

Chapter 16

Reflective Teaching, Teacher Education, and Professional Development



M. Raja Vishwanathan

Abstract This chapter recounts the reflective practice of the author straddling two parallel roles—as an ELT researcher/practitioner and a teacher of heterogeneous groups of learners at various levels, recognizing in the process the limitations of any teacher training course as also the necessity of critical reflection. The takeaway from this experience is that a one-size-fits-all approach fails the teacher, leading to unproductive labor and waste of time and efforts. To be alive to the crucial moments of “critical incidents” (Farrell, *ELT Journal* 62:3–10, 2008: 3) is what marks the difference between a teacher and a teacher with empathy. It is very essential never to lose sight of the primary stakeholders—learners—and any method/ approach/ material that enables learning to happen, no matter how trivial, should be incorporated into the repertoire of teachers. The theoretical inputs available to a teacher are simply too inadequate to account for the endless possibilities coming a teacher’s way in teaching. Making a success of teaching rests with the teachers who need to arm themselves with empathy, understanding, and awareness of conditions under which learning happens to get the most out of teaching. Intelligent teachers innovate with a teaching apparatus they see fit to achieve the aims and objectives of the curriculum.

Keywords Critical pedagogy · L1 use · Reflective teaching · Teacher education · Translanguaging · Authentic materials · Mother tongue · Critical incidents · First-generation learners

Introduction

The limitations of theory and the miracles of serendipity came at once to educate me and enlighten my own beliefs about teaching practices when I cut my professional teeth as a teacher long ago. It was a time when to be young and be a teacher was very heaven and I had no illusions as to what constituted good teaching practices and what went into making one a good teacher. I was out in the market with a freshly minted

M. Raja Vishwanathan (✉)
National Institute of Technology, Warangal 506004, Telangana, India
e-mail: vishwanathan@nitw.ac.in

Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE) from one of the premier institutes in the country that offers diplomas specific to English language teaching.

What had neatly escaped my professional eye was that “good” is a positive adjective while *better* and *best* are comparative and superlative terms waiting to be used as well. I also realized rather late in the day but nevertheless realized, that teaching and learning never cease to surprise: Every day is a new day and every session a brand new session even if the materials and methods are time tested and the teacher an old hand with the same bag of tricks. Old teachers need to master new tricks if they are to win the loyalty and admiration of the master and the disciples—the teaching profession that is, and learners. What therefore differentiates effective teachers from merely good teachers is not just teaching approaches but employing changes appropriate to the situation vis-à-vis the learner group they are teaching, learner background, learner aptitudes, learning styles, and attitudes, all of which impact the success or failure of teaching. I was also to appreciate how necessary it was to engage in “willing suspension of disbelief” and sometimes even belief altogether when teaching learners from heterogeneous backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework

The practicum component of teaching that one did as part of teacher training program dealt with theoretical models and underpinnings of teaching approaches and methods and philosophies at work while classroom experience gained from practice teaching revealed how theories translated as practice in actual classroom situation(s).

Any teacher education program or professional development course is expected to answer the following requirements of potential teachers or those wishing to enter the profession:

- i. Consider what they need to know, and know about, for their practice.
- ii. Relate to the theory they can clearly connect to their practice.
- iii. Reflect on their own beliefs and practice and the connection between them.
- iv. Gain ideas for their practice.
- v. Share experiences from their practice.
- vi. Experience something as a learner that can then be taken into their teaching (Sokel, 2019: 2).

It has been very appropriately observed with regard to many of the teacher education programs:

“... teaching needs and wants are unpredictably numerous. Most training programs, it was argued, ignore this diversity, instead aiming to transmit a once-and-for-all set of authorized practices for teachers to take away and implement in whatever context they find themselves. This approach is fatally flawed both in terms of content and process (McMorrow, 2007: 375).”

