Connecting Eight Effective ELT Classrooms

Contexts, Challenges & Solutions

Dipika Gode • Shekhar Khomne

Raju Lingala • Kuheli Mukherjee

Nurjahan Naik Khwaja • Vinayadhar Raju Prathikantam

Manjusha Sagrolikar • Gajanan Tayade

With *a preface by Dr Amol Padwad*

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Develop. Together.

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Preface:
In search of effective teachers

Dr Amol Padwad

Secretary, AINET

Several years ago, in a small study undertaken by some members of the Bhandara English Teachers' Club, I was exploring students' expectations from their (English) teachers. The primary interest was to see what image students might have of a 'good' teacher. I met a group of secondary students in a local school for an hour-long informal discussion, during which they shared several expectations they had from their teachers. Some expectations related to the teachers' knowledge, class control, the ability to make students understand topics and to make classes fun. But many more were about the teacher's personal attributes, such as being accessible, patient, a good listener, sympathetic and interested in students' own views and concerns. It was very clear that they had the teacher's pedagogic skills or subject expertise (including proficiency in English) much lower on their priority list than the personal attributes. After the discussion was over, and the students started leaving the room, I noticed three students lingering at the back of the room. I realised that they were waiting for other students to leave, perhaps to have a word with me in private. I stayed back to talk to them and what they told me was quite unexpected and eye-opening. They told me that they were the 'poor' students in the class (they used the Marathi equivalent of "dunce" to describe themselves), academically very weak and always underperforming – and therefore in the bad books of the teachers. That was not a problem for them since they had reconciled to the fact that they could not live up to the class/ teacher expectations. Nor did they have any issue with some other 'smart' and 'intelligent' students being the teachers' pets. But they spoke in agitated voices about what they saw as an attitude of discrimination and unfairness of the teachers (and they did not hesitate to name them!). They shared some experiences of how the

teachers were not consistent in their treatment in the class, being unfairly lenient and tolerant with the 'pets' and unnecessarily heavy-handed and dismissive with them. The essence of their frustration and anger, as I understood, was that they were not recognised as persons, as equal community members, in the class. They felt – and I completely agree – that they had the right to be treated at par, irrespective of their performance or competence.

As you go through the stories of experience and experiments in this book, this is what comes out very prominently as a recurrent defining characteristic – not only are the teacher-narrators of the stories good human beings themselves, they treat their students as human beings too. They seem to treat all students at par and not allow a student's bad English or incomplete home-work or total silence to be dismissive of such students. On the contrary, they seem to take a special notice of such students and respond with usually beyond-the-normal support needed by them.

Defining or even describing an effective teacher is quite a complex and challenging job, since there isn't any common set of characteristics of an effective teacher which will hold true in any context and for all. While learners may have their own notions of effective teachers, as the students in my study indicated, teachers themselves may have their own understandings and beliefs in the matter. Add to that different, and sometimes conflicting, views of school administrators, education officials, parents and the society about effective teachers, and you will realise the complexity and challenge. Teachers are often seen to struggle with these various pulls in different directions to be effective teachers, and sometimes surrender to those views (for example, the school head's or the education officer's) which are too difficult to resist. Against this backdrop, the stories in the present collection are particularly valuable because they show what great gains can be made when teachers' and students' notions of the effective teacher converge, while other 'intrusive' expectations are (at least temporarily) kept aside.

The narrators in this book are passionate and committed teachers sharing their efforts to experiment and innovate in order to be effective teachers. There are many contextual similarities between them – they work in challenging circumstances with underprivileged learners; they work in large centralised state systems in schools located mostly in rural areas; they face various challenges but try to address them rather than reconcile with them. But even more important are the similarities of orientation, approach and attitude of these teachers, which probably may explain better why they are seen as effective teachers and have managed to make a difference in their students' lives. The stories evolve around some practical classroom

concerns and the narrators' attempts to address them. In their attempts these teachers do not shy away from going all the way to the larger personal-emotional and societal issues at the root of the problem and walk the extra mile to address these. No wonder that they do not only successfully address some concerns, but also cause some transformative impact on the learners. These stories reflect how effective teachers show an awareness that the personal cannot be separated from the academic and must be addressed if learning is to improve. In other words, effective teachers may or may not be experts in their trade, but they are good learners themselves and, above all, good human beings.

