

THE ‘NOVEL EXPERIENCE’: AN ENSEMBLE OF LINGUISTIC COMPETENCIES

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ABSTRACT

The discouraging output of English language teaching in India in terms of learner proficiencies and their linguistic competencies owes to the absence of ‘Intriguing reading content’ in most of the teaching pedagogies we follow today. While general reading is itself a misnomer in the present education scenario, absorbing reading material is a veritable rarity. Though reading forms part of the four cardinal skills of human communication, this golden habit is being fast replaced by practices like surfing, browsing and googling brought in with the advent of internet. While reading entails certain eligibility criteria, it ensures specific outcomes like a fundamental awareness of standard sentence patterns, apt and ingenious use of vocabulary as befitting the context, very elevating and exhilarating ideas and concepts of life and also, more importantly, it knocks at the dormant creative impulses in readers. In this context, the ‘novel’ is the most enticing literary form which can stir optimal interest in readers and drive them towards surprising levels of linguistic comprehension, usage and proficiency. This paper strongly recommends enhanced emphasis on reading skills, especially loud reading by students, in teaching learning tasks and also novel as the main ingredient in reading materials.

KEYWORDS: Context, Creative Impulse, Intense Reading, Novel Experience, Reading Habits

INTRODUCTION

‘Intense Reading’ is a kind of reliving of the life account that the book encapsulates, by the reader. It is more than understanding a topic, more than accumulating ideas or information and much more than acquiring mere linguistic proficiencies. It is an experience unto itself which brings forth an inner transformation at various levels of one’s being. Though reading forms part of the four cardinal skills of human communication, this golden habit is being fast replaced by practices like surfing, browsing and googling brought in with the advent of internet. One reason, besides this, is the absence of ‘intriguing reading content’ in the curricula and in the hordes of other programmes and communication skills training modules in vogue everywhere. This is more so in the Indian context. A gripping narrative, a life episode dramatised, a powerful dialogue which involves a controversial social issue, a thrilling and enigmatic depiction of an unusual life happening - are all possible material which propel the readers’ interest but not the dry and unconnecting rules, prescriptions and artificial business situations which unfortunately form the staple diet of syllabus in education today. The reader, i.e, the student of ESL in our context, has to be first drawn into the natural usage of language in its myriad life-situations and then given training in communication modes of specific and more sophisticated professional contexts of language usage. The one practice that complements and consolidates all other practices like listening, speaking and writing is the inspiring endeavour of ‘reading’.

PANINI'S PRESCRIPTION

One of the most crucial factors for the deficient language competencies of second language learners is 'Poor Reading Habits'. Certain habits of an individual help him improve a specific set of skills. Reading is one such habit that influences one's language to a great extent. The language (expressions, phrases and idioms) of a person with good reading habits sounds more natural and effective than that of the one with poor reading habits. The one who reads more will naturally have more exposure to the varied expressions, words and phrases and this will result in an effective usage of the language with ease and flexibility. While reading entails certain eligibility criteria, it ensures specific outcomes like a fundamental awareness of standard sentence patterns, apt and ingenious use of vocabulary as befitting the context, very elevating and exhilarating ideas and concepts of life and also, more importantly, it knocks at the dormant creative impulses in readers. In addition to the numerous benefits that silent reading bestows, loud reading is more profound in impact in the sense that it potentially influences the readers' articulatory prowess and skills. The greatest grammarian that the world has seen, the masterful Panini, gives an epigrammatic instruction to readers and speakers alike in the following Sanskrit verse:

Madhurya Maksharavyakthihi Padachchedantu Suswaram

Dhairyam Layasamardham-cha Shadaythe Patakha Gunah

In essence, this sloka lists out six crucial qualities that a good reader is supposed to possess, viz., a melodious tone, clear pronunciation of syllables, administering pauses at right places while rendering sentences, proper intonation, and confidence in communication and speaking in rhythmic cadences. This prescription holds good even today and these elements are to be given emphasis in the second language pedagogy. If loud reading is duly accommodated in the present day curricula, these six seminal elements of spoken communication enunciated by Panini could be positively ensured.

