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*Best Practices in ELT: A Need for Reflection in the English Classroom*

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This paper on ‘ Best Practices in ELT: A Need for Reflection in the English Classroom’ is an attempt at exploring and analyzing various methods involved in English language Teaching (ELT) in initiating a meaningful and interactive learning process in our class room situations in general . It aims at tracing the finer aspects of the history of Language Teaching with a view to analyzing the evolution and changes which characterize the field of ELT as a discipline and finally it proceeds to get its focus on the recent developments such as the resurgence of interest in reflective practice and renewed interest in constructivist theory wherein the learner constructs knowledge through engaging and interacting with the content and world. This paper is an earnest effort in order to give the reader, understandably the scholar of ELT and others for whom the subject in discussion might matter, an arguably comprehensive understanding of different theories, approaches, practices and methods of language teaching and how they influence our current understanding of basic principles of ELT and ESP (English for Specific Purposes)

**Key Words:** Language, English Language Teaching, English for Special Purpose

In fact, the history of Language Teaching displays an inordinate succession of new methods and revolutionary approaches which brings us to the realization that how to teach a language is a more subtle question here in the field of ELT than in most other subjects. In no other subject is there so great a risk of wasted effort, of straying into sidetracks and losing one’s bearings in the maze of intersecting lines of activity as is visible in our ELT situations. In this context, this study limits itself with a few best practices in teaching a language.

A language may be viewed simply as a means of imparting information, without undue concern of the distinction between the

written and oral forms or between the literary and colloquial aspects. This debatable approach was first introduced by an ELT scholar of unquestionable repute name by Morris. He has arrived at this conclusion predictably after an exhaustive study of different language learning situations. For him, in the process of learning a new language the two most important predominant factors which should not be ignored are Vocabulary and Grammar. To anyone approaching an unknown language the first concern would naturally be to acquire an ability to interpret the sounds heard or the words encountered in a written text. When certain sounds or other signs take on meaning, a beginning is

felt to have been made towards mastery of the novel means of imparting information. This approach is called, in the words of Morris 'Informative Approach'.

'Informative Approach' as the name itself suggests is an approach where emphasis is laid more on information about language than language itself. This approach once was very popular among the ELT scholars for over two decades. The course of instruction is mainly devoted to the learning words and sometimes about words and the study of grammar as an objective, abstract system. It tends to treat lexicographical words as the unit of language, and favors the extensive use of translation on an assumption that all verbal units in one language have corresponding single terms in another medium for the imparting of the 'like information'. But this approach fails to distinguish sufficiently between knowledge and application. As we all agree today, having understood the complexity involved in language teaching particularly, an undivided concentration on vocabulary and grammar will lead to linguistic knowledge, but it does not ensure an ability to speak or even to read the language with ease. It was this phenomenal realization, after decades of failure, necessitated and heralded the beginning of The 'Language Skills Approach'.

This approach looks at dynamic aspect of language learning as an activity rather than knowledge. This is the first time in the history of Language Teaching 'language' is treated as 'a skill'. It tries to bring out the distinction between learning 'a subject' and learning 'a language'. Language is perceived as 'habit formation'. This method advocates

a process of learning a language by speaking. In other words, 'We learn to speak by speaking', not by studying words and learning about the language. For language to operate efficiently there should be little conscious effort on the part of the speaker but rather spontaneous use of words and forms. This new approach produced sensational results and popularized the learning of foreign languages particularly English. The end result of the success is what we, the professional trainers of English Language enjoy today in this world of technology and business.

When this 'Language Skills Approach' was introduced in our teaching institutions the complexity of the language teaching was further analyzed. In other words, during the period of time when this approach was advocated vehemently in our universities and colleges, the process and system of learning a foreign language was simplified and unfortunately over-simplified. The argument against this approach is that this method endeavored to separate language and culture. The learners of a language do not need to be aware of cultural sensitivities of the target language community. This obviously goes against John Schumann's 'Acculturation Theory' of Second Language Learning wherein he favors a total integration of culture of the second language learners with the target language community.. This approach further separates 'learning' from 'learners'. Learning according to the advocates of Skill Based Approach is an objective process. The learners need not involve in the process of cultural and social synthesis of the target language so as to understand the niceties of the language

sought. Again, this method gives much importance to rote learning of action words, stock phrases and monotonous repetition. Hence its ultimate achievements at the higher levels in developing language skills of students proved very disappointing for it was found to be culturally defective and also it tended to encourage superficial knowledge of words and neglect of grammar.

