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Use of Songs, Rhymes and Games in Teaching English to Young Learners in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Although children learn a language faster than adults, they do not learn through traditional language teaching methods. Through fun activities children can learn a language better as learning becomes natural for them since these activities do not make them conscious that they are learning a language. In Bangladesh, since a proper learning atmosphere has not been ensured in children's English classes according to children's interest and psychological characteristics, benefit is yet to come from the compulsory English education at the primary level. In order to appeal to young learners' learning styles, songs, rhymes and games can be very effective tools for teaching children a foreign language. These tools can be used in children's classes to utilize their natural ability to learn a language. This paper introduces the benefits of some interesting tools in teaching children English and also suggests incorporating them at the primary level English curriculum in Bangladesh.

Keywords: *young learners, second language, teaching techniques, songs, rhymes, games, primary education.*

1. Introduction

As a child, I could not remember my English lessons and that made my parents really worried about my future. Interestingly as I had great fondness for music and could easily remember the music lessons, my mother somehow managed to convert most of my lessons into music to interest me in my studies.

Surprisingly, the technique worked well on me and gradually I started paying attention to my studies and relieved my parents of their worry. I can now relate the story of my childhood to that of the children of Bangladesh who are really in need of interesting lessons for learning English. The reason is that although children have an innate ability to learn a language they do not learn properly if they find their lessons boring and unexciting. In fact, children learn better through interesting activities and for this reason songs, rhymes and games are very useful tools for teaching them a foreign language. Actually these are the tools that help children learn in an enjoyable environment without making them feel the pressure of learning a foreign language. In Bangladesh, if we can introduce these tools in children's English classes in place of the lessons not suitable for children, the objective for implementing compulsory English education from the primary level would be successful to a great extent.

According to experts and their research, the earlier children start learning a second language, the higher are their chances of becoming more proficient as opposed to their learning of it later. Researchers also claim that the most appropriate time to learn another language is between six and thirteen years of age. One theory that supports early language learning is the critical period hypothesis. According to the theory there is a biologically specific period of life when language can be learnt more easily. Researchers like Lenneberg (1967) and Bickerton (1981) state that after the critical period, certain abilities of acquiring a language decrease. According to them second language acquisition reaches a critical stage during puberty, after which people usually do not learn a second language.

Linguistics professor Dr. Susan Curtiss, in a book by Curtan and Dahlberg (2004), opines,

> The power to learn a language is so great in the young that it doesn't seem to matter how many languages you

> seem to throw their way...They can learn as many spoken language as you allow them to hear systematically and regularly at the same time. Children just have this capacity. Their brain is ripe to do this.

Again, according to Curtain and Dahlberg (2004), the main factor in building foreign language proficiency is the amount of time spent for learning the language. They state, "When language learning begins earlier, it can go on longer and provide more practice and experience, leading ultimately to greater fluency and effectiveness".

However, although children have immense ability to learn a language, the methods and techniques of teaching children are not same as they are for adults and a wrong method of teaching could bring a totally opposite result. Therefore, it is also very important to consider what stops children from learning a language. One thing that prevents children from learning a language is when they feel uncomfortable or under pressure in the language class. Also they cannot easily understand the theoretical concepts of grammar rules of a language and as a result, learning rules confuses them even more. Again, because of their short attention spans, children cannot concentrate on tedious activities for long durations. Consequently, boredom makes children disinterested in the classroom. Another very important reason for children to stop learning a language is if there is excessive correction by the teacher. Research shows that some of these traditional educational practices in classroom teaching may have the effect of preventing rather than helping children to learn well. ("The child as a learner", www.teachingenglish.org) Therefore, it is true that no one can force a child to learn a language. However, by providing favorable environment, useful resources, carefully structured input and practice opportunities, a positive learning atmosphere can be ensured in the children's class.

