

Understanding Learning at the Primary Level

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"The syntax reminds us that 'I am taught' by a teacher; but 'I learn' from a book (or an assignment ...)" - L.C. Taylor



Teachers at the primary level may not be subject specialists, but they need to be specialists in two important respects: they need to understand what it means to learn, and they need to understand what it is to be a child. Today I wish to share with you some of my understanding about these two topics, in order to address the question of how we can bring about learning (including language learning) in our classrooms.

There have been times in history when the child has been viewed as a miniature adult, and as an imperfect adult. Quite opposite to this is the romantic view of the child as "the father of man," as a free spirit with a spontaneous and unconditioned response to the world, a state of mind which the greatest artists such as Picasso have aspired to.

Coming to the schoolroom, under the first view, children are taught as much as possible of whatever adults know. The adult store of knowledge is poured into the child's mind as quickly and in as large a quantity as possible. Learning means to learn what the adult knows. Under the second view, represented by Jean Piaget and Maria Montessori among others, the child has her own perceptions, and her understanding develops in its own time. Learning means the mental activity of a child: it is a change in the way a child thinks. Let us look at a couple of real-life anecdotes to see what we mean.

A primary school-teacher of English holds up her hands and says to the class, "I have two hands and ten fingers." Her intention is that the children should repeat this after her. Before she can say so, a child exclaims: "Even I also!" This child was punished. Why was the teacher upset with the child? Can we say, from the child's response, that the child was indeed learning something? Had she in fact already learnt what the teacher was trying to teach? What was the teacher trying to teach?

A child is kept back after school every day as punishment for some sort of failure in the class. On the third or fourth occasion, the mother asks the child what exactly the problem of that day was. The child says: "Amma, I can understand what stomach pain is and what leg pain is, but I don't understand what window pain (pane) is." This mother took the child out of that school and started what is now one of Hyderabad's most prestigious schools. I refer to Shanta Rameshwar Rao and Vidyaranya High School. A very similar anecdote, incidentally, is told by Michael Howe in his book, "A Teacher's Guide to the Psychology of Learning." Little Johnny goes to school and is told by the teacher to "sit here for the present." He comes back home unhappy: the teacher didn't give him a present!

Once we think of learning as a mental activity, as something that the child does in her mind rather than what we do to the child by asking her to write or speak precisely what we teach her, we must allow that there may be genuine problems of understanding between the teacher and the child, which the teacher must look out for (window pain, the present). A child may not always learn what you are trying to teach (Even I also). So, all children may not learn the same thing at the same time.

This last point is especially true of the primary school, and especially true of subjects like language, which are said to "grow" in the child under certain conditions, rather than to be "taught," like physics or algebra. Just as we expect all young children to grow physically into adults, there is a mental growth in all children. Just as physical growth can be nurtured and encouraged but cannot be forced externally (by stretching a child to make her look tall), so also mental growth cannot be forced externally (by making children copy the teacher, recite from the book, copy from the blackboard...). Early mental growth, like early physical growth, is democratic: all children grow. They may

ultimately grow to different heights; but in their growing years we do not know who will grow how much; we simply help them to grow. So early mental growth does not differentiate between children in terms of aptitude, intelligence and so on. All children have to be given a chance to learn as much as they can. Only in high school can children start to make choices based on superior skills or aptitudes for particular subjects.

Teaching is a public activity; a teacher can prepare for a class, she can choose what to teach, she can sequence it, she can repeat it, she can test it, she can mark answer scripts. Learning is a private activity, it is unobservable when it happens, and it can happen in unexpected ways with unexpected results. Learning can happen in the absence of teaching: We say a child learns to walk, but we don't seriously teach a child to walk anymore than birds are taught to fly or fish to swim.

Similarly, we say the child "learns" to talk, but this is just a way of speaking: the child no more "learns" to talk than the sun "rises" in the east and "sets" in the west. The sun appears to rise, and the child appears to learn language; but the child is in fact recreating language, reinventing it in some way, to express its meaning. One child, describing a picture, writes: "The lion is afraid of the man." This is of course not standard English, and we hope the child will some day understand that. But in inventing a verb when she needs it, this child, a second-language learner of English in Class I, is actually doing exactly what three- to five-year old children learning English as their mother tongue do: they say "Don't giggle me," (don't make me giggle), "She goed it there," (she made it go there), and so on. Sometimes the child invents an answer which is perfectly acceptable English, but is not the "item" that we are teaching.

For language to grow in the mind, we need to provide the child with meaningful messages. This is actually what the child in our story was looking for, when the teacher said, "I have two hands and ten fingers;" she thought the teacher was sharing something about herself with the children, as if she was saying, "I have a dog, I like juice, I feel hungry ..." The child naturally

looks for meaning; it does not occur to the child to practice language for its own sake, except as a game, or in songs or drama. So there is a very easy way to teach language in the primary school: through songs, stories, poetry and drama. Rhythm makes the language memorable; stories keep the child interested; and language is learnt painlessly. There is plenty of research from other countries, and some research in India, about story-telling as a method of teaching children languages, and to think about the world.