We must whole-heartedly welcome collections like this, particularly in India, since such narratives of useful experiences 'from the field' are conspicuously in short supply. The key value of this collection lies in many broad ideas, as well as specific lessons and insights, it offers for us to boost our own efforts at becoming effective teachers. However, the collection will be potentially even more valuable if it succeeds in stimulating further probing of at least two related questions. Firstly, if being good human beings is a crucial foundation for effective teachers, why is it so difficult for teachers to be good human beings? The teachers in these stories are not representative of the overall teaching community, or even the sub-community they come from. They are uncommon deviations in a sense. So, it is still an unsolved puzzle what makes them – and not many others in the same situation – good human beings and have a serious but humane concern about their own work and their learners' wellbeing. Secondly, it may sound ironic, but apparently these teachers manage to address challenges and impact their learners' lives by going 'out of the way', by going beyond the classroom, the curriculum and the system. It seems that they are doing great things not because of the system but in spite of it. If this is true, then does it mean that the scope is very limited within the system to do anything impactful and valuable? In that case, what price do these teachers come to pay for bypassing or transgressing the system? If doing such things comes at a stiff cost, are they able to do things only occasionally and not as a regular feature of their practice? This last question is important because some of the experiments/ initiatives reported in this collection seem to have taken place only once or twice. That does not take away the value of what the narrators have done. There is a larger concern here about how to ensure that effective teachers are a rule and not exceptions, and that what they do are not occasional deviations but regular practice.

The Indian ELT community must be grateful to Jason Anderson for initiating useful explorations into an area of immense value to education in general, and ELT in

particular, and doing so in partnership with teachers themselves. The authors of the stories included this collection deserve to be congratulated for sharing their experiences in a lucid and accessible way and making their own experiences available to others to benefit from. AINET is immensely pleased to publish this collection and to be able to contribute to the dissemination of good ideas and practices. It should be very reasonable to hope that the publication of the stories will be followed by further explorations and discussions on the issues emerging out of them, which AINET will be equally pleased to facilitate.

New Delhi

May 2021

1. Exploration and change in the classroom

Nurjahan Naik Khwaja

1. My context and challenges

Teaching is considered as one of the noblest professions on the globe and I feel privileged to be a teacher. I teach in a coastal part of Maharashtra. My school is a government-aided school running classes from standard 1 to 12. Being a highly-reputed school, we have students from almost all sectors of society. Being located in a semi-urban area, our students range from 1,200-1,300 in number and come from fishing communities, farming backgrounds, salaried families, local business families and even from migrating labourers. I teach classes 5, 8, 9 and 10. My students are mostly in the lower streams. Besides being a teacher at secondary level, I work as a teacher trainer also.

I have been working in my present school for the past nine years. The biggest challenge I face is dealing with the average and below average learners for consecutive years with limited resources and little support from the parents. The classes I teach are mostly mixed ability classes where the number of average and

below average learners exceeds the number of other learners. Many a times they lag behind the required skills of a particular standard. Along with the regular coursework prescribed for a class, they need to get extra practice of the basic language skills. So, it takes a lot of time to plan the activities as per the differentiated levels of the learners. On the learners' part, they remain passive when it comes to extra practice. Also factors such as fear of English, their previous academic background, lack of exposure to English outside the school and parents' lack of English education also put blocks in their attempts.

Many a time these learners face criticism which turns into making them mischievous. As they can't relate to their studies, they remain aloof from it and become troublesome to others. So managing their behaviour becomes another issue. Motivating these underperforming and mischievous students and retaining their interest in the studies becomes a herculean task for me. Parental support is also limited so the students don't bother to complete the assignments given to them. By the upper classes, it becomes difficult for them to comprehend what is taught.

The irregular students also pose a challenge as their irregularity affects their progress. Having set up in a famous tourist destination, the flourishing tourism industry offers good sources of income to the students at a very young age which keeps them away from school. It troubles the parents as well to convince the kids to return back to school and concentrate on their studies instead of making money.

I teach in an environment where completing the prescribed syllabus gains more weight than acquiring particular skills. Our culture is mostly exam oriented so parents and the school give utmost importance to scoring high in the exams. Ultimately, the students also focus on the same which underestimates their true potential and abilities. At this point, learning becomes rote and stresses on mugging of content. It prevents me from bringing innovations into the classroom. When I continue with my planned activities instead of the traditional way, time becomes an issue as I find it difficult to complete the syllabus within the given timeframe.