This was precisely the situation facing the author of this chapter years ago when he set out to teach at various levels—high school, degree college, an International

Training Program at a premier institute now a full-fledged university, engineering colleges and eventually, at National Institute of Technology, Warangal, the experience gathered over the years in ESL classrooms with different sets of learners being an exercise in enlightenment and new forms of wisdom. The classroom teaching experience in ESL classrooms as a teacher of English language led one to several home truths: like the proverbial river, one does not step into the same classroom twice nor does one step into any classroom with confirmed ideas about what teaching methods and materials to use to extract the best out of learners and attain success as a teacher.

Any theoretical framework rests on a set of informed assumptions about teaching and learning and one thread of commonality uniting the frameworks is placing the learner at the heart of the teaching–learning experience. But this statement trivializes the whole gamut of what passes for and in the name of effective teaching–learning—that elusive term which is best summed up by one word: *expertise*. No matter how experienced and what expertise one commands, there is always yet another hitherto unreported instance of learning coming my way to warn me or demanding that I revisit familiar and fond notions of what is valid, reliable, or time tested.

I also realized that the onus on reflection is on the individual and not the system. A successful teacher is one who can integrate into their teaching beliefs, practices, innovations they are successful in achieving over the course of their professional journey from a novice to a professional. There is a glass ceiling on what teacher education programs can deliver by way of providing crucial inputs to a potential teacher with regard to desirable/ideal/recommended teaching methods, but the ball of imagination is always in the court of the teacher (trainee) to play the way (s)he wants to and make a success of their education.

While teacher education programs provide broad outlines and contours of what reflective thinking entails—“think about what happened, why it happened, and what else could have been done to reach their goals” (Cruishank & Applegate, 1981: 553), there is nothing like the personal road to Damascus for every teacher to effect a change of heart and mind. Lucas et al., (2014: 363) have provided a useful framework that has in mind low proficiency learners of the type we find in India. They observe that “A safe, welcoming classroom environment with minimal anxiety about performing in a second language is essential for ELLs to learn” as many other scholars have pointed out. The English language learner that Lucas et al. have in mind would be the equivalent of second language learners of English with limited or low proficiency in English language in India.

Yet another classification based on critical incidents in the language classroom involving learners is recommended, the incidents being classified into nine categories—“language proficiency, class participation, behavior, gender, classroom space, lesson objectives, classroom activities, attention spans, additional class assistance” (Farrell, 2008: 4). A critical incident is defined as a “vividly remembered event which is unplanned and unanticipated.” (Brookfield 1990; cited in Farrell, 2008: 3). A defining feature of any such critical incident is that it is often found in incidents that most teachers would take for granted and fail to attach any significance to it. Thus, any typical or ordinary incident becomes critical after the teacher analyzes the event and explains why it is critical.

The first and most indispensable move when identifying instances of “critical incidents” entails moving away from set ways of thinking and believing and waiting for the eureka moment in class to reach the wisdom that had been elusive like the Higgs Boson. The second move involves teachers with some experience bringing that experience to teacher educators so that the entire batch of learners may benefit from collective experience sharing. Teachers cannot and do not always learn everything they need to about classroom management, teaching, learning, and/or evaluation in any formal course designed for the purpose. Theories often fall down when reality intrudes and speaks facts to teachers. It is the teacher’s responsibility, therefore, to collect, recollect and process such experiences as have been useful in getting to know and appreciate learners under their pastoral care better. Christopher Day (1993; cited in Farrell, 2014: 6) offers three hierarchical levels of reflection by a teacher that come in handy to deal with reflective practice: (i) descriptive reflection “where teachers focus their reflections on behavioral actions,” (ii) conceptual reflection “where teachers include justifications of these reflections based on current theories of teaching,” and (iii) critical reflection “where teachers look beyond theories and practices to examine their meaning within ethical, moral, and social ramifications.”

The indispensability of critical reflection was driven home to me in many ways in a career that is now more than two decades old and continuing. The moment of epiphany from Pope’s aphorism “What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d” came to me in the form of data on critical thinking/ pedagogy/ reflection. It has given me solace during critical moments of a career shaped as much by my approach and thinking as my learners, steeped though I was in naivety and theories in my “salad days, When I was green in judgment, cold in blood,” charting untested waters of teaching with tests and testiness. Critical reflection captures in all glory the brevity and perspicacity of an illuminating thought process. It enables teachers to continually and constructively engage with their own teaching methods and approaches, examine their dearly maintained beliefs, and change these beliefs and assumptions for the better. It also helps teachers jettison any school of thought that might pose a hurdle to the teaching–learning process, cultivate a degree of healthy skepticism about their own aims and objectives, and think of better ways to achieve learning.

