluency in English course, formerly called Stream B. My hypothesis is that a small group benefits from a customized pedagogy that uses reading and conversation, permits bilingualism and gives due emphasis to writing, while optimizing the use of easily available online resources. It enhances their confidence and motivates them to take ownership of their learning.

Keywords: Language skills, reading, writing, online, strategy

The pandemic-induced transition to the online mode of teaching-learning forced us, as teachers, to reflect on our practices and to improvize in order to continue to engage the students, respond to their needs and add value to them in ways that they could perceive. In an offline class, cues like body language, silence and patterns of attendance give valuable feedback about the learners’ capability, interest and motivation. On a technological platform where the videos were almost always kept off—ostensibly to save data—the teacher can rely only on students’ verbal participation to gauge their involvement. The challenge is therefore to ensure interactivity.

In this article, my focus is on the strategies that I personally used to teach language to students of Stream B in English, in the online mode. My hypothesis is that for a small-sized group, we can customize the teaching to suit the individual needs of students. A pedagogy that uses reading and conversation, permits bilingualism and gives due emphasis to writing, while optimizing the use of easily available online resources...
and also respects the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) available to the students, can motivate them to take ownership of their learning.

Before I proceed further I would like to give a small biographical detail relating to my growing interest in pedagogy. In 2013, when the Four Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) was introduced in the University of Delhi, we were called for Orientation workshops, which trained us in what seemed a revolutionary pedagogy, for the Foundation course in Language, Literature and Culture (FC-LLC). The experience changed my whole attitude towards teaching and made me realize that there was much more to my profession than simply providing content through lectures. Thereafter, I began to seriously consider students’ queries about how they could improve their English. I had no easy solutions to offer. It seemed callous to advise students, who obviously lacked exposure and access to a print-rich environment, to merely “read more”.

Over the years, I have tried out different ways of making language classes interactive and relevant to student needs. Skits and role-playing, projects and presentations, writing in class, grammar practice through sentence construction, creating questionnaires and carrying out real surveys—these were some of the things that I tried. Having a good memory, I was able to recall names and could address each student by name. This helped to build a rapport and I would begin each class with a conversation to break the ice and get students to warm up to the session. I could make out that brighter students were polishing their skills and developing confidence. However, with the weaker students, I could not do much to enhance their linguistic proficiency. As we only offered Stream A at that time, the large class sizes made it impossible to personalize attention. Hence I was very glad when we began to divide batches into three streams.

Since Delhi University colleges have high cut-offs, there are very few students in Stream B. Some of them may have low scores in English because of reasons which have nothing to do with their proficiency in the language. In our college, we allow such students the option of choosing Stream A. However, in my experience, most of the students allocated the stream are language-poor and benefit through the different curriculum set for them. Since they form a small group, they also enjoy a very good student-teacher ratio. Small groups have been recommended by Muralidharan (2019) as an effective pedagogical strategy. They permit
customized interaction, enable the teacher to identify and thereby work on the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and motivate them through personalized attention.

There were sixteen students in this batch of 1st year (2nd semester) BA programme students, in the session beginning in April 2021, who had been allocated the stream “Fluency in English.” They had scored less than 80 per cent in English in their Class XII examination. They were significantly different from the BCom 1st year students, in Stream B, whom I had taught in the previous semester. Over the years, I have noticed that BA programme students are generally from a more disadvantaged socio-economic background as compared to BCom students, and this is reflected in their language proficiency. BA programme students are more likely to apply for fee concession. In their college application forms, in the space for “Parents’ Occupation,” many specify one of the following: driver, gardener, labourer, maid, security guard, chowkidar, etc. Hence, many belong to households which have BPL ration cards or Labour Cards and where siblings share a smartphone. Many are first generation learners from government schools. Compared to their peers in college, they are more likely to face the disadvantages of the digital divide, lacking easy access to gadgets, data and networks.

