

## ACTIVE CLASSROOM TECHNIQUE - CREATING AN EFFECTIVE TEACHING & LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

B. Monika Nair\* and K. Anbazhagan\*

---

Active classroom technique can be employed to create effective teaching-learning environment. Education which is supposed to be knowledge oriented has now become target oriented with more emphasis on completing the syllabus and 'achieving' at all times 100% result. A traditional teaching approach expects learners to absorb, assimilate and reproduce the information imparted to them by their instructor. This traditional approach fails to prepare learners to meet the current requirements of business and industry. Learners therefore fail to apply this acquired knowledge to real life situations. Classroom is a place which provides a space for uninterrupted learning avoiding outside distractions. An active classroom technique in contrary to the traditional approach incorporates methods that can reconstruct a teaching-learning environment. It actively engages the learners with the learning material providing them a platform to explore and understand the outside world through critical thinking. A collaborative teaching can revamp the still existing traditional learning environment. Learning can happen only when learners actively participate in the classroom.

This research paper focuses on the importance of active classroom teaching techniques, the eclectic method that can be adopted, the tasks or activities that can be employed and how smart lectures can be designed to make language classrooms more interactive.

**Key Words:** Eclectic method, active classroom, smart lectures, collaborative teaching, traditional teaching method

### INTRODUCTION

An active classroom is a place where learners actively participate in the learning process. Learning seldom happens spontaneously. A classroom from just not being a place full of chairs and tables, or passive learners should be an environment suitable for learning. Active classroom facilitates active teaching and learning process.

Loris Malaguzzi in his book 'History, ideas and philosophy' said "Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn" [1].

In a traditional teaching method, classroom discourses are generally teacher oriented or teaching oriented. Teaching is considered to happen when the teacher corrects the learners then and there. However, this method leaves very little room for the learners to evaluate their learning. For example:

---

\* Department of English and Foreign Languages, SRM University, Kanchepuram, India, E-mails: monikanair.b@ktr.srmuniv.ac.in; hod.efl@ktr.srmuniv.ac.in

Teacher: Where did you go?

Learner: I go to theater.

Teacher: went to the.....

Learner: I went to the theater.

Language learnt in such an environment will expose learners to a limited range of words or situations. A new learner of a language is often intimidated by frequent corrections that hamper language learning. The learner develops an inability to face the real world for real time conversations. He or she will fail tremendously, shy away from engaging in conversations and will develop a hatred for the language learnt.

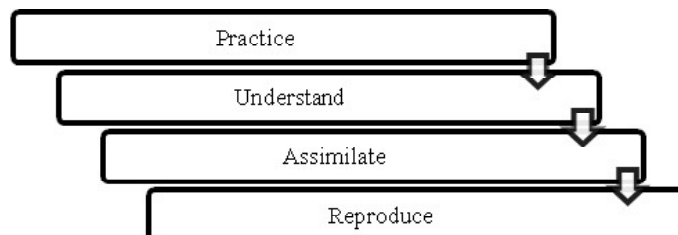
To circumvent the above situation, the outside world should be brought inside the classroom. Learners should actively participate and involve themselves in the learning process. Language is learnt out of practice and imitation and cannot be forced upon. Independent learning can be reinforced for a larger benefit.

“It is important for the learner to be exposed to the features of spontaneous speech. Most of us can recall our first exposure to a foreign language outside the classroom, and the feeling of bewilderment which often accompanies this experience. We are suddenly confronted with people who speak rapidly, who use vague language which was never covered in our classroom experience, who make false starts and ask abbreviated questions. This is the real world and we need to prepare learners for it” [2].

Active learning can be achieved only when teachers step down from the pedestal of authority and become facilitators. This results in the reduction of teacher talk time and increases student talk time. The aim of this paper is to explore different aspects of active classroom techniques and highlights its advantages when compared with traditional teaching methods.

### **TRADITIONAL TEACHING APPROACH VERSUS ACTIVE CLASSROOM TECHNIQUE**

In the traditional teaching approach, the language teacher acts as the embodiment of knowledge. What the teachers utters in the classroom is the language which has



**Figure 1:** Active Classroom Technique

to be absorbed and reproduced during the tests. Learners are treated like empty barrels into which the teacher fills in the knowledge. Learning takes place only within the four walls of the classroom. Movement inside the classroom is restricted. Teacher uses “chalk and talk” method and gives importance to rote learning. The communication is usually uni-directional, from the teacher to the learner.