Background

As a teacher of English, my first and primary preoccupation is of course teaching learners English every time I was given a class of learners to teach English as a second language, at levels ranging from high and middle school to degree college and engineering colleges to university. While my academic qualifications bestowed me with knowledge that qualified me to teach literature/language, they did not prepare me for the actual classroom experience which I had the opportunity of sampling when I joined a school affiliated with a state board to teach students of eighth and ninth standard. Thus commenced my eventful and eventual journey into the world of

teaching, nuances of which I mastered along the way. It has often been said that experience comes from good judgment and good judgment comes from bad/unpleasant experiences and I have lived to prove the adage true.

Teaching Disadvantaged Students

As a teacher, I knew what I needed to do to teach but there were other aspects that needed looking into as well—the privilege of my English medium education and my socioeconomic background vs the ostensible “disadvantage” of the learners’ regional medium education. Hence, I employ the term disadvantage with informed caution since disadvantage is what learners who have had all their education in regional medium schools come with when they encounter the daunting task of having to follow taught courses and lectures in English, having to thus master not only subjects but also the language itself through which subjects are taught. This indeed can be a very trying prospect as they try to come to terms with a second language which might as well be a foreign language to them. They may have been condemned by poverty and circumstances not to enjoy the luxury of English medium education or the possibility of private tuition to learn the language in the privacy of their home. This double whammy is tripled when there is stubborn insistence on using English to teach English and offering all inputs in English, thereby handicapping honest efforts by learners to learn a language they know they must master to achieve a modicum of success once they graduate with a degree.

I was witness to this when I taught students of MA (English) at a state university where I was requested to teach key terms and concepts in Telugu by a group of students who were genuinely in need of help with English, the MA hardly meeting their linguistic needs. Far from expressing shock and disgust at the request from students who ought to be taught English only through English at a postgraduate level, I recollected in my mind’s eye the mellifluous Tamil employed by a Professor who taught poetry and prose to students of BA (English) at a state university and whose command of English was as brilliant as his command of Tamil was. He was able to mesmerize the audience with his lectures drawing heavily from examples in Tamil literature to show how writers, poets, and dramatists shared world views. Thus, Shakespeare came alive with parallel examples from writers writing on similar themes in Tamil literature. This was the first instance of critical reflection about the “wisdom” of using L1 that reached me when I myself dallied with and then firmly took to the idea of using L1 without any feelings of guilt.

Use of Mother Tongue

Vennela (2018: 54) records how “using an Indian language in an English medium classroom is often accompanied by an element of guilt on the part of the teacher.”

This is partly because there is no official policy or teacher directive which outlines the benefits and use of bilingual methods as part of school-level teaching. Therefore, using a local language in English medium classrooms is generally perceived as “diluting” the quality of education.

Worse, it is officially endorsed by the management of schools and colleges where using a local language is not only seen as a stigma but as evidence of a teacher’s incompetence in the target language—enough evidence to target teachers and dismiss them from service! Labeled the monolingual fallacy by Phillipson (1992), this fallacy has captured the imagination of everyone looking to educate learners using the best possible means. Principals of schools, owners of schools and colleges, senior teachers and professors have taken such a fancy to this notion that any attempt at using L1 is sneered at and becomes cause for questioning the English teacher’s proficiency in English and their ability to use English. It was a baptism of fire that greeted me, a teaching activity that initiated introspection that has stayed with me till today. The experience of critical self-reflection and how much it matters to a teacher manifested itself that day and it was among the few experiences that transformed my attitude to and views about teaching and learning.

I started my career as a teacher of English, teaching high school students in a residential school that was known for its elitism and exacting standards expected of teachers and therefore students. The rules were clear as well; no use of any language other than English in the English classroom, and it was so easy to conform to such established norms as the guilt of not being able to use mother tongue did not attach to me.

