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Cocking a snook at the communicative approach

Eleanor Watts questions whether communicative methodologies are suitable for teachers with little training and less confidence

In this article, I will look at the situation in India where generalist primary school teachers have recently been required to teach a language in which they are not fluent. I suggest that, in this context at least, there are compelling reasons for teacher-resistance to currently fashionable methods of language teaching.

The problem of the non-specialist teacher

English is now an Indian language, spoken, as David Crystal has pointed out, by three times as many people as in Australia (1999). It is a natural medium of communication for the ruling class. However, government primary teachers do not belong to this class. They may use English for certain formal exchanges such as giving greetings and congratulations, but they are likely to find it difficult to converse in the language. For them it is a second language and it is Greek to the poor whom they teach.

When non-specialist teachers start teaching English with little or no training, they are likely to go about it as they themselves were taught. They have generally learned English as a content subject, not as a skill to be used. Their own experience of learning English was through the written word, so they believe 'that "finishing portions" is more important than facilitating learning ... and that the text is holy.' (Ilangoan, 1996, 22) Their emphasis is on 'repetition, teacher control and grammatical manipulation, leaving little space for student initiative.' (Patra, 1994, 4) They want to be guided by the expert-sanctioned textbook because it is safe. They feel uncomfortable with the spoken word since all conversation is unpredictable and they know their oral skills are poor. Their reasons for resistance to new ideas are understandable.

The problem of the non-teacher specialist

Widdowson points out that frequently 'decisions about the curriculum are made, and programs designed, without any consultation (let alone collaboration) with those directly involved in teaching.' (1993, 262). This is certainly the case in the Indian sub-continent, where there is a wide gap between those who think and those who do.

When the communicative approach is imposed without consultation, as Canagarajah found in Sri Lanka, some teachers adopt the techniques without understanding their purpose: 'The trappings of the

novel pedagogy were present (i.e. the use of tasks, group activity) but the basic structure of the course was traditional (i.e. focus on grammar with mini-lectures, teacher-authority and deductive learning processes).' (1999, 115) Other teachers whom he questioned rejected the new pedagogy outright as a foreign imposition. Teacher educators who respect their trainees must take these teachers' views into account.

In India, the communicative approach is advocated by academics who carry little credibility because of their lack of primary teaching experience. Teachers will continue to cock a snook at the communicative approach until the gulf between teachers and their trainers can be bridged.

Aspects of the divide

The divide between teachers and their trainers has many aspects:

1 The divide between theoreticians and practitioners

In India, theoreticians increasingly belong to what Holliday would call an integrationist approach and emphasise language skills and communication rather than a memorised knowledge of grammar and text. Over the past decade, the communicative approach has gained sway among academics like Prabhu and Kumaravadivelu, but is still met with suspicion by schoolteachers. They come from what Holliday would call a collectionist tradition: one that is didactic, content-based and hierarchical (1994, 72). A noisy class, in which groups are all talking at the same time, is seen as a failure in control. A questioning pupil is seen as disrespectful. If the teacher does not know the answer to a question, she may feel humiliated.

2 The adult/primary divide

Trainers who have never taught children may advocate methods that are difficult to implement with young learners. The younger they are, the shorter their concentration span. Children find it more difficult to stay on task than adults and are likely to use group work as an opportunity to discuss the latest playground fight in the mother tongue. In large classes, they have a tendency to be naughty if they are all expected to talk at once, especially if they are not used to being allowed to talk in other lessons. Every experienced teacher of children knows that the way to control a rowdy

class is to get them writing! In addition to this, adults and children relate to each other in different ways in different cultures. Most Indian children are expected to obey, not to question their elders.

The resource-rich/resource-poor divide

In Europe, where the communicative approach evolved, students are exposed to the target language outside the classroom through television, film, pop music and the ease of travel to English-speaking areas. Classes are equipped with tape-recorders and videos which provide examples of authentic speech, and teachers can monitor their students' ability to speak because they have relatively small groups.

These resources are unthinkable in the Indian state sector where classrooms frequently have no walls, electricity supply or running water. Class sizes often exceed eighty, so it is difficult for teachers to monitor the speaking skills of each individual. One class may sit under the same tree as another class and the noise of oral work is disturbing. Few government schools are equipped with tape-recorders, so there are no examples of 'authentic' speech, especially in rural areas where English is rarely heard. A workable training programme must face up to the paucity of human and material resources.

The divide between skill-based theory and content-based assessment

Although the favoured methods of teaching have changed, assessment has not. As Rama Matthew says of English teaching in India, 'traditional content-based (as opposed to skill-based) exams override all other educational concerns' (1997, 125). In later public exams, children will be assessed on: a) written, not oral work b) their knowledge of text and grammar, not productive use of the language.

Oral assessment is unlikely to become widespread in India because it is so expensive to conduct. Written exam papers take less time to mark than individual oral tests. It is also less easy to bribe the examiner in a written test, which is, to some extent, anonymous. Questions with closed answers (such as multiple choice and blank-filling) are easier to mark than open ended questions requiring individual expression.

If productive skills are not tested, the washback effect is that they are unlikely to be taught. While assessment methods remain unchanged, the teacher is unlikely to heed trainers who stress the importance of oral – or written – fluency.

Implications of the divide

Suspensions of teachers towards their non-teacher specialists should be respected, given the depth of these divides. I hope to have made it clear that there are two major needs in this situation.

One need is to equip non-fluent teachers with the

skills they need to teach English in primary school. In low-resource contexts, it may not be possible to increase their competence in the language, as the state will only be able to afford in-service training of a few days. In my view, what primary school teachers need is a bank of simple communicative activities with the following features:

- *Limited language activities* Games in which the teacher chooses the language (e.g. *Simon says*) are preferable to open-ended games such as *Consequences* in which the teacher feels unconfident about correcting open-ended language.
- *Low resource activities* Teacher education courses should include ways of using the chalkboard (often the only given resource) to draw on the local environment of the children. They should not advocate the use of teaching aids such as board games which are expensive to buy and difficult to store.
- *Teacher fronted activities* In cultures that expect learning to come from the teacher, a sudden expectation of pupil participation can be confusing. A successful form of teacher-fronted oral work can be singing. The children can do actions from where they sit and be relatively active while the teacher remains in control.
- *Pair work activities* In the above context, teachers are likely to find pair work more acceptable than group work because their pupils do not have to move about the classroom or speak very loudly, so disruption is minimised. They also get a greater chance to speak than they do in groups.

The other need is to train the trainers in the practice of the methods they advocate. Trainers need to spend time in primary school practising what they preach. Only when they have tried out group work with eighty children on a regular basis will they be able to persuade teachers of its benefits.

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