These connectivity issues were more pronounced in the early phase of the pandemic during the first lockdown when we were forced to hurriedly and haphazardly transition to the online mode. I was then teaching a Fluency in English class offline and I found that the most regular students were at a severe disadvantage because of restricted digital access. However, by April 2021, when I began teaching this particular class, I found that each student had access to a smartphone, though of variable quality. They often had issues with their mics. Two students who lived near the college applied for and were issued laptops from the college.

I announced at the beginning that I would keep a record of their participation in class activities and that I would set aside 20 per cent of the Internal Assessment for this. Barring two students who never showed up, participation of the remaining fourteen ranged from 29 per cent to 100 per cent. Participation did not reflect attendance as some students took longer to open up and to get easy with speaking in the online class. In the offline mode, it is easier to get every student to speak.
The first day, I assessed them for learning by asking them to speak about themselves. I also asked them to write down what they wanted from an English course. They wrote that they were looking for confidence. They wanted to overcome their hesitation in speaking and also to improve their language and vocabulary.

For Stephen Krashen (1985), the fundamental principle of L2 acquisition is the provision of comprehensible input and the lowering of affective filters such as stress and anxiety levels. He calls input “the essential environmental ingredient” and defines the affective filters as “mental blocks” which prevent learners from using the input (p. 3). This may occur when they lack confidence or motivation or feel ashamed of their weak language skills. Language teachers can strategically make their classes student-friendly by permitting bilingualism and using conversation as an easy rapport-building activity.

Bilingualism

Dornyei and Kormos (1998) note that L2 speakers have incomplete knowledge of the target language and hence lack the linguistic competence needed to express what they really want to say. Years ago, a student had asked for permission to use Hindi to speak on a topic in class. He had explained that he would be severely restricted to a few basic observations otherwise. I agreed, somewhat reluctantly, but later marvelled at the complexity of his arguments.

Auerbach (1993) supports the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. It validates the students’ pre-existing linguistic resources, reduces anxiety and supports the need for self-expression. Jinlan Tan (2002) and Sipra (2013) also note how the judicious and moderate use of L1 supports and facilitates the learning of L2. Hence I announced that they could speak in Hindi or use a mixture of Hindi and English—the important point was to participate in class discussions and other activities. One student admitted that in the AECC class of the previous semester, he had kept quiet throughout as the teacher had expressly forbidden the use of any language other than English in the class. Another spoke of why they were unable to make use of the Personality Development classes provided by the college—all students interacted in English and they felt that their language was not up to the mark for use in a public forum. I must mention here that the students mostly spoke in English—slipping into Hindi only occasionally when they felt really stumped.
Conversation

We had a regular conversation at the beginning of every class where they would speak about what they had done the previous day/week or about other topics of interest. These few minutes of conversation function as an ice-breaker because children open up to talking in class. It also makes them realize that their funds of knowledge have value (Moll et al., 1992).

About two weeks into the session, I invited a Communication Coach to speak to them about how to improve their language. Having a special invitee to cater to their need boosted their self-esteem and increased their sense of ownership. They seemed to realize that I was sincere about improving their language skills rather than merely trying to make them exam-ready.

Reading

Taguchi et al. (2016) note that L2 readers need abundant reading exposure. They also need motivation. Otherwise they will be trapped in the Matthew effect of the rich-get-richer poor-get-poorer cycle of reading achievement (Stanovich, 1986). Poor readers get trapped in a vicious circle in which they read less, understand less and lose interest. Used effectively, however, reading can be extremely empowering. Elley and Mangubhai (1983) write of 380 schoolchildren in Fiji who were provided with 250 interesting books which were read out and discussed. Silent reading was also encouraged. Within two years, this control group significantly outdid their peers in all tests of English proficiency.