Active classroom technique is process and practice oriented. Active classroom techniques involve learners in the process of learning. Learners’ interests are considered before designing the lesson plan. From being a passive receptor of the language; learners advance to become active participants. The desired outcome is decided by the learners according to their requirements.

Figure 1 explains the working process of an active classroom. Teachers act as facilitators facilitating the process of learning. Communication in an active classroom is bi-directional, between the teacher and the learner.

“The teacher is required to be a skillful manipulator, using questions, commands, and other cues to elicit correct sentences from the learner. Lessons are hence teacher-directed, and the teacher sets the pace” [3].

### CLASSROOM SETTING

A traditional classroom setup gives more importance to the teacher as the center of focus and considers students as machines recording instructions. Students are required to sit in rows one behind the other. A disciplined setup cannot help students learn a language; rather it may affect the behavior of learners. The further the learner sits, the wider is the gap in communication. An unconscious bias that the last benchers are poor performers further restricts the communication between the teacher and the learner.

Smart classrooms are therefore designed to achieve the desired outcome of uniform communication across the classroom. Movement of students in a smart classroom is not restricted. Students work either in pairs or in groups. The furniture



**Figure 2:** Observations from the front of the classroom[4]

in the classroom should be designed to promote collaborative learning. Collaborative learning enhances critical thinking, creative thinking and problem solving characteristics among learners. Learners of a new language will feel comfortable learning and clarifying their doubts with the peer group rather than the teacher.

Smart or active language classrooms are aided with technology to promote the process of learning. The classrooms are provided with smart boards that use whiteboard technology (using computer and projectors, video or pictures are displayed on the board), computers, television, speakers, headphones etc. Teachers in a smart classroom allow students to decisively use their mobile phones. Learners make use of blogs and wikis in the classroom as directed by their instructor.

Suggestopedia (described in detail in section IV), a method developed by psychiatrist and educator Georgi Lozanov explains how the classroom setting, arrangement of furniture, use of light and music can influence language learning.

Figure 2 clearly shows that students in a language classroom have to analyze the given task, explain it in detail to the peer group and find out solutions [4]. Language classes are mostly noisy because learners actively participate in the process of practicing and learning a language. They will try to create sentences with a particular set of vocabulary using trial and error method. They will learn from their mistakes without any feeling of guilt when they are corrected by their peer group.

### **METHODS AND APPROACHES TO BE USED IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

For effective teaching learning to take place the teacher can adopt an eclectic approach towards language teaching. For achieving the desired outcome, active classroom technique combines few of the methods and approaches and designs a new lesson plan according to the needs of the learner.

Some of the techniques incorporated into active class room training are:

- A. Communicative Language Teaching
- B. Collaborative Language Teaching
- C. Co operative Language Teaching
- D. Suggestopedia
- E. Task Based Language Teaching

#### **A. Communicative Language Teaching**

For decades people followed and practiced Grammar Translation Method and Audio-lingual Method. Learners using Grammar Translation Method could translate very well but failed tremendously in conversation. Audio Lingual Method on the other hand relied on rote learning, drills and memorization of set phrases.

The Direct method, Community Language Teaching, Total Physical Response gave birth to Communicative Language Teaching which insisted on real life like situation in the classroom. Trial and error is used in language creation in the classroom. Language learning can take place even outside the classroom environment. This method uses activities like role play and group discussions to help learners actively participate in the process of language acquisition.

### **B. Collaborative Language Teaching**

Collaborative language teaching enhances team spirit among students. Learners learn through sharing of ideas. They break down the information provided to them and work in pairs or groups to find out the solution. This helps them develop their problem solving skills. Collaborative language teaching is currently gaining more importance due to its merits. Learners analyze their weakness out of their own discussions and try to correct them by getting suggestions from the peer group.

### **C. Cooperative Learning**

Cooperative learning follows the principles of humanistic approach. Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky insisted on the importance of social interaction in learning. This approach believes that learning can happen only by interacting with others. Like Communicative language teaching and Collaborative language teaching this approach gives importance to pair or group work. Each member from the group is given only one part of the information. Learners put together their ideas, analyze them, try to understand the concept and reproduce the information in a more refined way.