Children, thus, learn a second language better if they have more opportunities to be exposed to it. Another way they

acquire a language is by using all their senses and by getting fully involved; by observing and copying sounds and gestures and by watching and listening. They also learn through exploring, experimenting, making mistakes and checking their understanding by repetition and also by feeling a sense of confidence. ("The child as a learner", www.teachingenglish.org)
Finally, they feel motivated and learn better if a natural and stress free environment can be provided in the language class.

2. Ways of getting children involved in learning English
In order to get children involved in the language class and to ensure a natural anxiety-free language learning environment certain techniques could be applied. One of the best ways of getting children drawn in the language class is through fun activities.
Among the fun activities songs, rhymes and games are the most effective ones to be used for children in the language class. Also they are fantastic materials for the language teachers to use with young learners because of their unlimited benefits.

2.1 Music
Nothing can be as effective as music in children's language class. It has been already mentioned that when children do not pay attention to boring instructions in a language class as they are unaware of the significance of learning a language they learn a language very naturally if they enjoy what they are doing in the class. It has been said that children have a natural taste for music and because of that English language teachers around the world use such enjoyable and supportive means for children to improve language learning and acquisition. (Cakir, http://iteslj.org/, 1999)

Music being a source of motivation, interest and enjoyment, it is much easier for children to imitate and remember language

than words which are just 'spoken'. Again, a song or a chant can be used very effectively to teach children the sounds and rhythm of the language and to reinforce structures and vocabulary. Moreover songs contain words and expressions of high frequency and offer repetition. (Cakir, http://iteslj.org/, 1999)

The stress and intonation pattern of the spoken language can be taught through music. Probably this is the reason why Carolyn Graham, a renowned author and teacher trainer at Harvard University, designed Jazz Chants to teach the natural rhythm, stress and intonation patterns of conversational American English. However, Graham is not the only language teacher to be aware of the fact that music can be a wonderful medium for natural language acquisition. Language teachers in Turkey, too, have been using English language songs to help children pick up their English through enjoyable activities. (Cakir, http://iteslj.org/, 1999)

2.2 Rhymes

It is only natural for young children to be active as it is their nature to be energetic and playful. Action rhymes captivate young students and help teachers convert their natural energy and enthusiasm into meaningful learning experiences. Action rhymes also help even beginners associate words and phrases with meanings.

Many primary level language learners respond very well to rhymes. Some of the reasons may be the rhythm, the repetition and most importantly the fun involved in rhymes get children naturally drawn to it. Although these young learners can initially find it very difficult to remember how to say complete phrases in a foreign language, they remember whole rhymes with ease. For example the rhythm and physical action involved in action rhymes like **'Head, shoulders, knees and toes'** provide fun drills of vocabulary for parts of the body. This kind of rhymes also involves lots of repetition which is

very effective in children's language class as children love to repeat and mimic words and sounds. Thus, through this kind of activity they naturally pick up the language with its accurate sound, words and sentences.

2.3 Games

Just like songs and rhymes, games also provide wonderful atmosphere in the children's language class. It is widely documented that English language games improve learning, and with children, they are one of the most effective classroom tools.

The first reason why games are so useful is that since games make learning fun, children are willing participants and are not just present in class because they have to be. Students pay more attention because when they enjoy themselves, they do better, feel better about themselves, and do even better – it is a learning cycle working in their favor. (Vernon, www.teachingenglishgames.com)

Next reason is playing a game has a purpose and an outcome. In order to play, students have to say things. Therefore, they have a reason to communicate and this makes them want to know and learn more. In addition to this, games stimulate and motivate children to a new level. They know that if they do not pay attention, they will not be able to play the game well and they will let their team down so they make more effort to join in and learn as much as possible. (Vernon, www.teachingenglishgames.com)