I used reading out loud as a regular strategy to provide comprehensible input and to familiarize them with written language. Reading builds the ability to grasp words visually by recognizing familiar clusters. Level-appropriate texts help to enlarge and consolidate the vocabulary and understand usage. Appropriate scaffolding was provided by the syllabus. I started with the first suggested text: “Tales of Historic Delhi” (THD) by Premola Ghose, a children’s book. A.J. Hoges, while talking of his success in teaching English to children in various Asian countries, advises using fairly easy books with interesting content (pp. 146-147). THD was very popular with the class. The pictures were appealing, the font was readable and the content was relatable since even those who lived out of Delhi were familiar with the capital. They realized that the
vocabulary was mostly known. The text is graduated well so that readers can move steadily towards the more complex later portion. Students happily took turns to read and found it easy to answer questions on comprehension. I also used it to show punctuation and to list verbs. Torgesen et al. (2007) speak about how questions and discussions should remind students that while reading, the goal is to understand the text. Motivated readers who find the text interesting are more likely to apply the strategic and analytical skills needed to comprehend it.

Thereafter, I sequenced texts, moving from easy stories like *The Happy Prince*, *The Selfish Giant*, *The Tinder Box* and *The Little Prince*, to reading material of a slightly higher order of difficulty—like a Feluda story by Satyajit Ray and chapters from *Learning How to Learn*. This is a motivational book based on the most popular course in Coursera. It is written in simple language with just a few difficult words. Willingham notes that, to avoid “mental overload,” learners should face only a mild challenge in reading—if there are too many difficult words, the text becomes obscure and they lose interest because they have to open the dictionary too often (p. 123). I intentionally chose interesting books with illustrations and a large font. I thought of them as early readers and therefore was careful that nothing should frighten them away from reading. Towards the end of the session, I got them to read a few short newspaper articles. Each time I combined it with oral comprehension. Over the session, I noticed the improvement in their reading efficacy—marked on parameters like fluency, phonological awareness, quick word recognition and overall confidence.

Here I must mention how the online platform was a significant enabler. I could download the books and share my screen so that we were all literally on the same page as they read. Furthermore, I made sure not to use more than, say, 20 minutes of a class for reading. The idea was to encourage them to take up reading on their own by developing a positive attitude towards reading and improving their self-concept as readers.

Apart from the Extensive Reading which I curated, I also made a one-time use of Assisted Repeated Reading to give them an idea of the rich resources on the Internet. I used an audio-visual story—a children’s favourite—*The Enormous Crocodile* by Roald Dahl. The Youtube video had the book along with the audio so they could listen and read along. That took up a whole class but it was well worth it because they
enthusiastically discussed the ending, suggesting alternatives which they felt could have been more satisfying.

Writing

Steve Graham (2019) notes that the “goals for writing need to focus on using writing for real purposes and writing in a more realistic fashion” (p. 288). While I followed the syllabus for their writing topics, I tried to use authentic sources as prompts.

Book-Review and Note-Making: I used THD to talk about the book review. Since it was a book which they had actually read, they understood the concept well and wrote the review in class. I also used a few chapters of the same text to practise note-making. Later, when I gauged that their levels had improved, I made them practise note-making with excerpts from non-fiction books, choosing texts with simple vocabulary. Two such texts were Amitabh Ghosh’s *Climate Change: The Great Derangement* and *Learning How to Learn*.

Film Review: We watched one film together. It took a number of days as I screened it for only about 20 minutes per day. I chose the movie, “The Liftboy”, primarily because it has many dialogues in Indian English which they could understand easily along with the subtitles. We would follow up the screening with a discussion of what they had seen. Film is a good pedagogical tool for a language class. It keeps learners engaged and motivated (Kalra, 2017 & Goctu, 2017). It also promotes their oral skills (Ismaili, 2013). Furthermore, it enabled them to write a Film Review which was a compulsory part of the syllabus.

