

Using Storytelling as Language Input in Task-Based Instruction in ESL Classroom in a Multilingual Setting

Aliya Halim

Abstract

India is a multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual nation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 lays importance in promoting multilingualism in the teaching-learning process in today's present-day classroom. Language acquisition of children depends on the creative construction model of language learning which is based on the learning input provided to them. Task-Based Learning (TBL) lays importance on authentic and purposeful tasks that will lead to student-student interaction.

The aim of this paper is to put forward the creative method of storytelling as an instructional strategy in English language classroom in a multilingual setting like India. It will examine storytelling as a language input in task-based learning instruction. This paper will also present some practical suggestions through examples for using storytelling as a language input in task-based learning instruction in English language classroom in a multilingual setup.

Keywords: Multilingual, input, task-based, storytelling, ESL

Introduction

India is culturally and linguistically vibrant and a country rich in diversity. It is characterized by a multitude of cultures, religions, languages and traditions. This makes India a multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual nation. As a result of this diversity there is a united and shared sense of national identity and cultural heritage present among Indians. This multicultural fabric makes India fascinating and dynamic,

where diversity is celebrated and cherished by everyone. This unique feature of India makes it essential for including different vernaculars in the school curriculum. There are over twenty-two officially recognized languages and numerous dialects that are spoken across the country.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has developed a language policy which is inclusive. It lays importance in promoting multilingualism in the teaching learning process in the present day classroom. The policy emphasizes the importance of language in shaping children and promoting linguistic diversity in educational settings in India. NEP continues to follow the three-language formula but with greater flexibility where students are allowed to choose from a wide range of languages including local and regional languages. NEP 2020 puts emphasis on the bilingual approach in teaching, that is, the medium of instruction given in school along with the use of mother tongue especially in the early years of education. This will help learners to comprehend the lesson easily. It will also help in the promotion of Indian regional languages especially those mentioned in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Overall, this approach will help in building an inclusive, accessible and equitable educational system.

Mother tongue, local language, regional language, vernacular languages are different terms that are used to describe the multilingual setting in India. According to Tsimpli and Lightfoot (2020), multilingualism improves “understanding of concepts due to the absence of equivalent terms, developing or retaining identity or for socio-cultural expression, accommodating the listener or speaker’s proficiency in one of the languages used or simply for the pragmatic reason that it might be quicker to explain something in one language than another” (n.p.). Language is essential in shaping our understanding of the world. If we do not know the right words and concepts to convey our thoughts and ideas, then it would be challenging to express our intended meaning. This can be a problem for people coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as they may struggle to express themselves effectively. This language gap could be bridged through multilingualism.

Any language development or growth depends on the creative construction model of language learning (Crain & Lillo-Martin 1999). This approach is also known as the “Constructivist” or “Generative” approach which proposes that children actively construct their own language systems through a combination of innate abilities and

environmental interactions. It states that similar to first language (L1) acquisition, the second language (L2) learning too is a creative process. Throughout the language learning process the L2 learners internalize language rules themselves based on the input provided to them. The input provided should be rich, varied and comprehensible. Therefore, sufficient language exposure plays a vital role in successful language acquisition. Long (1983) suggests that such opportunities for learners to participate in making meaning during verbal interactions in class has to be generated. This would establish the processing of whatever inputs were given to the learner as well as the outputs (the production of language). Instruction should then focus on comprehensible input and varied opportunities for learners to use language spontaneously and interact meaningfully. Task-Based Learning (TBL) lays importance on authentic and purposeful tasks that will lead to student-student interaction till the task is completed in class.

The aim of this paper is to put forward the creative method of storytelling as an instructional strategy in English language classroom in a multilingual setting like India that will provide meaning-focused input to the learners because of its communicative and interactive nature. It examines storytelling as a language input in task-based learning instruction. This paper highlights storytelling as a meaningful and enriching language input activity which can provide scaffolding to the students before the main task and increase interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves as well as enhance their language proficiency. This paper also presents some practical suggestions through examples for using storytelling as language input in task-based learning instruction in English language classroom in a multilingual setup.