The evaluation process also puts restrictions on teachers here as students get promoted to the next class easily. The given criteria for evaluation is too easy and fails to portray the true picture of the performance of a student. So there remains a gap between what the learners actually know and the grades they get in the examination. The exaggerated report cards make the parents also believe that their children are excelling whereas by the time they reach the upper class, their performance

decreases. Changing the mindset of the parents in the early classes and making them aware of the actual learning level of their kids is another challenge.

The number of students in each class also works as a challenge. In my classes, the average number of students is 45 to 60. Also, being a mixed-ability class, there are all sorts of learners. So, keeping their levels and number in mind, I have to frame the activities and complete them within the given timeline which is another issue that I face. Considering their number, it becomes difficult to cater for an individual's needs and assess them regularly as my heavy workload allows only a limited time for it.

Our school has a total of 8 periods of 35 minutes each in a day, of which we spend almost 6/7 periods in teaching and others on school related work. Celebrations of various events, competitions, and extracurricular activities reduce our teaching periods. Sometimes, there are tasks other than teaching which also prevent teachers from utilizing their time for students.

2. My teaching

I have spent nearabout a decade in this profession and all these years and experiences have played a vital role in shaping my character as a teacher. My teaching practice has undergone some changes and over the years I have experimented a lot in my classrooms because I believe that as teachers, we should keep updating ourselves and should be like a waterflow. For language teachers, change is mandatory as language is something that can be explored more and more. It is the functional aspect of life which has a lot to do with our living and survival.

Learning a language is different than learning other subjects. It's a social as well as a cognitive process. Hence, it's not possible to fit it into the four walls of a classroom in a stipulated time. It's a continuous, ongoing process. So we, as teachers, have to keep experimenting in our classrooms in order to facilitate language learning. With English being taught as a foreign language in India, it becomes essential to provide maximum exposure to it. Here our role expands from merely being a teacher. Language deals with the aesthetic aspects of life which beautifies our lives. So, instead of presenting it in the monotonous form of a subject, we should present this artistic approach of language to the students. Students need to be able to enjoy the beauty of language rather than reciting the rules of grammar. The era in which we teach today values marks more and therefore there has been an emphasis on the examinations in our education system. But, in my view, education goes beyond marks and exams. It

enables us to live life meaningfully, value one's own self. In the course of time, the marks we score have no significance but what we learn remains with us forever, enables us to cope with life and it's that which matters. So, my focus in the class remains more on learning for life rather than performance in the exams. As my learners belong to different backgrounds and have different learning experiences, they often emerge as first-generation school goers, needing more practice of English in the class. So, my role in the class isn't restricted to teaching the textbook only. For me, the textbook is a medium to teach language and not an end in itself. And I have strong faith in the abilities of students that they can construct their own learning if provided with the right kind of atmosphere and opportunities. With timely motivation, students can work wonders in the class. So, I always try to scaffold their learning in my class, nurturing a positive support system for my students. The knowledge I have gained from various workshops, seminars, conferences or from my teacher education degree, has left a strong influence on my journey as a teacher. Even today I keep reading blogs, educational articles, discuss my practice and concerns with other teacher friends, all of which have contributed to shape my beliefs as a teacher.

Action research to solve ongoing problems

A couple of years ago, I faced some reading challenges in my home class which were hampering the overall English performance of my learners. In a quest to explore this further, I decided to conduct an action research study in this class. After going through the systematic procedure of finding the problem, collecting evidence, developing a strategy and implementing it, I was quite successful in gaining positive outcomes. Even though it was sometimes challenging to conduct it considering the regular workload and time barriers, my learners and I did whatever we could do. Along with the improved quality of reading and love for English among my learners, I could very well see their increased motivation to perform better. Other teachers also noticed this change in the learners. Those days are etched on my mind to stay forever as this project has established a strong bond between me and my learners. ■

Planning my lessons

For many of my learners, the classroom is the only place where they can learn English, so I plan my lessons accordingly. Instead of going by the traditional lecture method, I incorporate some skill-based activities. For example, while teaching a text, I pre-teach the vocabulary, add some reading comprehension activities like skimming, scanning,

prediction, etc. There are revision tasks also. This too depends upon the text. If the lesson is too difficult for my learners, then I vary the method and add some explanation as well. Sometimes there is a combination of activities and explanation. These activities are often responsive activities which are built upon the previous ones. Starting with simple factual tasks, I also include complex activities. I prefer to design my own set of activities considering the learners' level and need of the lesson instead of using the textbook activities as they are. Also, some of them I plan beforehand, while some I plan on the spot as I can reflect on the lesson during it and make necessary changes to it. Based on these activities, I prefer the pattern of classroom interactions. There is groupwork, pairwork and for some activities there is individual work also. It becomes convenient for me to monitor the students during these activities and give feedback to them. Sometimes some errors which need individual correction can be discussed with the concerned student(s). Also, the areas where common attention is needed, can be addressed before the whole class.