So much for listening and speaking; what about reading, writing and spelling? Here again, there appear to be stages of pretending and inventing that the child goes through. If these "mistakes" are understood as efforts at approximations to the adult way of doing things, then they can be seen as evidence of learning. Every teacher likes to have evidence of learning: as feedback about her teaching, as a record of her teaching to show the principal or the parent. But mere copying of adult performance without mental activity is not evidence of learning, and therefore, error-free performance by a small child is not evidence of learning. A child who invents the spelling, "tchr" for teacher, is showing that he knows that the letters of the alphabet have their own sounds; a child who pretends to read knows that there are symbols on a page that can be spoken as language. Reading research has shown us a paradox: the child who is not reading, but is parroting or pretending to read, reads fluently without mistakes. (This may be the three-year old who has a book of nursery rhymes.) As the child tries to read on his own, his reading slows down, and mistakes occur, because now he is actually reading on his own. With help and regular effort, and with the teacher regularly reading out to and with the child, such a child can learn to read. But the transition from pretending to read to actual reading must be carefully made.

The problem is not that the child play-acts at reading or writing, but that very often the teacher and the school fail to distinguish play-acting from the real thing. The child is taught to copy down questions and answers from the board; this is called writing. One can see the

child copying words down letter by letter, not paying any attention to the meaning. But we said earlier that the child naturally pays attention to meaning. What has gone wrong?

In the name of teaching and collecting evidence of teaching, we might be interfering with the natural ways of learning that the mind has. Consider the following experiment. People are given the picture of a living room to look at for one minute. One group is told that there are some Xs inked into the picture, and they have to find them, by scanning the picture horizontally or vertically (one sub-group) or by looking at the outlines of objects (the second sub-group). Actually, there are no Xs. The second group is asked to think of the actions they can perform using the objects in the room (one sub-group), or to make mental images of the objects (second sub-group). At the end of the minute, people in the first group can recall about three - eight objects from the picture. Those in the second group can recall 25-32 objects.

The stimulus was the same, the time given was the same and the people were randomly selected. What affected the result? Different instructions given resulted in different mental activities. The first group was looking for Xs. The second group was looking at the objects and thinking about them. So although learning is an internal, mental activity, it is influenced by the kind of teaching we do.

How can we promote mental activity? To think about this, we must first understand mental activity. There are stages in learning and memory. We first have to perceive or attend to something. Then we have to put it into our memory. And we have to be able to recall it when we want (we have all experienced the 'tip of the tongue' phenomenon, when we know that we know something but cannot recall it).

Research on the very first stage of perception or attention suggests that attention should be directed to meaningful aspects of the percept. This is already evident from the experiment cited above.

Depending on our instructions or questions, our students spend different amounts of time attending

to the stimulus. Are some questions more meaningful than others? Yes.

Let us take the example of a simple fill-in-the-blanks task. It turns out that a word is remembered better if the sentence with the blank is more syntactically complex. Thus 'The small lady angrily picked up the red ___' is more complex than 'The ripe ___ tasted delicious.' A word of caution: simply giving complex sentences which the children cannot understand will not serve the purpose. The point rather is against oversimplification: in order that children get the answers right, if the sentences become so simple as to be meaningless, the child does not see why or who would ever say such a sentence. At that point the child stops attending to the sentence.

Finally, a word about personal relevance. A Ph.D. student has found that a child who does not write well on other topics may write very well when asked to write about himself.

Perhaps this is the secret of all learning, including language learning: its personal relevance to us. Then the task of the primary school is to make learning as personally relevant as possible to each child: to bring the schoolroom as close to the home and the playground as desirable, for the child to naturally grow and learn. The view of a child as an imperfect adult teaches us to be suspicious of anything that the child enjoys doing, and therefore makes the schoolroom as distant from our natural playgrounds as possible. On the other view, ideas are the playground of the mind, and it is our responsibility to provide every child access to these playgrounds.

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Language and the National Curriculum Framework

Indu Prasad



Language is the medium through which children talk to themselves and to others, and it is with words that they begin to construct and get a grip on their reality. The ability to understand and use language clearly and cogently is necessary for learning to take place. Language is not only a means of communication - it is also a medium through which most of our knowledge is acquired. It is a system that, to a great extent, structures the reality around us for representing it in our minds - it is a marker of our identity in a variety of ways and it is closely associated with power in society.

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF) endorses the stand of human beings having an innate language faculty. Children come to school with communicative competence in their language or languages. They enter the school not only with thousands of words but also with control of the rules that govern the complex and rich structure of language at the level of sounds, words, sentences and discourse. Multilingualism, according to the NCF, must be used as a resource, a classroom strategy and a goal by a creative language teacher. This is not only the best use of a resource readily available, but also a way of ensuring that every child feels secure and accepted, and that no one is left behind on account of her linguistic background.

The NCF says that basic language skills are adequate for meeting situations that are contextually rich and cognitively undemanding, such as peer-group interaction. Advanced-level skills are required in situations that are contextually poor and cognitively demanding such as writing an essay on an abstract issue.

The goal of first-language education, therefore, is to hone these skills by progressively fostering advanced-level communicative and cognitive abilities in the classroom. At the basic primary stage, a child's languages must be accepted as they are with almost no attempt to correct them. From Class 3 onwards, oracy and literacy will be tools for learning and for developing higher-order communicative skills and critical thinking. By Class 4, if rich and interesting exposure is made available, the child will herself acquire the standard variety and the rules of correct orthography, but care must be taken to honour and respect the child's own language(s). It should be accepted that errors are a necessary part of the process of learning and that children will correct themselves only when they are ready to do so. Instead of focusing attention on errors and 'hard spots', it would be much better to spend time providing children comprehensible, interesting and challenging inputs.