The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching is a recently recognized one. It does a lot to expand on the goal of creating communicative competence compared to earlier methods that professed the same objective. Teaching students how to use the language is considered to be at least as important as learning the language itself. A much celebrated author of ELT Brown aptly describes the 'march' toward Communicative Approach in the following words:

"Beyond grammatical discourse elements in communication, we are probing the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language. We are exploring pedagogical means for 'real-life' communication in the classroom. We are trying to get our learners to develop linguist fluency, not just the accuracy that has so consumed our historical journey. We are equipping our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance 'out there' when they leave the womb of our classrooms. We are concerned with how to facilitate life-long language learning among our students, not just with the immediate classroom task. We are looking at learners as partners in a cooperative venture. And our classroom practices seek to draw on whatever intrinsically sparks learners to reach their fullest potential."

Teaching a language is the most complicated task one could ever think of. It involves

involvement, intervention, participation, bonding, association and appreciation of various levels. Hence we can't choose to ignore cultural, social and political factors which have already played a significant role in the creating a context where we are positioned. The awareness of this kind would help the language teacher get a sense of contextual intelligence with which common targets can be fixed and road map may be designed and action plan shall be initiated.

David Nunan lists five basic characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching. This approach emphasizes on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language. It accommodates authentic texts into the learning situation. There is the provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on the language but also on the learning process itself. This method helps the learners enhance their personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning. Finally an attempt has been made to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

Finnochiro and Brumfit compiled this list of Communicative Language Teaching features way back in 1983 as a means of comparing it to the Audio-lingual Method. Here follows the difference between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Audio-lingual Method (ALM).

1. CLT: Meaning is paramount.  
ALM: Attends to structure and form more than meaning.
2. CLT: Dialogs, if used, center on communicative functions and are not



normally memorized.

ALM: Demands more memorization of structure-based dialogs.

3. CLT: Contextualization is a basic premise.

ALM: Language items are not necessarily contextualized.

4. CLT: Language learning is learning to communicate.

ALM: Language Learning is learning structures, sounds or words.

5. CLT: Effective communication is sought.

ALM: Mastery or “over learning” is sought.

6. CLT: Drilling may occur, but peripherally.

ALM: Drilling is a central technique.

The following is the process in which CLT takes place in our classrooms at various stages. It is very important to know which stage or the context the learners are before the teacher takes up the risk of language teaching.

Brown (1994:78-80) warns that there are certain caveats in the field of language teaching when we come to the discussion on the basic principles of CLT. Those who support this method and belief should have a commonsensical understanding that their support or the belief needs to be “qualified”. Brown again warns us against the numerous interpretations of what CLT actually ‘is’. CLT is often a catch-all term, and does not reflect the fact that not everyone agrees on its interpretation or application. Teachers need to be aware that there are many possible versions, and it is intended as an ‘Umbrella’ term covering a variety of methods.

A Common Approach towards Communicative Language Teaching is through three P’s namely Presentation, Practice and Production. Presentation represents the introduction to a lesson, and necessarily requires the creation of a realistic ‘situation’ requiring the target language to be learnt. This can be achieved through using picture, dialogues, imagination or actual ‘classroom situation’. The teacher checks to see that the students understand the nature of the situation, then builds the ‘concept’ underlying the language to be learnt using small chunks of language that the students already know.

Having understood the concept of the language use, students are then given gradually the language ‘model’ and engage in choral drills to learn statement, answer and question forms for the target language. This a very teacher-oriented stage where error correction is important. This stage in the words of Brown is 'Practice' stage. Here the students and teachers obviously engage in the repetitive practice of the units of language learnt.

‘Practice’ usually begins with what is termed ‘mechanical practice’- open and closed pair work. Students gradually move into more ‘communicative practice’ involving procedures like information gap activities, dialog creation and controlled role-plays. Practice is seen as the frequency device to create familiarity and confidence with the new language, and a measuring stick for accuracy in the due process. The teacher still directs and corrects at this stage, but the classroom is beginning to become more learner-centered. But a word of caution that the correction must be done in

such a manner that it does not interfere the process of language learning activity.

