Language across Curriculum: Principle to Practice

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is in a sense language teaching.' (NCF, 2005, p. 39)

How do we approach teaching at primary level?

All our methods of teaching have been derived from the insights that we have generated through lively interactions with children, observations and simple experiments. We would all agree that children learn by feeling things, throwing them, banging them, observing them, by asking questions, by listening to others, by experimenting, by narrating, etc. While doing all this, they are constantly connecting to their previous experiences and building on it. Thus, the education processes in our schools are geared towards providing opportunities to children where they learn by connecting to their previous knowledge and achieve understanding in the desired domain (at least we advocate it through our curriculum documents!).

What is language?

According to Halliday (1993), "language is the prototypical resource for making meaning" (p. 1). A child uses a language to understand the world around her/him. Higher the ability to use a language for detailed descriptions of concepts, and explaining phenomenon, deeper will be its understanding. Krishna Kumar (1986) adds, "language shapes the child's personality, including perceptions, abilities, attitudes, interests and values" (p. 9). Therefore, language is at the heart of all kinds of learning.

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How should we approach language teaching at the primary level?

Observing children to understand how they acquire their mother tongue should give us an insight into how we should approach language teaching in schools. For example, at the age of four, when children call an object 'a bag' they are not referring to a particular bag, but are identifying bags in general. They identify it even though the bag may be of plastic or jute or cloth. They won't necessarily be able to tell that these bags are of different material, but definitely, identify and say that these are bags. If we look at this example a little closely, we realize that in order to identify a bag, one needs to know that it has a handle, and a space to keep something. The handle may be of different kinds, but children are still able to recognize it. They recognize that all handles share a certain similarity—all handles are U-shaped, more or less. Sometimes, they may refer to a steel container with a handle as a bag, but this is precisely how a child learns new words or concepts, by accommodating changes. Therefore, a child enriches his concepts when he understands that not everything that has a handle and a space is called a bag—this, for me, is a lifelong process.

Therefore, when a child identifies objects, he knows their concepts well—to the extent his age and exposure permits. If we ask a child of age four years to categorize some objects, she/he would display a conceptual understanding of the objects, even though that understanding may or may not be acceptable in the world of adults.

Also, she/he may not be able to explain the rationale behind the categories (due to fear/hesitation/other similar factors), but she/he would have an understanding about their uses, shapes, sizes, where they may be found, whether they are edible, etc. To my mind, this understanding is holistic, and not YET divided by the boundaries of subjects—since I know shapes, I know Math; since I know uses, I know EVS; since I call it correctly, I know language.

Further, when a child describes a bag in minute detail—its size, shape, material, design, embroidery or painting, number of pockets with zips or buttons, etc., two processes take place simultaneously. On the one hand, she/he is uses language to describe the bag, and on the other the description of the minute details using a language help her/him to understand the bag better. Numerous such examples are available around us. To generalize, language learning in children takes place along with concept formation and cognitive engagement with the world around them.

Secondly, the use of appropriate linguistic components (words, gestures, stress, intonation, etc.) is not only an indicator of a person's linguistic abilities, but reveals much more. Which words can be used with whom? Where to put the stress? What is the point one is making? How to respond? Where is the gap in the arguments? What is the essence of the talk? Analyzing all this also requires sound knowledge of the subject matter being discussed, apart from the skills of analysis, synthesis, questioning, responding, etc. Although these cognitive academic skills are transferable, the knowledge of the subject matter can only be gained through active engagement with the content. Thus, conceptual understanding requires language, and for learning a language we need conceptual understanding. We cannot separate the two.

Today's scenario

In schools, we teach mathematics, two languages and EVS as the 'main' subjects, and other subjects such as art, craft, and P.E. (physical education) are considered as co-curricular activities. How many Science teachers help children to understand and analyze the text, or engage them in meaning-making processes? For instance, how many of us have really had an opportunity to derive meaning out of the term 'photosynthesis' through our own engagements in relevant activities. That is supposed to be the responsibility of a language teacher. Conversely, in how many language classes do the students find time to take up science concepts and analyse and discover its meaning. Different kinds of lessons—History, Science or Geography—given in a language textbook get the same treatment. Thus, it is clear that school subjects are so isolated from each other that collaboration among teachers teaching the same classes is also rare.

The second related notion is that of 'language as a medium of instruction'. One only looks at language in the context of other subjects, as just a medium of instruction. When a language teacher was asked for an opinion, the reply was, the language in which the majority of subjects are taught should be given importance and should be taught in the class. This implies that the one who instructs needs a language. Since, a child is there just to follow, she/he either does not require a language, or can manage with the language of instruction. To my mind, there is a serious flaw in this scenario. Where is the place for the child's language? What will happen to the concepts that a child forms while acquiring or learning a language? Since we look at language simply as a medium of instruction, we do not advocate the utilization of the child's language. Under such circumstances, the entire practice of school teaching is set up for failure.