### **D. Suggestopedia**

Suggestopedia also known as Desuggestopedia believes in effective way of learning. According to this approach, stimulating the human brain using external source like music can result in learning. Experts of this approach claim that this approach is three times more effective than any conventional teaching method. In this method the teacher first distributes handouts to the students, asks few questions related to the topic, plays a soft classical music, reads the material aloud for the students to listen, asks students to repeat along with him, asks his students to read it again, in a more dramatic way the teacher reads it aloud and now the students repeat without their handouts.

### **E. Task based Language Teaching**

According to David Nunan, "task is a piece of meaning focused work involving learners in comprehending, producing and/or interacting in the target language, and that tasks are analyzed or categorized according to their goals, input data, activities, settings and roles"[5].

Task based language teaching encourages students to learn using problem solving strategy. The focus of this approach is to improve cognitive skills of the learners. Pair works and group activities are not encouraged in this approach. The tasks focused on the reasoning ability of the learner.

### **LEARNER CENTERED CLASSES**

Learners' autonomy is generally overlooked upon, believing that the learners will not take responsibility for their own learning. There are teachers who believe that tasks and activities will spoil class discipline and that they will lose control over their students.

Learner centered class does not mean that the learner takes full control of the class or the student does the work of a teacher. Teacher can motivate learners and instill confidence in them to use language at their will. Teacher's timely suggestions help learners correct their mistakes. The teacher in a learner centered classroom asks questions related to the topic, conducts discussions, asks for students' opinion about the topic and also accepts their suggestion.

Learners in a learner centered classroom takes responsibility of assessing their own improvement. Self assessment, peer evaluation and feedbacks play a vital role in the process of learning.

### **TEACHERS' ROLE**

Being proud as a teacher is good but too much of pride can also result in ego. Today the major problem in any classroom is the teachers' attitude towards the students. Teachers don't encourage students to contradict their ideas on a concept. Their pride does not allow them to learn something new from a student. They take pleasure in being the total controller of the class. They don't accept their mistakes and sometimes even justify their mistakes. A teacher must encourage learners to ask questions, clarify their doubts, give suggestions and engage them in the teaching learning process in an interesting way.

Teachers fail to realize that their aim should not only be to complete the syllabus but also develop the cognitive and creative skills of the learners. Engaging learners with any tasks or activities at random can help in creating a lively atmosphere in the class but does not help the learner in understanding the nuances of the language that they are learning. A teacher has to spend some quality time planning the task that explains the technicality of what is being learnt. Learning should happen unintentionally. A teacher should therefore

- Plan the task according to the syllabus
- Plan the execution
- Go to the classroom with the required material for the task
- Assign task in a systematic way

- Check if the learners have understood what they are doing or if they are on the right track.
- Provide suggestions in between to boost learners confidence
- Analyze the outcome
- Decide on the things that can be included or deleted from the next task.
- Assign them with more challenging tasks to check their improvement

### **LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

The ultimate aim of any language teacher is to improve the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of students. The various methods and approaches devised by the linguists, psychologist and educators mainly focused on the learners' language acquisition. The following creative activities can be employed in an active classroom to enhance language learning.

#### **A. Listening Using Active Classroom Technique**

A few tasks or activities that can be used to enhance listening skills are

- **Listening to dialogs from any movie:** Learners can be shown a part of the movie in which the conversation is between two or more characters in the target language. The scene can be repeated once or twice depending on the level of the learner. Learners have to understand the conversation and should try to list down the dialogs in the proper order.
- **Chinese Whisper:** Chinese whisper is an ancient technique used to analyze the listening capability of students. An ear to ear transfer of message happens. The last student tells the message aloud. Usually the final message is incorrect. The teacher tracks where the transfer of message went wrong.
- **Lis-draw:** Lis-draw is a listening drawing activity. Students listen to a story, incident from the newspaper or an article and respond to it by drawing. The teacher can analyze the students' level of understanding. The student who has to complete his drawing needs to know the meaning of tough vocabulary. Teacher can give him the liberty to either check the dictionary or find the meaning using the internet. A meaning that is learnt out of personal interest will stay in the memory.
- **Music task:** Music task is an interesting activity where students will be more actively involved as music caters to their senses. Students are made to listen to songs in the target language and fill up the gaps in the worksheet. This activity will help learners increase their listening skills and increase their understanding of the topic.