Students came from well-heeled backgrounds and all I needed to do was teach the texts and teach to the test, happy that all the responsibilities at my end had been met. I was never happier and I assumed that any typical Indian ESL classroom would be no different from the one I had been teaching. I was confident of teaching any group anywhere because my first experience turned out to be a very pleasant and easy-to-manage experience. Students were happy that they had been taught English and that they needed to commit to memory answers to earn good marks and I was satisfied because I had a pre-defined textbook, syllabus, and evaluation modes. I was not required to stretch myself in any way.

College Teaching

The truth hit me hard when I made the transition from school teaching to degree college and from degree college to a short stint as a teacher of Spoken English at Ramakrishna Mutt, followed by another brief but highly enriching stint on the International Training Program (ITP) offered at EFL University, Hyderabad, to adult learners of English from various countries in Asia and Africa. And then as a teacher of English to undergraduate students of engineering in private engineering colleges and from there on to a National Institute of Technology. Thus, I appeared to have covered the gamut of professional experience as a teacher teaching English not only

as a second language but also as a foreign language to foreigners undergoing a three-month proficiency course in India. Well and truly the white man's burden was being lifted off his tired shoulders and the onus of realizing Macaulay's dreams for other postcolonial subjects was being felt and dutifully fulfilled with surgical professionalism in India by an Indian steeped in the new evangelism of Phillipson (1992) and Canagarajah (2014), who have been warning the uninitiated about the lurking evils of linguistic imperialism and neocolonialism in and through English.

I recollect some such memorable experiences here and how such experiences shaped my evolution as a teacher and mentor. I cut my professional teeth as a school teacher, as I had mentioned before, and then moved on to teach undergraduate students of degree college, i.e., students of arts, sciences, and commerce and computer applications. There were two eventful and eventual periods of soul searching between the time I gave up school teaching and decided to graduate to teaching undergraduate students of arts, science, and commerce, and then undergraduate students of engineering and business administration. These were two significant events marking my coming of age as one who needed to abandon tried-and-tested theories committed to memory in the PGDTE classroom, which would soon be abandoned in favor of personal experience and observation. Student feedback and needs analysis informed all my teaching methods once I became a teacher facing hundreds of eager and curious young minds ready to imbibe what they could from a figure of authority.

Teaching of English as a Foreign Language Experience

One was the time I spent teaching a three-month on the ITP at Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL, now English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad). The program had adult professionals drawn predominantly from Africa (Senegal, Sao Tome and Principe, Djibouti, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana, etc.), Asia (former republics of the erstwhile USSR—Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Georgia, etc.), occasionally from Central America (Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras), and Latin America (Colombia, Venezuela). The professionals spoke and interacted in their respective mother tongues and one common language of their regions. For example, those from Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Georgia spoke Russian which was a common language while they also used their mother tongues, Uzbek, Tajik, Armenian, etc., when interacting with their people from their own region. Likewise, those from Francophone countries such as Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, etc., in Africa spoke French while also trying to use English.

In order to make everyone feel at home, I would divide them into groups based on the common language they shared and give them authentic materials dealing with countries they came from. I would, for instance, bring to class articles dealing with African culture and tradition which everyone would read about. There would then be lively discussions about the cuisine, religions, languages, vegetation, crops, and culture of Africa, followed by a discussion about what makes Africa unique. The

next day there would be articles dealing with Asia and her cultures, cuisines, way of life, religion, etc.

The emphasis would be on what united Africa and Asia and not much on what divided them. This was a method that students found very appealing. In addition to English, which the teacher would use extensively, students would learn gradually commonly used idioms, phrasal verbs, essential words, and sentences to communicate at the basic level and then move on to advanced levels.

Students were encouraged to translate what they read, use bilingual dictionaries, seek the help of their better informed or more linguistically equipped counterparts to read, write, and speak English. What started out as a reading and writing activity soon involved other elements as well—speaking, debating, exchange of ideas, learning new vocabulary, listening to peers, note-taking, grammar-based activities, etc. For example, learners looked for similarities in African and Asian cultures, way of life, mindset, etc., so learners drew up a chart detailing what united people of different continents.

