
ENGLISH CLASSROOM : IDEALS AND REALITIES

CONVERTING ENGLISH CLASSROOM INTO ACTIVITY LABORATORY

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THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVITY LABORATORY:

The word laboratory might sound odd when we use it with the expression 'English classroom', though we are conversant with the concept of language laboratory. The notion of laboratory which is being discussed here has nothing to do with any kind of physical infrastructure but with the spirit of experimentation. The classroom can be used as a platform for conducting experiments with the usage of language coupled with presentation techniques. Thus here instead of technology we use technique.

An English classroom always poses the problem of boredom for the students perusing technical texts and maneuvering high profile equipments. An English teacher has to be a dynamic experimenter in the laboratory of classroom to teach his English programmes with powerhouse efficiency. Instead of teaching a classroom of passive listeners in the monotony of stentorian tone, bombarding high-fly diction against the blank screens of their exhausted brains, it is better to enroll their active participation in the teaching-learning process and give them a sense of "doing" something and "achieving" a performance. Let's try a method which can be termed as CONTINUOUS ACTIVITY PROGRAMME (CAP)

THE MODUS OPERANDI:

TEACHING A TEXTBOOK:

A standard English syllabus comprises a textbook, grammar and composition exercises. The activity programme can be used for all these categories of syllabus items.

For example if a textbook has to be taught then for the purpose of activity we can take the following steps:

- Segregate the classroom strength into groups of 10 with at least one member who is a strong communicator as the group leader.
- Divide the chapters of the textbook according to the number of groups constituted in the class in such a manner that each group gets at least one chapter as its assignment.
- Instruct the groups to divide their chapter assignments into 10 paragraphs, giving one paragraph to each member for presentation.
- Give them the exercise to make a collective effort to write a paraphrase in their own version of each paragraph of the chapter taking the help of a thesaurus/ dictionary.

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- With this assignment ask them to prepare a draft of their paraphrase along with an "Evaluation Sheet" which would bear their personal details with a column left blank for "Teacher's Remarks", Grade and Signature. A sample sheet is shown below:

EVALUATION SHEET	
Name of the student : P.Rajesh	
Class : B.E.(I)	
Roll no.: 641	
Group no.: 5	
Topic of the assignment: Grammar	
Date of the assignment: 27/1/05	
Date of submission: 3/1/05	
Teacher's remarks :	
Improve Presentation techniques:	
Improve pronunciation:	
Voice quality is good	
Grade: B+	Teacher's signature with date

- The teacher will evaluate the student's performance on a six-point grade scale A+ (Excellent), A (Good), B+(Above average), B (Mediocre), C+ (Poor)& C (Very poor). This gradation will be converted into internal assessment scores to ensure serious participation on the part of the students.
- The teacher will give guidelines to the students with a model presentation to give them the idea of what sort of performance is expected from them.
- Then take this activity groupwise, say, in the forthcoming period ask group one to take up the first chapter of the textbook. The members of this group will come one by one and present one unit of this chapter orally submitting their

preparatory drafts to the teacher. The time allotted to each speaker will be 3-5 minutes in a 60-minute period.

- The teacher will evaluate the written as well as the oral performance of the pupil and give his expert remarks in the column of 'Teacher's remarks'. This sheet bearing the evaluation remarks of the teacher will be handed over to the student who would file it in a separate folder made for CONTINUOUS ACTIVITY PROGRAMME (CAP).
- At the end of the assignment the teacher can solve difficulties and explain the gist of the chapter presented, announcing at the same time second chapter for presentation to be taken in the next English period as the theme of the performance by second group.
- The teacher will keep on giving such stints throughout the year with the assessment of each session recorded in the form of teacher's remarks.
- The drafts of these sessions will be systematically filed in a chronological order in the CAP folder by the student.
- The textbook study would be completed in this manner with the chapters undertaken one by one by all the groups in the class followed by teacher's commentary at the end of each group performance.

This method helps the teacher to give personal attention to each student and involve all the students into a continuous programme of hunting new words and expressions from thesaurus and other sources for building a robust vocabulary, thereby programming the DNA of their expression architecture. The teacher can also help his students in improving not only diction but also other parameters of language like clarity of tone, accent and pronunciation of difficult words. The application of this method can be extended to grammar and composition

exercises too. A passage as a sample is presented below:

TEXTBOOK PASSAGE:

Formerly a craftsman, or skilled workman, often made the whole of an article himself by hand. He put into his work all his skill, all his experience. He was proud of the fruits of his labour. His reputation, his standing among his fellows, depended on his skill and on his character. He would have been ashamed if any serious fault had appeared in his work. He was envied and admired by fellow-craftsmen whose skill was not equal to his own.