Task-Based Language (TBL) Instruction and the Role of Language Input

Task-based language instruction includes three stages: Pre-task, While-task (Task Cycle) and Post-task (Language Focus). In the pre-task stage the teacher introduces the topic and the task to the students in class. While the task cycle stage the students plan the task, complete it and present what they have done. The post-task stage is for the teacher to give feedback and review what the students have done. In the pre-task stage the teacher instructs or demonstrates in the mother tongue/local

language/natural language for the students to follow and understand. In this stage linguistically enhanced input in English language such as vocabulary or grammar should not be given to the students. Task-based learning engages learners in scaffolded interaction as slow learners collaborate with their more proficient peers to complete the task as well as student-student negotiation of meaning also takes place. This interaction among students may take place in their mother tongue. Littlewood (2004) says that, students doing enabling tasks prepares them conceptually and linguistically to perform the communicative task later on. The enabling tasks include asking questions to the teacher, filling up gaps, problem-solving, etc.

Based on the above discussion, a classroom input can be sub-divided into three types: (a) Input for task setting—for example, instruction and demonstration (b) Form-focused input—for example, explaining grammar rules, imparting vocabulary, error correction (c) Meaning-focused input—for example, activities like class discussion, storytelling, story reading, songs/videos/film clips, newspaper reading, role-play, games, etc. The Form-focused input is directed by the teacher as the aim is to teach language skills to students. The Meaning-focused input is learner-directed and more communicative in nature. The learners engage in meaningful activities as they get exposed to, or explore or practise the target language skills. This type of input will engage learners' attention and learning will become meaningful. They will actively participate in classroom activity and in turn learn the target language. In Form-focused input, feedback is given by the teacher.

Storytelling as Meaning-Focused Input in TBL Instruction

Storytelling is considered one of the most effective-focused input activities because it is both interactive and communicative. It is beneficial for students learning a language. Firstly, stories and task-based learning are theme-based which provides linguistic support and creative ideas for completing the main task. Secondly, stories provide a natural and enjoyable way to expose students to a language. Lastly, it acts as a rich teaching resource for EFL/ESL teachers to teach phonics, vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, etc. Therefore, storytelling as a teaching technique at the pre-task stage is useful, as it does not make language learning a mechanical process, instead makes it fun and an enjoyable one.

Storytelling is an oral activity that involves interpretation of a traditional, literary or personal story. The story can be fairytales, folk tales, traditional stories, mythological stories, biographies as well as personal stories. Such variation allows teachers chances to use storytelling at the pre-task stage to scaffold learners to different tasks such as phonics, vocabulary, grammar, reading, listening, speaking and writing tasks. For instance, the teacher shares her experience of her visit to the Taj Mahal in the form of a story. This will arouse the interest of students to read travel stories or learn about the Taj Mahal. The teacher should keep in mind that the story should interest the learners. It should relate to the learners' life experiences. The length of the story should not be very long as it might distract the students and there will not be enough time left for them to complete the task in class. The plot of the story should be simple for the students to understand according to their level or standard of learning. The language used by the teacher can be the mother tongue or the local language which will make the students readily understand the story. While the teacher is narrating the story in the mother tongue he/she can introduce and repeat target language items that he/she wants the students to acquire. The students will pick up the new words, phrases and sentences subconsciously.

The following are certain steps that a teacher needs to follow while delivering stories to students in class (Hess 2001; Peck 1989). Firstly, before narrating a story in class the teacher should rehearse it well so that it is delivered in a natural way to the students. This part is thrilling as the teacher interweaves the real and the imaginary world together for the students. Secondly, even though storytelling has its own pedagogical purpose of providing language input to learners yet the teacher should devote the class time in sharing a story with his/her students in an enjoyable and lively manner in the mother tongue or local language rather than putting emphasis only on teaching language. Thirdly, before beginning the storytelling session, a few minutes should be allotted for warm up activities where students are asked questions from their own personal experiences or allowed to make predictions relating to the content of the story. Fourthly, props like pictures, photographs and models can be used for better understanding of the main details of the story. Fifthly, while narrating the story the teacher can write down the particular words he/she wants to impart on the white board or show it through a power-point.