Production is seen as the culmination of the language learning process, whereby the learners have started to become independent users of the language rather than students of the language. The teacher's role here is to somehow facilitate a realistic situation or activity where the students instinctively feel the need to actively apply the language they have been practicing. The teacher does not correct or become involved unless students directly appeal to him/her to do so. In this stage the teacher has enough reasons to believe that 'an initiation' has been made and 'the process' of learning a language is said to have been initiated.

Now we shall dilate on the basic principles underlying the CLT and the kind of mind set the teacher is expected to have while involving in this process. As we all agree, the Communicative Language Teaching stands on the foundation of four basic principles.

The four basic principles are:

- Message is more important than Medium
- Function is more important than Form
- Fluency is more important than Accuracy
- Appropriateness is more important than Correctness

It encourages the use of real life situations in classroom to initiate language learning activity. The teacher in the classroom plays the role of a co-host assisting the process of learning by participating in activities and collaborative effort rather than standing on podium and giving a lecture on language skills.

In order to achieve an optimum result in our CLT situations, it is imperative that the teacher should constantly remind herself/himself of the purpose of the language teaching in general. The teacher is expected to have a vision, passion and imagination, vision to take the students up in the ladder of language learning, passion to show the power of influence and imagination to explore new activities.

There is a long felt need in the field of language teaching in general the teachers involved in the process should constantly strive to reshape their knowledge of teaching and learning. This knowledge as such should be developed initially, according to Tedick in teacher education programs, and then becomes part of teacher's education throughout careers through reflective practice.

Reflective Practice occurs when teachers consciously take on the role of reflective practitioner, subject their own beliefs about teaching and learning to critical analysis and take full responsibility for their actions in the classroom, and continue to improve their teaching practice (Farrell, 2007; Jay & Johnson, 2002). Reflective Practice is believed to be the need for the hour now in order to obtain the desired results of meaningful language teaching. Many years ago Dewey (1933) called for teachers to take reflective action that entails "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the ground that support it and the further consequences to which it leads" (p.9). This celebrated scholar of ELT identified three basic attributes of reflective individuals, which are still important for the



practicing teachers even today. They are open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness.

Open-mindedness is a desire to listen to more than one side of an issue related teaching or learning and to give attention to alternative views also. Responsibility involves and includes a careful consideration of the consequences of which an action leads. Wholeheartedness implies that teachers can overcome fears and uncertainties to critically evaluate their practice in order to make a meaningful change. In the words of Farrell, “reflection is a central factor in the teaching and learning process. Teachers can improve their own teaching by consciously and systematically reflecting on their teaching experiences”. Systematic reflection includes looking back on events, make judgments about them, and alter their teaching behaviors in the light of craft, research, and ethical knowledge. Richards (1990), another scholar of ELT believes that self-inquiry and critical thinking can “help teachers move from a level where they may be guided largely by impulse, intuition, or routine, to a level where their actions are guided by reflection and critical thinking”. (p.5)

It is very hard to define the term 'reflection'. It is often interpreted according convenience and context. According to Wallace(1991) there are two forms of 'reflection': a weak form and a strong form. The weak one is where teachers sometimes informally evaluate various aspects of their professional expertise. This type of reflection does not necessarily lead to improved teaching and can even sometimes lead to unpleasant emotions without suggesting any way

forward. The second form of reflection involves teachers systematically reflecting on their own teaching and taking responsibility for their actions in the classroom. Richards and Lockhart emphasize this stronger version when they say that teachers should “collect data about their teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching”(p.1)

The teachers who are serious about teaching and who want to get into the mode of reflective practice should systematically gather data about their practice. This engagement is a kind of research the teachers should carry forward for self-development and professional excellence. This research will help the serious minded teachers get a critical view of their beliefs about their teaching and their teaching activities in the classroom. The three major approaches facilitating reflection are action research, teaching journals, and teacher development groups. Each of these three is very valuable in promoting the principles of reflective teaching.

According to Bailey (2001) action research is “an approach to collecting and interpreting data which involves a clear, repeated cycle of procedures”(p.490). It involves identifying an issue, reviewing the literature on the issue, choosing data to be collected, then collecting, analyzing and interpreting the data selected and finally developing, implementing and monitoring an action plan.

Teachers who are involved in the practice of reflective teaching get a deep insight into the

intricacies involved in teaching and issues related to learning. This will help them further their understanding of different teaching contexts. More than this, this approach will attempt to change the very attitude of the teacher towards teaching,

towards the fellow-teachers and the taught. This change itself is a significant achievement of the teacher as a communicative and understanding individual and able and efficient facilitator.

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