- i. Love of football which Africans jokingly called “socca,” pidgin for soccer.
- ii. Bland cuisine with plenty of meat dishes forming their eating habits.
- iii. Allergy for and avoidance of spices in cooked dishes.
- iv. Varied climatic conditions and rich vegetation.
- v. Geography and nature of soil which allowed varied vegetation to flourish.
- vi. Love of music and songs; dances ranging from pop and rock to classical and reggae.

In addition to establishing similarities, learners would now compare their respective lands with India and come up with similarities they noticed as well as differences.

In the process of teaching them, I learnt a smattering of Russian, Spanish, and French, much to their delight and amusement. I would, for example, greet the class with phrases in these languages using survival phrases.

Russian phrases used

kak dela (How are you ?)

Dobry den' (Good day)

ty ponyal (Have you understood?)

Fyso pa nyatna ? (Have you understood?)

do svidaniya (Good bye)

Spanish phrases used

cómo estás (How are you?)

Buenos días (Good morning)

Almorzaste (Did you have lunch)

Entendiste (Did you understand?)

Déjanos ir (Let us go)

ahora habla (Now speak)

French phrases used

Bonjour (Good day)

Parler (Speak)

Comment allez-vous (How are you?)

Comment ca va ? (How are you?)

as-tu déjeuné (Did you have lunch?)

laisse nous partir (Let us go)

What I had been following as pedagogic practice was a clear manifestation of “what oft was thought but ne’er so well expressed,” in the terms encountered such as code switching, multiple codes, *Willingness to Communicate* model, translanguaging, emergent multilinguals, etc. I had been resorting to the process of translanguaging little aware that there was such a phenomenon as translanguaging or that this was an active movement in the monolingual countries such as the US, the UK, and Germany.

Teaching of English as a Second Language Experience

This was repeated when I taught spoken English to learners with limited command of English but a rich repertoire of Telugu, Hindi, and Urdu. These learners were often shy and diffident and I needed to urge them to come out of their reluctance. The only way to do it was to become a multilingual myself and employ three or more languages in the classroom. When teaching spoken English, I dispensed with the English-only norm and switched to using as many languages as I knew and understood to help learners cope with attempts to speak.

As an experiment, I used Telugu/ Hindi to introduce myself and narrated my journey as a non-Telugu speaker relocating from Tamil Nadu to Andhra Pradesh way back in the 1990s. I told my audience that I needed to interact with fellow students. The compulsion to make friends and seem approachable pushed me into learning Telugu and Hindi. Gradually, I built on what I knew and that is how I was able to become an accomplished speaker. My story of learning more languages than I was born with was a tale of encouragement for my learners and they followed suit.

Each learner was required to get behind the podium, introduce themselves in their mother tongue, speak about themselves for three minutes and go back. This was very comfortable for all learners. The next part of the exercise involved learners translating what they had spoken in their mother tongue into English and then addressing fellow learners a second time, this time in English. This continued till everyone had an opportunity to speak. This worked well because every member of the batch I taught felt included and valued. All of them realized they were in the same boat of low competence and therefore did not feel the need to be shy or diffident about expressing themselves. My attempts to teach them to speak were fruitful and yielded results since I was there to facilitate learning, the learners themselves having to come up

with strategies and game plans to achieve the primary objective: initiating baby steps to speak and use English.

As a teacher who had the experience of also teaching high school students for a few months following my spoken English experience, I imagined teaching any group would be the same except for minor changes and adjustments. I couldn't have been more wrong or misguided. Almost soon after the school experience, I graduated to teaching a batch of low proficiency heterogeneous bunch of learners, who had all been educated in the mother tongue and were meeting English as a second language and as a language in which all subjects would be taught from then on.