Throughout the storytelling process the teacher continuously interacts with the students in the mother tongue or the local language. He/she makes the students guess what will take place next in the story, give his/her views on any particular episode of the story and ask questions to see whether the students comprehend it or not correctly.

Task Design

Sample Lesson 1

The following example will show how the mother tongue is used in a storytelling session in class (duration 45 minutes) to develop speaking skill in students of Class 1 (age group 5-6 years). The teacher makes use of a children's story "बिल्ली और दूध" (Billi aur Doodh—Cat and Milk). The word introduced is "Drink" (पीना). The steps the teacher follows to conduct this session are—he/she first reads the Hindi story "बिल्ली और दूध" to the students. Then the teacher stops at the point where the cat wants to drink milk (बिल्ली दूध पीना चाहती है— The cat wants to drink milk). He/she asks the students to repeat the Hindi word "पीना" (peena) and explains its meaning. After that she introduces the English word "Drink" and explains its meaning. The teacher can make use of flashcards or visual aids to reinforce the vocabulary. In the post-task stage the teacher makes the students practise and repeat sentences like "Billi doodh peena chahti hai" (बिल्ली दूध पीना चाहती है)— "The cat wants to drink milk." He/she can also engage their students in a fun activity like drawing a cat drinking milk and labelling it with the English word "Drink." This approach helps students connect the English vocabulary to a familiar Hindi context, making learning language more accessible and enjoyable in a multilingual classroom.

Sample Lesson 2

The level will change for Class 5 (age group 10-11 years). The duration of the class is 45 minutes. The teacher narrates the story titled "अलादीन और जादू का चिराग" (Aladdin aur Jadu ka Chirag—Aladdin and the Magic Lamp) to introduce the English word "Discover" (खोज करना). He/she reads the Hindi story "अलादीन और जादू का चिराग" to the students. He/she stops at the point where Aladdin discovers the magic lamp (अलादीन ने जादू का चिराग खोजा) and asks students to recall the Hindi word "खोज करना" (khoj karna) and explain its meaning to them. He/she then introduces the English word "Discover" and explains its meaning, highlighting

its connection with “खोज करना.” He/she makes use of flashcards or visual aids to reinforce the vocabulary. In the post-task stage he/she makes the students practise and repeat sentences like “Aladdin ne jadu ka chirag khoj kiya” (अलादीन ने जादू का चिराग का खोज किया) – “Aladdin discovered the magic lamp.” He/she also engages students in a discussion by asking questions like “What are some amazing things you have discovered recently?” and also encouraging them to use the English word “Discover” in their responses.

Sample Lesson 3

Here is another example of using a story to teach English sentences to Class 5 students (age group 10-11 years) in a Bengali medium school. The teacher narrates the story titled “আমার বন্ধু রহিম” (Amar Bondu Rahim—My Friend Rahim) to the students in class (duration of 45 minutes). He/she stops at the point where Rahim’s love for football is mentioned “Rahim football khelte pachanda kare” (রহিম ফুটবল খেলতে পছন্দ করে—Rahim likes to play football). He/she asks the students to repeat the Bengali sentence and explain its meaning to them. Then he/she introduces the English sentence “My friend Rahim likes to play football” and translates it into Bengali “Amar bandhu Rahim football khelte pachanda kare” (আমার বন্ধু রহিম ফুটবল খেলতে পছন্দ করে). He/she makes the students focus on the English sentence structure “My friend [name] likes to [activity].” He/she makes them practise with different names and activities and encouraging students to create their own sentences. The teacher can also engage the students in an enjoyable activity like sticking a photo of their friend and writing a short paragraph about their friend’s interests using the English sentence structure they have learnt. In this way the students connect the English sentence structure to a familiar Bengali context, building their language skills and confidence in using English.