The problem under consideration

The syllabus is compartmentalized, and so is the meaning; the children fail to understand the holistic perspective and the teachers find it difficult to provide meaningful opportunities.

Way forward

The only way to sort out this problem is to follow the ideal of 'a language across the curriculum'. According to the NCF (2005), "A language-across the-curriculum perspective is perhaps of particular relevance to primary education. Language is best acquired through different meaning-making contexts, and hence all teaching is in a sense language teaching" (p. 39).

A language-across the curriculum approach focuses on providing hands-on experience to the children so that they can discover, explore and question the world around them. Language plays an important role in this, because a child's abilities flourish through her/his own language. He feels respected and included in the teaching-learning process; his language flourishes because she/he works with other children as well as a group of teachers who speak different languages. As mentioned earlier, she/he uses language to understand the world, and in turn this process enriches the language itself.

In order to promote 'theme based teaching and learning' process in schools by demonstrating its efficaciousness, my team[1] and I attempted to apply the concept of a language across the curriculum.

We analyzed the curricula and syllabi of all the subjects taught at Primary level (Classes 1 to 5). We identified the concepts that needed to be discussed, the skills that needed to be fostered, and the abilities that were required to be nurtured from classes 1 to 5. We found that there were three themes that ran through all five classes, and addressed most of the concepts mentioned in the syllabus. These themes were 'Myself', 'Water', and 'Trees in the playground'. We selected the themes based on the following criteria:

- Themes should be very specific.

- Children should be able to get a first-hand experience.

- They should be age appropriate and interesting.

- They should not be too broad, such as 'Our earth'. This is because at that age, a child will not be able to actually feel 'the earth', or comprehend its vastness.

For one year, we worked on three themes. We wove the concepts, skills, and abilities around them in such a way that we progressed from class 1 to class 5. Thus, we got concentric circles around each of the themes. Figure 1 illustrates how various concepts such as shape, size, colour, kinds of roots, angles, breadth, length, leaves, and photosynthesis can be woven around the theme 'trees in the playground'. The concentric circles correspond to different levels of difficulty. This simple example gives us a glimpse of how a simple theme can be used to explain concepts
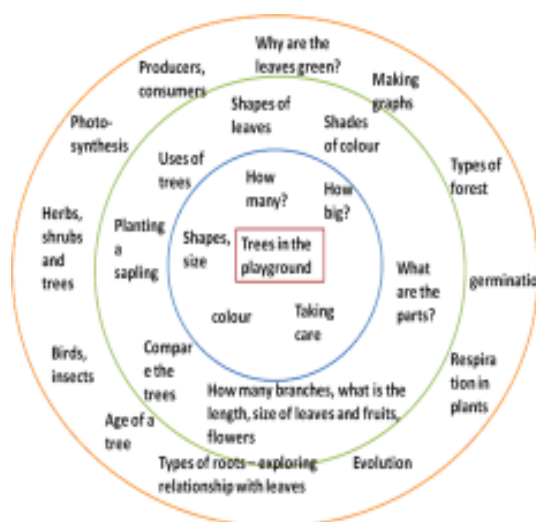

Fig 1

Once the themes were finalized and the concepts and skills were woven around them, we chose age appropriate literature and other reading materials for all the subjects from various

sources including text books, to get the relevant material. With the content ready, we started thinking about interesting and challenging theme-based activities which would bind the concepts and skills of all the subjects together. We came up with a lot of activities which provided opportunities for exploration, analysis, collection of data, deriving conclusions, questioning and interviewing, public speaking, etc. Figure 2 illustrates how the activities were woven with the concepts[2]

Fig 2

Although the activities were not new, they gave us a glimpse into how meaning-making context was readily available with us. We were able to easily remove the boundaries between subjects and shake the notion that language was just a medium of instruction.

We came to the conclusion that theme-based planning takes time and effort, but once it is done children LEARN in the true sense of the word. They even learn the school language by mastery of the concepts. This, I feel, is 'learning without burden'. But for this, there cannot be any one

prescribed book for the children, they may refer to and read several books out of their interest for exploration.

In primary schools where one teacher teaches all the subjects, implementing theme-based teaching and learning is easier. In schools where there are different teachers for different subjects, they all can collaborate to apply theme-based teaching learning.

Reflections

While doing activities such as the ones listed above, I found that my students of class 3 had become more vocal—they asked more questions, they started explaining concepts to each other, they suggested different ways in which class 2 students could participate in skits, they wrote poems, and drew pictures. They even wrote their own answers, and framed their own questions. Even though these were far from perfect, it was their own work. For me, this was truly (language) learning in context.

[1] We, the team of teachers at the Aditya Birla Public School, Kharach were guided by an educationist Shri Rasik Bhai Shah to implement theme-based teaching learning.

[2] Both these webs are developed by me. The first one is made in powerpoint, while the second is created using mind map.

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