The proverb 'repetition is the mother of skill' becomes very meaningful during the games in children's language class as students get to use the language all the time with a lot of repetition. Although repetition is boring in some cases, during games it is fun for children. Also because of the fun involved in the game a massive amount of vocabulary and grammar can

be revised in a short time because it is very difficult for learners to remember vocabulary if they never use it. Furthermore, the physical movement involved in some of the games also helps keep children stimulated and alert. Children naturally have a lot of energy and are not good at attending formal lessons for long periods, and so if they participate in a game involving physical movements from time to time, they will never get impatient and bored. Most importantly, the philosophy of encouragement incorporated into these games increases confidence in all students. Usually this does not just mean they get better at only English, but in all subjects in school. This in turn makes the teachers more motivated and optimistic, and they can really make a difference in their lessons. (Vernon, www.teachingenglishgames.com)

Apart from all this, language games like any other games involve learners in a healthy competition that can help them learn more. "As long as no one is forced to participate, competition can be positive and encourage player discovery, examination and learning." (Vernon, www.teachingenglishgames.com) Thus, creating the right type of language games can foster this healthy, beneficial competition in the classroom.

Finally language games create a bond between the teacher and their students, which is fulfilling for the teacher and students alike. In short, if used properly by the teacher, games are excellent ways whereby children have fun and at the same time acquire a language. (Vernon, www.teachingenglishgames.com) So, it can be said that English language games actually give students a reason to communicate, and a context for speaking practice.

3. Real situation of primary English education in Bangladesh – A case study

From the above discussion, it is clear how easy and effective is language learning is for children if done through fun activities like songs, rhymes and games. However, if we look at the real classroom situation in Bangladesh, would we find them as ideal as expected? Sadly, the answer is no.

Therefore, in order to show how English teaching is taking place in the children's classes in Bangladeshi schools, this section will provide a case study that was done on two schools in Dhaka city for three weeks. One of them was Banani Biddya Niketan and another was Banani Model School. In those schools 15 English classes at the primary level were observed and interview of 10 primary English teachers were taken in order to have an idea about the present English education practice at the primary level in Bangladesh. In addition, the books compiled and prescribed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) for the primary level English teaching have been studied to see how suitable they are for the children.

3.1 Textbook

Prof. Dr. Gazi Md. Ahsanul Kabir writes in the preface of NCTB prescribed textbooks for class 1-5 that the contents of the books have been designed "...to make the learning interesting, enjoyable and easy to grasp...contents and pictures are selected from their familiar environment" (2007). Thus, it is clear that the textbooks for the primary level English teaching aim at Communicative approach to language teaching as its prime "teaching-learning strategy" (NCTB, 2007). In fact the content of the books does not include much interesting material and there is very little scope for fun activities. On top of that even the proper use of these textbooks can not be ensured because of the unavailability of the Teacher's Guide for each textbook. The reason for this is that although according to the preface, a guide is supposed to be provided to

the teachers of primary level "...with a view to conducting the teaching-learning activities effectively" so that they can follow the instruction of the textbook to plan lessons and "...ensure learners' active participation" in order that "...the learners can achieve the desired competencies in a more effective manner" (NCTB, 2007), in reality the teachers are not provided any guide and for sure cannot follow the prescribed technique /method of the textbooks.

3.2 Classroom Observation

All the classes were observed in primary sections of the above mentioned schools in Dhaka. The observation of classroom teaching revealed that most of the teachers take classes by sitting all the time and giving children instructions to write something. As all instructions are given in Bangla, children did not get any input of spoken English. Another very important observation was that teachers encouraged memorization rather than the creative production of English language. Grammatical rules were explained without context although they were supposed to follow communicative language teaching according to the objective of NCTB. Finally, not a single attempt was made for fun activities in any of the classes.