Other Writing: Their writing practice was quite intense to cover all the topics mandated by the syllabus. Some like the Book and Film Reviews and note-making were done through activities as mentioned above. With other tasks, I used different strategies. For learning how to write interviews, I made them do a group role play, based on a question set in a previous end-semester examination. The task was to write an interview of their local MLA. When I explained that they should think of actual problems in their locality and question their MLA on those, they came up with very intelligent questions and answers—far superior to the actual answers I had come across while evaluating fluency in English scripts of the external examination. In fact, during the paper-checking, I had found that many students actually did not read the
questions properly—their answers showed that they had failed to grasp what was being asked. Our educational system produces students who cannot read a question paper! To inculcate the habit of reading questions properly, I would get different students to read out the same question in old question papers.

I also taught them how to write applications by asking themselves the questions behind the writing: To whom were they writing, why were they writing—what was the issue and what solution did they suggest? Effective writing involves asking the right questions which can then be answered. Though we started with personal applications in college, they were able to apply the concept to writing FIRs and petitions which were syllabus topics.

**Their Ownership of Their Learning**

Conley’s (2013) conceptual model for student ownership of learning includes qualities like self-monitoring, goal orientation, self-awareness, motivation, persistence and help-seeking behaviour. These students were hardworking, regular and disciplined. When they understood that I was keen to mentor them, they were eager to collaborate and co-facilitate the learning process. This had the added benefit of reverse mentoring because they helped me to learn a lot about how to make a language class effective.

They suggested certain strategies which are traditional but often neglected. Firstly, they insisted on my discussing their mistakes in the fortnightly written assignments. Secondly, towards the end of the session, they suggested having debates and group discussions. One debate was on the topic of Open Book examinations (OBE) vs traditional examinations. Like students in other classes, they too made valid points against OBE. One hardworking girl, who was writing on her own in my class, explained that in the OBE she expected herself to simply copy the others because she still lacked confidence in herself.

They all told me how they were trying to improve their language. Their efforts ranged from trying to read the newspaper, to speaking in English with a sibling, to watching Youtube videos in Hindi with English subtitles, and using an online translator from Hindi to English.

The two students who had applied to the college for laptops shared copies of their applications with me. One of them had made the effort
to participate in every class. Though she had grammatical errors in her application, which was written without my help, it was very logically written and had the complete information. The other student had a 65 per cent participation rate (which reflected her attendance as she was quite smart and always made it a point to speak up). However she would often leave the class early, citing society work, and therefore she would miss out on many of the activities. She was not able to include all the necessary information. I correlated her inferior ability with her absenteeism. This is of course anecdotal evidence based on my subjective interpretation.

Impact

Due to the second wave of the pandemic, they had assessment–based exams so there was no summative external assessment of their learning. My own formative assessment is based on a reflective analysis of my detailed daily records of the classroom activities and their participation. That clearly revealed their responsiveness, their progressive improvement in all the four skills of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking and their enhanced self-confidence.

Currently, as fourth semester students doing the second part of the Fluency in English course, they are living proof of the validity of the pedagogy presented in this article. They are ready conversationalists, sharing their experiences, concerns, aspirations and successes. They are confident and active members of various college societies. They bring rich content to syllabus topics—often composing in L1 or in a mix of L1 and L2 and then translating to L2. They then use their native intelligence to organize it logically. They have also become fairly fluent newspaper readers—in a recent exercise, where they were asked to read and explain articles of their choice, they chose complex topics like hypersonic missiles, finlandization and the impact of the Ukraine war on fuel prices. For the final syllabus topic on social media, they have literally taken charge of their learning, and are making individual presentations on the different platforms suggested. With solid subject matter knowledge in L1, they have been able to transfer their “Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency” (CALP) to L2 (Cummins, 1979, as cited in Krashen, 1985).

It is evident that they have matured as students and have developed the ability to think critically.
Notes

1. The University of Delhi has tried to address the heterogeneous linguistic proficiency of students in English by having three different streams—A, B and C, renamed as Language through Literature, Fluency in English and English Proficiency, respectively, under the Choice Based Credit System. Streaming is based on the English scores in the Class XII board examination.

References


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