It is the same case with teaching grammar and poems. Because of this activity-based approach, it has become possible to turn some of the boring lessons into interesting ones and seek maximum student participation. In my view, students find the lessons interesting only when they can relate to it. So, I try to add examples or instances in the lessons related to their lives.

As I have said earlier, learning from outside resources has benefitted me a lot. I have tried to adapt this knowledge as per my learners and classroom conditions. By doing so, I have invented some interesting methods and activities which are liked by my students as well. One such activity I call 'Vocabulary Quest' where before teaching any text, I read new words from the text and learners race to find them and provide the spellings, followed by learning the meaning and drilling. This one has been thoroughly enjoyed by my learners as it has turned a boring task of vocabulary learning into an interesting game.

Use of languages: A balanced approach

Regarding the use of language in the class, I have often heard that it's best to teach in mother tongue for average and below average learners. Explaining the text in mother tongue is ideal for them. Giving away this myth, I deliberately try to use English in my classes as for many of my learners, the teacher is the only resource to listen to. And listening paves the way for speaking. After repeated use of some common words or phrases, my students also get used to it. Another thing I add is instruction check questions, through which I check my students' understanding before the start of any

activity. If the language I use is too difficult for the students, I use their mother tongue to explain it. So, a balanced combination of English along with mother tongue works well for my class. Along with regular teaching, there are many occasions in the lesson where we share a good laugh. Using their mother tongue here retains their attention and makes the lesson joyful.

Adding fun to the class

A lesson becomes interesting when it has some fun elements and language games cannot be any exception to this. I often incorporate them into my lessons as ice-breaking activities at the beginning of the academic year. After I have taught vocabulary, I use language games for revising it. Whether it's practising grammar concepts, assessing the learnt content, or utilizing learners' spare time, language games are of great help. Along with acquiring knowledge, learners find the lessons enjoyable. 'Back to the board' and 'Slap the board' (see Figure 1) are two such popular games among my learners which have been adapted by other teachers as well.

Figure 1. Students play 'Slap the board' to revise vocabulary.

My idea of a democratic class

Many a times, I consider students' opinion on their preferred way of working. Promoting autonomy in classwork is necessary for me because it makes the students feel that they are an important part of the lesson and it advocates democracy as well. As they are going to be responsible citizens of tomorrow, this prepares them for future life as well. Often while assigning them homework, I ask the students what homework they would like to have or they can do on the lessons learnt.

Another thing that democratizes my class is the working of groups and selection of group leaders. At the start of the new academic year, with regular observations, I find out the academically stronger and average students. I share my plan of working in groups with such students who are good at studies and can help others with their studies. To reinforce the below average students, I put my classes into groups and assign one monitor to each such group. These study monitors help me in providing extra support to such students. Sometimes, there is a single student needing individual attention and one monitor is given responsibility of him/her. Discussing with these monitors regarding their groups' or partner's progress regularly and then taking further steps eases my work. And when it's my turn to deal with such students, they already have got some practice in their group. Also, it makes the group leaders confident and allows the group members to learn comfortably with their friends in a relaxed manner. Collaboration and communication are two important skills of the 21st century which are thus inculcated among the students through these grouping techniques. Praising my students on their efforts and on little achievements has given me good results as it has improved their performance. The effects of such motivation are evident in their overall studies as well.