Sample Lesson 4

Here is another example of using a Bengali story to teach English grammar to Class 8 students (age group 13-14 years) in a Bengali medium school. The teacher tells a biographical story named “বিদ্যাসাগরের জীবনী” (Vidyasagarer Jiboni—The Life of Vidyasagar) in the class (duration of 45 minutes). He/she is going to teach the Past Perfect Tense in English grammar. The teacher reads the Bengali story “বিদ্যাসাগরের জীবনী” to the students, focusing on Vidyasagar’s achievements. He/she stops at a point

where Vidyasagar's past actions are described like for example, "তিনি বহু বছর ধরে লেখাপড়া করেছিলেন" (He had studied for many years). He/she then asks his/her students to identify the Bengali equivalent of the Past Perfect tense (তিনি... করেছিলেন—he... had done). He/she introduces the English Past Perfect tense, explaining its usage and structure (example: "He had studied..."). He/she uses flashcards or visual aids to illustrate the difference between Past Simple and Past Perfect tenses. He/she makes the students practice exercises on converting Bengali sentences to English using the Past Perfect tense. For example: Complete the given sentence: "By the time Vidyasagar _____ (finish) his studies, he _____ (become) a renowned scholar." He/she then engages the students in a class discussion on "What had you done before you entered Class 8?" and encouraging them to use the Past Perfect tense in their responses. This will help students to connect the English grammar concept to a familiar Bengali context, making learning more accessible and interesting.

Implications

The examples given above show how meaning-focused input for teaching English vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure can be done through the storytelling method. This suggests that if stories are correctly chosen and delivered properly to students it can act as a powerful instructional tool making learning a foreign language interesting and easy. It is also helpful for the teacher as the students get engrossed in the lesson and learning becomes an enjoyable activity.

The storytelling process is dynamic and interactive. The teacher engages the students and gives them many opportunities to guess what is going to happen next. Storytelling sessions in class allows students an exposure to different language forms and also gives them the scope to reproduce the language items in a natural communicative context. The students gain a deeper understanding of the linguistic forms and their functions. While the students are listening to the story, the teacher may make them aware of different words, their function, usage and meaning depending on the context they are used in. This will develop in the students guessing strategies to understand unfamiliar words. The students automatically learn new vocabulary for both first and second language acquisition.

Conclusion

Therefore, storytelling sessions in class are motivating, encouraging, and helps develop a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language like English or learning a language in general. The English teachers can code-switch from native language to English language. It provides students both linguistic input and innovative ideas for the task they have to do. However, the expected learning outcome will differ depending on the type of story delivered, the way it is delivered and how the teacher interacts with his/her students during and after the storytelling session in class. Though the storytelling method is time consuming and involves creativity yet considering the benefits it can bring to the students like, for example, students' active participation in the lesson, students' attention engagement, students' increased interaction, confidence building and supporting language learning, such effort is definitely worth taking. This hybrid mode of teaching needs to be welcomed by educators and adopted particularly in the beginning stage of English language learning.

References

- Crain, S. & Lillo-Martin, D. (1999). *An Introduction to linguistic theory and language acquisition*. Blackwell Publishing. <https://archive.org/details/introductiontoli0000crai/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater>
- Hess, N. (2001). Teaching large multilevel classes. Cambridge University Press. https://assets.cambridge.org/97805216/67852/frontmatter/9780521667852_frontmatter.pdf
- Littlewood, W. (2004). The task-based approach: Some questions and suggestions. *ELT Journal*, 58(4), 319-326. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/58.4.319>
- Long, M.H. (1983). Native speaker/ non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 126-141. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.126>
- Peck, J. (1989). Using storytelling to promote language and literacy development. *The Reading Teacher*, 43(2), 138-141. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20200308>
- Tsimpli, I. M. & Lightfoot, A. (November 25, 2020). India: Investigating multilingual classrooms. IIEP learning portal, UNESCO. <https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/blog/india-investigating-multilingual-classrooms>

Aliya Halim is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Neotia University, West Bengal. Her research interests focus on ELT, translation, folklore and minority studies in South Asia.
aliya.chowdhury@gmail.com