NURTURING READING HABITS

In addition to personal and mental developments, reading is an access to social, economic and civic life (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). It is therefore regarded that the language teachers and trainers must train the students to develop reading habits. Krashen (1996) says that this habit of reading and specific interests could be nurtured at an early age. But, to deal with upper-intermediate and graduate students, teachers need to put in more efforts to taste better outcomes. At any stage of learning, it is suggested that the teachers need to use the techniques that stimulate learners' interests. The class room instruction must help learners form good reading habits which will eventually develop their language proficiency and communicative ability.

In this context, the 'novel' is the most enticing literary form which can stir optimal interest in readers and drive them towards surprising levels of linguistic comprehension, usage and proficiency. A 'novel' is a bundle of life contexts woven together by the rich tapestry of emotion, feeling, circumstance and consequence. Comparatively a recent form, the novel is a synthesis of other major genres of literature, viz., drama, elements of poetry, biography, travelogue, etc.

THE 'NOVEL' EXPERIENCE

English teachers, when they prescribe situations for dialogues and role-playing, could select them from novels where a frisky real-life situation is depicted, instead of going for situations which generally lack both personal and emotional appeal to students' psyche. Here is a delectable nugget from R.K. Narayan's supremely famous novel 'Swami and Friends'.

"What have you written for the last question?" Swaminathan asked a class-mate.

"Which? The moral question... Don't you remember what the teacher said in the class? ... 'Love of gold cost the brahmin his life.' "

"Where was gold there?" Swaminathan objected. "There was only a gold bangle. How much have you written for the question?"

"One page," said the class-mate.

"What! You should not have written so much."

A little later he found Rajam and Sankar. "Well, boys, how did you find the paper?"

"How did you find it?" Sankar asked.

"Not bad," Swaminathan Said

"I was afraid only of Tamil," said Rajam, "now I think I am safe. I think I may get passing marks."

This sample of informal conversation among teenage boys contains all the requisite elements which go into the making of spoken idiom, like sentence patterns, questioning modes, a variety in tense usage, colloquialisms and vocabulary. But more appealing and compelling than these, is the instantaneous relish that the context gives to the typical Indian students.

THE SUPREME POWER OF CONTEXT

The words and the phrases just form parts of a sentence but it is the context that communicates with the reader. When the core of a context gets yoked to the inner sensibilities of readers' mental landscape, it can take the readers in its hands and direct them towards the desired destination effortlessly. Dell Hymes (1972) says that the key to understanding language is to start not with language but with context. The greatest challenge before the English teacher is to create powerful and propelling contexts for the understanding and practice for students. Here, 'Which novels should be used' gains vital importance and the work chosen must arouse the learner's interests and draw out positive response from them. The works which are very relevant to the beliefs, values and day-to-day life of learners are bound to influence them at a deeper level. Hence, the selection of such English novels could serve as the most efficacious technique for motivating the learners towards the formation of good reading habits as these works engage the learners intellectually, emotionally and linguistically.

'Readers negotiate with the author by applying their prior knowledge to it' (Maleki & Heerman, 1992) Following is another snippet of interesting conversation between an elderly wise man and a thirteen-year old school going girl from Ashwin Sanghi's best selling 2010 novel 'Chanakya's Chant'.

She fiddled nervously with her pencil as Gangasagar looked at her. 'Very good,

Chandini. Can you tell me what that means?'

'Ahimsa means non-violence.'

'Does that mean refusing to fight?'

‘No. Ahimsa is not cowardice. It takes a very brave man to face blows head-on.’

‘So it’s about getting your way without coming to blows for it?’

‘Yes. But you need to have the moral authority to make people understand what you want to achieve. Gandhiji’s moral authority was very great.’

‘And can you tell me what gave him that moral authority?’

‘The personal example that he set for others?’ asked Gupta’s daughter hesitantly.

The names of characters, the setting and context, the linguistic structures of the sentences used as well as the content of the verbal exchange are all in line with the cultural make up of Indian students and an interest is likely to be generated in them when samples of this kind are included in teaching and learning materials. Researchers like Carson and Longhini (2002) also support the naturalistic learning contexts which influence the types and frequency of learning strategies that learners employ.

CONCLUSIONS

A pertinent diagnosis of the reasons leading to malnutrition in the reading habits of students is that the teachers, a majority of them, are not able to inspire or influence a student to take to passionate general reading. Such a motivation can take place and yield desirable results when the teaching content as well as the exercises and laboratory tasks are restructured with material which abounds in anecdotes, narratives, conversations etc., from carefully chosen novels. This will further help the learners form reading habits which play the most crucial role in enhancing language competencies.

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