Building relations and managing behaviour

The relationship between a teacher and students is very crucial and it defines the success of our lessons and classes. Therefore, establishing a healthy relationship with the learners is of utmost importance for teachers. In my classes, I have come across some challenging as well as shy students. The feeling of rejection and criticism for not showing expected levels of learning often cause the students to misbehave and they find an escape from the studies. In many cases, parents also fail to understand this situation and with no one to look to for some hope, these students remain neglected, which adds to the trouble. It's a challenging job to handle such students. Though they seem to be rude and bullying, it's not fair to leave them unnoticed and astray from learning. So, having a good conversation with them is the ideal solution to open them up. Punishment doesn't work for such students, instead it makes the matter worse. So, I avoid it. In one of the workshops I had attended, the speaker suggested not to use any kind of punishment which will do no good to the student. In fact, instant punishment makes the students behave more rudely. In such conditions, not losing my temper and avoiding overreacting is the key for me. I prefer talking with the students about their behaviour. Starting with general discussion, this dialogue then unfolds the reasons behind their behaviour. It becomes possible to make them realize their mistakes and improve. And it allows me to understand their point of view and plight

to use proper remedies later. Sometimes it takes time on the students' part to bring in a change in themselves. But it's important to initiate from somewhere and assure them that someone is listening to them, wants to trust them. As I deal mostly with teenagers, this idea has worked well for those students also who were going through some emotional turbulence and were finding it difficult to cope with the situation. Till now, I have got good results from such conversations, and parents too have recognised this.

Giving responsibilities to such students has also made my job easy. The feeling that we too are capable of doing something important works like magic. We just need to go for the right stroke at the right time. There are some exceptional cases as well but the satisfaction of at least trying my hand fills me with the hope that the efforts may bear fruit in the future.

The power of friendly conversations

Having a friendly conversation with my learners is my favourite thing to do. It indeed bridges the gap between the teacher and the learner. In fact, parents too want me to have a word with their kids, when they can't find a way out during any difficulty and it has often worked well for us. So, one such day, I was called by a parent who seemed so worried about the rude behaviour of her son, who would easily lose his temper. That day, the boy had argued with the parents and beaten up his younger brother very badly. In fact, he had started skipping lunch and preferred staying alone when at home. I was surprised to know this strange side of my learner, who otherwise seemed very quiet and obedient in the class.

One day, I initiated a friendly conversation with the boy regarding his schedule, his hobbies and his family. Slowly it emerged that he was actually upset with the treatment given to him and his younger brother. The age gap between the two was 6 to 7 years and the elder one, who was a teenager, could not understand why his parents gave more attention to the younger one and why was he expected to behave in a more responsible way. Being an introvert by nature he failed to convey his feelings properly and ended up misbehaving at home. After listening to him, I made him realize how else he could convey his feelings to his parents instead of such rude behaviour and why he needs to be friendly with his sibling. I talked with his mother also and suggested she have a regular, friendly chat with her so that he can feel comfortable. She agreed to that. After some days, the mother met me and happily narrated the change in her son's behaviour. The little attention and kind dialogues between the two helped in solving other problems as well. ■

As there are these behavioural issues, there are some students who lag behind because of their timid and shy nature. The background they come from, their past experiences, the build up of their persona, there are many reasons which make them underconfident. The fear of making mistakes and its consequences also prohibit them from being active in the class. To boost these students, I pair or group them up with some stronger, more confident students. These students assist them while carrying out classroom activities and encourage them to take part in them. Working with a peer makes them comfortable and helps them to adjust themselves with the classroom proceedings. Thus, maintaining healthy relations with my students is an integral part of my teaching practice. It delights me when students approach me for discussing their concerns or look on me as a reliable person to talk to. Extending my hand to them and being their friend this way also give me immense satisfaction.

3. My advice for colleagues with similar challenges

Teaching is a profession where we keep learning simultaneously while imparting knowledge to others. It's like that tree which offers its services to others and at the same time expands its roots under the soil. Sometimes we learn from our own actions and sometimes there are others who influence our practices. And this learning forms every teacher's own theory, own set of beliefs. My journey as a teacher has led me to believe certain things, form some opinions and these serve as strong pillars of my persona as a teacher. The most important thing that I have learnt throughout these years is to keep experimenting and not give up on my efforts. So, my advice to the readers is to keep trying, no matter what comes your way:

- There will be circumstances, there will be people, there will be words and comments which will let you down. But, at the end of the day, it's your efforts and dedication that matter the most. Learn to ignore the negative part while having a focus on the positive part and see the magic. You are the maker of your own destiny. You better know your classroom, your learners, their personalities and the circumstances you teach in. So before anybody else judges you, learn to know and evaluate yourself first. Value yourself. Don't fall prey to any negativity and don't let any negative things overpower you.
- Along with learning, reflecting on it is also vital. Introspect on your actions. Take time to evaluate them. Sometimes you're the king in the class, while you struggle badly on other days. Sit quietly and give it deeper thought. Think what went well and what needed improvement. Consider what extra efforts you

need to put in. What can you do to continue your success stories and how can you set things right when they are not going the way you want? Believe me. You yourself will see the difference. Make reflection a part of your teaching practice. It won't cost a penny but will give you immense satisfaction at the end of the day.