3.3 Interview of the teachers

Interview with 10 teachers teaching English at the primary level disclosed some interesting facts. First of all, no English teacher at the primary level had any knowledge or idea about how children learn a language better. Also they did not know that children learn in a different way and should be taught differently than adults. Moreover, teachers had little or no idea about the proper use of the textbooks introduced by the NCTB with a view to implementing communicative approach to language teaching. This is because they do not have access to the Teachers' Guide with the new textbook and as a result do not know how to use the new text. Also they had no proper training to teach young learners a foreign language. Thus, their English teaching basically involved completing a syllabus before each exam by encouraging memorization. Consequently, instead of teaching children through enjoyable activities they made them memorize everything and write the

memorized items in their exam to get a good grade. Learners memorize everything because teachers reduce marks for each grammatical error without thinking about the students' age and their developmental stage of learning a language. Some of the teachers said that if any of them set the question paper with a different essay topic which is not given before the exam they are reprimanded by the school authority and the guardians of the students.

3.4 Findings

The sequence of analysis reveals that in Bangladesh, there is almost no practice for interesting activities to teach English in children's classes let alone using songs, rhymes and games. In fact, teachers are not even aware of the effectiveness of these tools. As a result, what children learn comes from rote learning of a foreign language that they are not at all interested in. The NCTB is able to teach them very little from the compulsory English education for twelve years. And whatever they learn can not be defined as language learning as they cannot produce the language without memorization. As this ineffective learning at the initial stage remains with them, it influences their English education at later stages and students enter the tertiary level with minimum level of proficiency in English to cope with their courses. Even very good students with extremely good results at the secondary and higher secondary exams have to struggle to get a good CGPA only because they are not as good in English as they are required to be to study in English. No doubt this is very frustrating for those students and their teachers.

4. Solutions to the problem

Research shows that the children who take interest in their foreign language lessons at primary school automatically develop an interest to learn that language even if there are no fun activities but serious lessons at the secondary level. The high motivation resulting from enjoyable lessons in the primary schools where learning takes place through songs, rhymes, games, story telling

and other interesting activities is retained throughout their academic life. (Brewster and Ellis, 2004:11)

However, it is also true that considering our socio-economic situation, it is perhaps not possible to revolutionize English teaching overnight. Apart from this, our Education Ministry along with the NCTB has been trying their best to bring in improvements in English teaching for quite a long time and there have been a lot of changes in the curriculum of English education. But despite all these efforts, little improvement has taken place in the overall English proficiency among the students. And this is only because of inaccurate teaching techniques of English at the primary level. Therefore, if things have to be changed, our focus should be on the primary level.

4.1 Changes to be made in order to improve the situation

As the art of teaching English to young learners is a specific skill which needs specific training to be performed effectively, training the English teachers who teach at the primary level should be the first priority of the government. Teachers need to understand how children learn a language. In addition, the curriculum needs a thorough change according to the needs and interests of the children including a lot of useful fun activities like songs rhymes and games. Moreover, children's scripts need to be corrected according to their level to encourage creativity and discourage memorization. The exam system also has to change so that the authority does not force the teachers to promote memorization among the children.

At the primary level, teachers should have a lucrative pay scale so that skilled teachers feel motivated to join primary schools. Besides, in order to get the best outcome from a language policy, all related factors like teachers, teacher supervisors, teacher trainers, curriculum developers and assessment specialists should work together and a proper coordination should be made to make language policy effective. The idea behind the coordination is to ensure the expected result from the policy by providing the students with material resources, appropriate course books, and other aids including properly trained teachers. (Brewster and Ellis, 2004:4)

Most importantly, in order to make language learning effective, child psychology and age have to be given the highest priority. That is the reason why any policy regarding children's education should be tailored to suit young learners.

Conclusion

Our language policy has changed since independence, and although we have been experimenting with English teaching, we have not been able to bring in any remarkable improvement in the English education system. And after years of experimenting, it can now be affirmed that by ensuring suitable teaching environment at the primary level, many of our problems regarding English education will be solved. Therefore, all the factors concerning English education in Bangladesh must be involved in a combined effort to ensure a stress-free environment for primary level English learners by providing the required conditions so that the children learn English with a lot of amusement in the classroom.

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