I taught them the lessons, in particular poetry in Telugu. One such experience I can never put out of memory is when I taught "Dover Beach." This is one of the most celebrated poems of Matthew Arnold and probably therefore prescribed in the common English syllabus for students of BA/B.Sc/B.Com. I happened to teach this poem to a class of undergraduate learners whose proficiency levels were very limited and who required a lot of scaffolding to understand even simple texts, let alone a poem that demanded a lot of background knowledge and fairly advanced levels of proficiency in English. "Dover Beach" was simply beyond their comprehension for the following reasons:

- i. Linguistic challenges posed arising from the figurative meaning of the poem which is rather difficult to tackle unless one has had enough exposure to the language and literary devices.
- ii. The background to the poem demanding an awareness of the political, economic, and social history of England of the nineteenth century.
- iii. Conflicts between faith and religion and the steady erosion of faith in organized religion.
- iv. Conflicts between rationality and spirituality.
- v. Familiarity with the geography of England because of the references to Dover and the French coast.
- vi. Dilemma of the individual caught between two divergent views—scientific progress and humanity.

To a large extent, the figurative meaning in the poem could never be explained to learners who needed a lot of scaffolding. It was easy to realize that teaching the poem using English was not going to work. It was not going to make any pedagogical sense either. I chose therefore to use the poem as a task to promote learner interaction and views. I asked them if they had been to a beach, say, Vizag or Chennai. Next, I asked them in Telugu what one would see on the beach and on the sea.

The entire interaction was in Telugu with the smattering of English where possible as given below. "T" stands for teacher while "L" refers to learners.

Teacher (T): "meeru eppudaina samudram choosera ?" (Have you seen the sea?)

Learners (L): "Yes, sir." "Avunu." (Yes.)

T: "akkada ki velleraa?" (Have you been to the sea?)

Some learners said they visited the beach when they had gone on a tour. Others said they had seen it in movies and serials.

- T: “akkada emi kanapisthayee?” (What do you see there?)
 L: “alaloo” (Waves)
 T: “inka?” (What else?)
 L: “iskalu” (Sand)
 T: “inka?” (What else?)
 L: “gulakarrallu” (Pebbles)
 T: “inka?” (What else?)
 L: “gaali” (Wind)
 T: “manchidi” (good). “Ippudu, samudram choosthey meeku emi gurthukosthayee?” (What do you recall from watching the sea?)
 Ls: “nirantaranga alalu kadaladam” (Continuous movement of waves.)
 T: “Good”
 T: “samudram ni choosthey meeku etuvanti feelings osthayi?” (What do you recollect when you see the sea?)
 Ls: “anthu leni udyamam” (“Never ending action/ movement”)

Some learners said they became nostalgic. “We recollect old memories, sir.” (paaatha jnapakalau gurthukku osthai sir). “Friends tho tour vellinandhi, malli akkada kochoney muchatlu pettukunnadhi....” (We recollect the tour we went to with friends, sir and also all the conversations we had with each other on the beach)

- T: “okka manishiki santosham tho sukam osthundi. Ivi maari maari osthayi. Evaru eppudu santhisahnaga undadu. Evaru eppudu sokanga undadu.” (None is ever happy and none is ever sad. Like waves, you experience sadness and happiness alternately.)

Learners seemed to relate to this well and felt happy.

I used the opportunity to talk to them about life in general; human hopes, aspirations, disappointments, trust, love.

I continued:

- T: “alalu paiki lesthayee, malli kinda paduthayi” (The waves rise up and then fall down) “alagey mana jeevitham kooda” (So is our life...) “Andari anni kalusi raavu” (Nothing works out well all the time for anyone.) “okkukka saari jeevitham lo compromise cheskoni vellalee” (“One has to compromise in life and move on.”)
 Ls: “Optimistic, always be happy, don’t worry. . . .”

Learners also said: “Don’t worry, no hurry . . .”

I was able to get learners to speak/use some English, no matter how broken, and that was a huge gain indeed in getting learners to conquer their fear of speaking.

Then I asked them: “manaku deni valla snathisham vosthundi?” (What brings us happiness?)

- Ls: “Friends...girlfriends (laughter)... manchi thindi unte (If there is good food) manchi udyogam osthey” (If we get a good job...), business lo profits osthey... (“If we get profits in business...”) ... “manchi nijamaina friendship” (True and genuine friendship)

T: “So there must be true friendship and loyal friendship”

Ls: “Yes sir. Friendship unte manakkku macnhidi ... manamni troubles nundi kaapadutharu” (Friends save us from troubles)

T: “Elaga?” (How?)