PARAPHRASE:

In the bygone pre-mechanical era an accomplished artisan often made the entire article by dint of his manual labour. He invested into his creation all his experience and dexterity. His labour was synonymous with his pride. His stature was determined by his merit and his character. Any flaw in his creativity would have landed him in the mire of shame. He became a butt of peer jealousy and the recipient of accolades administered by fellow-craftsmen who could not vie with him.

N.B.:- The portions of the passage restructured in terms of diction are highlighted.

SOLVING UNIVERSITY QUESTION PAPERS:

Another interesting and effective way of coaching students is to take up university question papers for practice. Assign one university question paper to each group. This question paper should be given to the group leader who would generate its multiple copies for his team members. In this manner, suppose if in a class there are seven teams, use seven different question papers as your teaching material. Then follow these steps:

- Divide each of these question papers into several sections. Each section corresponding to one question type, for example grammar (correction of errors, use of idioms and phrases in sentences, transformation of sentences) precis writing, essay writing, letter writing, report writing, textual comprehension.
- Then treat each section as one activity type and prepare a timetable for these activities, which would be common for all the groups. For example, if there are six categories of questions in a question paper they will form six activity types.
- Then take these activities one by one for all the groups in the class. A specimen timetable is given below:

Activity Sr. No.	Topic	Date
One	Grammar	
Two	Precis writing	
Three	Letter writing	
Four	Report writing	
Five	Essay writing	
Six	Questions based on the prescribed text	

- Announce in the class the first activity, say, grammar and tell all the groups to solve the grammar problems of their respective question papers. Ask the group leaders to propose two speakers from their groups for the presentation of this activity. The teacher will note the names of the speakers from all the groups so that if there are 7 groups then a list of $7 \times 2 = 14$ speakers is ready with the teacher. The teacher announces the activity for the next class so that the speakers get time to prepare.

METHODOLOGY:

The teacher gives guidelines to all the groups on how to convert each question into an activity. For example if the activity is based on grammar, letter, report and precis writing skills tell the student to prepare a chart of the solutions to these questions from their respective question papers and enact the role of a teacher. With chalk-blackboard or a chart and a ruler as teaching tools he will explain the class how to solve the assignment question. The teacher will evaluate him on the basis of his explanatory skills, power to control the class, the efficiency to make the session more interactive and the ability to handle questions coming from the students who are listening with the teacher himself acting as the supervisor. The teacher will correct wherever the student goes wrong.

If the activity is of essay writing or answering a question of the textbook then ask the student to project his oratorical skills by presenting himself as a speaker addressing an audience. The teacher will award him grade on the basis of his content and style of delivery.

After one such activity is over take the next activity according to the aforesaid timetable. This time elect the speakers other than the speakers who had performed previously from each group. The system devised should be such that each member of a group should at least get one question to solve and stage his solution.

Again here Evaluation Sheet will come into play as an index of student's merit in the task accomplished.

This programme will achieve a dual purpose, one of chiseling the personality of the student through oral drills and the other of solving university question papers for better results in examinations.

ADVANTAGES OF THE METHOD:

The advantage of the CAP method is that the classroom becomes student-centric

rather than teacher-dominated. Each student gets a chance to perform. This method is effective particularly for the students of engineering who need presentation skills as a ladder to climb the higher echelons of their careergraphy. Such performances of soft skills can also be video or audio tapped to enable the students to gauge their own competence. The teacher gets the advantage of assessing each and every student on individual basis giving them specific guidance for the weak areas of their linguistic output which is not possible in a conventional classroom. In this way a student gets at least one chance to perform every two months of the teaching session in the scheme of 1.5-2 hours per week for a class the strength of which runs in the range of 60-70 in the annual pattern of examination. The CAP folder with sheets filed chronologically gives a readymade graph of student's progress during the academic session. He comes to know the level of his performance and his weaknesses and strengths so that the next time he mounts the dais for his subsequent drill he knows the mistakes which merit correction. It also results in symbiotic motivation-the students as well as the teacher earn motivation in this creative process. It also bolsters aptitude for learning language. A sound foundation is made for the future enterprises of TOEFL/GRE.

The writer of the paper, herself being an English teacher in an engineering college, has experimented with this technique and discovered fabulous results. The entire paper is the pen portrait of the practical experience of the writer as the teacher in the classroom. The students take such activities with supreme interest and even the students who had never faced audience in their pre-college years gain courage from this assignment to present their performances and are benefited enormously. The paper was presented in the international conference of English teachers English Classroom: Ideals and Realities in Chennai in February 2005.

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