#### **B. Speaking Using Active Classroom Technique**

A few tasks or activities that can be used to enhance speaking skills are

- **Be Loud:** Be Loud is an activity where the students need to explain a picture or concept loud and clear to his group mate who will be standing near the black board. The student who is near the board is not supposed to look at his group mates. He has to draw a picture or write some details only by listening to the instructions provided to him by his group mates.
- **Group Discussions and Debates:** Learners in the initial stage of learning a new language will have lots of inhibitions in using it. Group discussions and debates on a particular topic will help them use the vocabulary needed to state their views. Teachers' help can be sought in-between the discussion to facilitate the process.
- **Block and Tackle:** Block and Tackle is a task where learners will have to assume themselves to be a fictional character after picking a chit from blinded lots. They will have to speak in favor of the character for one minute, change court and continue by blaming the same fictional character for the next one minute.
- **JAM(Just A Minute):** No preparation time is given to the student in this activity. The learner has to speak on the spot on any topic given to him by his teacher or peer group. This activity will help the student overcome inhibition and stage fear.

### **C. Reading Using Active Classroom Technique**

A few tasks or activities that can be used to enhance reading skills are

- **I Am Lost:** I am lost is an activity where the learner is provided with the road or city map. He has to read it and write proper instructions for helping a person reach his destination. This activity helps the reader to read pictures from a map. This also enhances learners' writing skills.
- **I am the Critic:** I am the critic is a poetry reading activity. Here the student reads a poem, analyses the language used, the underlying meaning and comments on the poem as a critic.
- **Reading Comprehension:** Reading comprehension has been used for ages to enhance language learning. Students read a given text and answer the question that follows. The teacher can focus more on the vocabulary through this activity. The pace of reading can also be evaluated by the teacher.

### **D. Writing Using Active Classroom Technique**

A few tasks or activities that can be used to enhance writing skills are

- **Kill that Witch:** Kill that Witch is a writing activity which focuses on error detection and editing. The teacher gives handouts with some printed text with lots of mistakes. These mistakes are the witches. The students earn more points



by correcting errors. If the students edit the correct sentence or words, it would be considered as killing the angel and they will lose points.

- **Will Win Writing:** After completing a syllabus the teacher can allot a part of the blackboard to each group in the class and ask them to write down all the points that they remember. This activity will help learners to understand the concept and retain the topic learnt.
- **Creative Writing:** Provide the learner with an idea. The student has to develop that piece of idea and write a story, a poem or an essay.
- **Letter or Email Writing:** The teacher can provide the learners with funny situations and ask them to send a letter or mail to somebody who is not the actual recipient. And later ask them to imagine themselves as the person who is offended after reading a wrong mail and respond back in writing.

These creative activities ensure total engagement from the learner and motivate the learner to actively participate and imbibe the language.

## CONCLUSION

Meyers and Jones in their book 'Promoting active learning: Strategies for the college classroom' reported that

- Students are not attentive to what is being said in a lecture 40% of the time.
- Students retain 70% of the information in the first ten minutes of a lecture but only 20% in the last ten minutes.
- Four months after taking an introductory psychology course, students know only 8% more than students who had never taken the course[6].

The above points signify lacunae in the traditional classroom teaching. With these lacunae, traditional classroom teaching can seldom achieve the true target of language teaching – making a student exemplary in handling a language. The active class room teaching, on the contrary, ensures 100% engagement from learners. This full-fledged engagement promotes bi-directional communication. Language learning is considered as a fun activity rather than a syllabus for a curriculum. Students enjoy and learn language through activities which stimulate their imagination and potential. Thus, active classroom teaching can be used as a potential tool for enhancing language learning.

## *References*

- Malaguzzi, L.(1998). History, ideas and philosophy.Greenwich: Ablex Publishing.
- Willis Dave and Willis Jane. (2007). Doing Task- based Teaching. New Delhi : Oxford University Press.
- Richard J and Rodger T.(2005). Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching.India: Replica Press.

Abel Jessica and Madden Matt, "Drawing Words & Writing Pictures". <http://dw-wp.com/2011/03/the-silence-of-cartooning/> Web. 30 Jan 2016.

Nunan David, (1989). *Designing Task for the Communicative Classroom*. Great Britain: Bell & Bain Ltd.

Meyer C and Jones T B. (1993). *Promoting active learning: Strategies for the college classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.