Ls: “dabbu istharu...annam pedutharu...company istharu...” (Friends help us with money... food...company...etc.)

T: “Good.”

Ls: “avunu sir” (Yes, sir)

Learners were able to let down their guard, overcome inhibitions, panic, and anxiety when speaking to the teacher. Using the learners’ mother tongue worked magic since I was able to get them to speak, assure them their views were respected, and cure them partially at least of their fear of speaking. Teaching the central idea of the poem therefore became easy: the necessity of true love in the face of adversity and hopelessness. The success of mother tongue use in classroom convinced me that this was not only an efficacious way of achieving intended results but a far more meaningful way to negotiate with materials and meaning than simply using English to explain the lessons.

Teaching First-Generation Learners

I replicated the model in engineering colleges where I had taught before joining NIT Warangal. The text I had been given to teach was the biography of the late A P J Abdul Kalam, *Wings of Fire*. Once again, I had a section of learners who were from the neighboring villages close to where the engineering college was located, and I once again threw official dictum to the winds to teach crucial terms and phrases essential for comprehending the text in Telugu. Once again, what struck me was how much I had taken for granted with regard to learner proficiency and learner vocabulary. The terms *rockets*, *satellite*, and *missile* were frequently used terms in the textbook, and it needed a request for translation from a student with regional medium education to set me straight. Terms I had taken for granted were strangers to students and both of us—they and I—inhabited the same town, though miles apart otherwise. I took pains to look up bilingual dictionaries and use Telugu equivalent terms for satellite (*upagraham*), Missile (*shipani*), submarine (*Jalāntargāmi*), gun (*tupaki*), and so on. The biography of Dr Kalam being replete with stories of scientific developments in space technology, it was essential to use Telugu terms to ensure comprehension of the text. On each of the teaching occasions, I had to tailor-make my teaching methods to ensure comprehension and useful interaction with the text and learners.

My tryst with languages other than English continued at National Institute of Technology as well where I found myself switching from Telugu to Hindi to teach students the basics of grammar, paragraph writing, introducing oneself, and preparing potential candidates for job interviews. Here again, I was always conscious of my role as a teacher who needed to instill confidence in students and give them the confidence

they so badly needed to take the baby steps toward speaking English with what little vocabulary they had at their disposal. As all the learners were being taught remedial English after college hours and it was a voluntary exercise, learners felt comfortable unburdening themselves in Hindi to start with and graduating to faltering English by and by.

My role here was that of a parent teaching his child how to walk and not that of a drill master teaching a scout how to run. I had to teach them survival English and prepare them for interviews, teach them presentation skills, explain how some standard questions demand standard answers, and have a template ready for them to use every time they attended an interview or made a presentation or took part in a seminar.

I learnt the necessity of engaging the learners as well as engaging *with* learners, to create conditions conducive for learning and mitigate the harshness and insecurities associated with learning English. I learnt from critical reflection that it was easy to indulge in value judgments without having to ask why things were the way they are but very challenging indeed to sit back, take stock of what had happened and think things through. Code-switching using Hindi, Telugu, and English, and speaking to learners, I realized, went a long and successful way in lowering their fears and inhibitions and they were able to see that English was a language after all, much like any other language and that one need not be consumed by guilt or shame at having to use one's L1 to negotiate meaning in a second language.

Conclusion

I have summarized here what I have learnt from my experience. It is a wise idea to engage with learners first before engaging with texts. A teacher needs to establish rapport with them and bring down their levels of fear and inhibition so that teaching a text becomes easy. This is achieved by first talking to learners in their home language about their needs, aspirations, interests, benefits of learning English, strategies to learn English and ways to cope with limited proficiency in English language.

In addition to teaching them to the test, the teacher can use one session of 45 min for teaching them the rudiments of spoken English. I did this every time I sensed *English only regime* was taking me and the learners nowhere. For example, when teaching Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud," I used newspaper articles to drive home the point of how flowers have more than ornamental value in India and of how selling flowers is a big business that sustains the livelihood of millions of Indians. These articles were translated to the learners. Relating themes in the text to local themes helps immensely in meaning-making.

While "center-based" norms have been curbed or controlled to a large extent in India because the materials developers are Indian and there is no compulsion to import materials, there is always the danger of some of the colonial ideas being absorbed as reflected in the choice of texts for teaching English for specific purposes. As McMorrow (2007: 376) maintains: "... the paper-thin fictional world of the course

book dominates classroom space to the exclusion of the real lives and issues of the teacher and students.” To avert this unfortunate happening, teachers can use their discretion to decide how best to use what they have been given to achieve learning.

The following questions can come useful when striking a delicate balance between the syllabus demands, management expectations, and learner needs:

- i. Why am I teaching the text? (Is it for literary appreciation, teaching grammar points, encouraging critical thinking, motivating learners to read critically, etc.?)
- ii. How is it useful to the learner in the long run?
- iii. Can I carry out minor changes when teaching to preserve the central idea while also going beyond the syllabus for a useful end?
- iv. How will the learner find use for what is taught in real life? (May I use a text to teach letter writing as well or preparing a résumé?)
- v. Can I employ a text to go beyond the simple, easy to understand and banal interpretation and teach learners’ life’s lessons?
- vi. How can I elicit responses and make the class interactive?
- vii. What (more) needs to be done while ensuring maximum learning opportunities for everyone? (Using WhatsApp messages, video clippings, etc.)
- viii. What do I need about the learner’s personal and academic background that will enable me to succeed as a teacher?

In sum, numerous factors affect the success of English language learners in learning academic content taught in English. Clearly, the students’ proficiency in L1 plays a major role. However, their linguistic and academic competence in L1 is often overlooked. This study reveals that the linguistic and academic skills that are developed in one’s native language can transfer to a second language and thus serve as rich resources for learning in that language. What has been invoked in the context of English language learners applies *mutatis mutandis* to any learner who requires a lot of help with language. As Canagarajah (2016: 13) observes: “Being human, we are shaped by our own backgrounds and biases that we find it difficult to adopt more objective and fair perspectives on others. Furthermore, dominant ideologies and norms are difficult to disassociate from.” Therefore, asking the right questions about teaching and learning will generate the right inputs and help students learn a language and much more.

References

- Brookfield, S. D. (1990). *The skillful teacher*. Jossey Bass.
- Canagarajah, S. (2014). In search of a new paradigm for teaching English as an international language. *TESOL Journal*, 5(4), 767–785.
- Canagarajah, S. (2016). Negotiating diversity in English language teaching: A tragedy in four acts. In *Proceedings of the Fifth CELC Symposium* (pp. 1–18). Centre for English Language in Communication, National University of Singapore. Retrieved from https://blog.nus.edu.sg/eltwo/files/2016/12/1-Negotiating_Canagarajah-221216-14kdf66.pdf.

- Cruishank, D. R., & Applegate, J. (1981). Reflective thinking as a strategy for teacher growth. *Educational Leadership*, 38(7), 553–554.
- Day, C. (1993). Reflection: A necessary but not sufficient condition for professional development. *British Educational Research Journal*, 19(1), 83–93.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2008). Critical incidents in initial teacher training. *ELT Journal*, 62(1), 3–10.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2014). ‘Teacher-you’re stupid!’—cultivating a reflective disposition. *TESL-EJ*, 18(3), 1–10.
- Lucas, T., Villegas, A. M., & Freedson-Gonzalez, M. (2014). Linguistically responsive teacher education: Preparing classroom teachers to teach English language learners. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59, 361–373.
- McMorrow, M. (2007). Teacher education in the postmethods era. *ELT Journal*, 61(4), 375–376.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Sokel, F. (2019). The effectiveness of a professional development course: Teachers’ perceptions. *ELT Journal*, 73(4), 409–418.
- Vennela, R. (2018). The ‘critical reflexive approach’ (CRA): A theoretical model towards bilingual education policy and practice. *Fortell*, 36, 53–61.