- In this era of globalization, access to knowledge is unlimited and easily accessible. With just a click of the mouse you are directed to a plethora of information, techniques and methods. Various trainings, webinars and conferences introduce you to many new ideas. While you are tempted to try many of them, you might be disappointed to see that they are not working for your class. You might be told that such things and ideas don't work at the grassroot level or they are not suitable for your students. Don't give up and remember that not all the students are same and hence one idea which served useful at one place will not bring the same results everywhere. So, learn to adapt the things as per your students and classroom conditions. These adaptations will take you towards other innovative ideas which you would not have thought of otherwise. And there is no harm in trying them out. Unless you try something out, you can never know whether it's useful or not. So, keep doing things and learn from them.

- Being teachers, we spend most of the time with our students. So, understand the student psychology well. Learn to put yourself in their shoes and analyse things from their perspective. It's necessary for easy and smooth interactions between us and our students. Students too need someone who understands them. Try to be their friend at times and take them into your trust. This is a tried and trusted remedy for many classroom issues. Also, know your students very well. Get to know their hobbies, interests, backgrounds, problems, ways of learning. This will help you in creating a strong bond with them. In addition to that, you can plan your classes more comprehensively and, in a student-centred direction.

- While giving feedback to the students, use a developmental approach. For example, use positive language even though you are pointing towards the errors. Emphasize the good things and suggest what can be done to improve. Your feedback should mirror the suggestions in a comforting way instead of demoralizing with harsh words. And the language of feedback should also be softer in tone. Every student is eager to listen to some good words so always keep this in mind while giving your feedback. Include some plus points even if its about their performance in sports, extra-curricular activities or even their

good behaviour. Education is not limited to academics only. Also praise the students on their little achievements, efforts. It will gear them up to perform better.

- We all have a fixed set of curricula to teach and we all are bound to do it. But often we find it difficult to complete all of it and here the race to 'finish' it rather than complete it starts. We may be able to cover the curriculum but does it guarantee meaningful learning of all our students? Focus on the learning rather than covering the curriculum. All the students don't learn by the same method and they have different needs. Give importance to that part of the curriculum which is important for your learners. Instead of preparing them for exams, enable them to be ready for future life. Inculcate the necessary skills in them. Education is a vast concept and it goes far beyond this already set curriculum and textbooks which are made for the whole student community in general. So, understand your students and plan your teaching accordingly.

- Make your classes lively. Turn them into places where students feel at home, where they can belong. Add fun and laughter to it along with learning. Try out new things. Make it a shelter to portray and voice students' work. And value your students' opinions also. When they feel that their feelings and opinion also count here, they will start taking interest in it.

- And most importantly, listen to your inner voice. Frame your own methodology based on your own experiments. No method or technique in the world can challenge it, I bet! So, keep exploring and keep trying. Wishing you the best journey ahead. ■

2. Creating a learning community in the school

Raju Lingala

1. My context and challenges

My school is a small Zilla Parishad High School in rural Telangana located 150 kilometres from our state capital, Hyderabad. It is a government school running classes from standard 6 to 10. It was started as an upper primary school in the 1960s and upgraded to high school in 1997. It serves the population of a small village where most of the upper class and middle class students go to school in a nearby major village. All of the students of our school belong to marginalised communities. I feel it's important to share that all of our students (except one) are disadvantaged, coming from scheduled castes and backward castes. Among them, 20% are orphans or semi-orphans. Our school has two media of instructions: Telugu and English.

Most of the parents are farmers, peasants, *beedi* (tobacco) rollers and daily labourers. I was transferred to the school in July 2018 from a larger school nearby. I teach English to classes 6 to 10. Besides being a teacher I am in charge of school programs and parent-teacher meetings. I work as a district resource person to conduct school complex meetings.

The biggest challenge I face is that our learners are all below average in prior achievement, but I don't want to blame them; it has happened like that for a decade and nobody cared about the school. Now things are gradually changing. There is little scope for the learners to have peer learning or parental guidance or a better time at home. The only exposure they get, especially for English, is one period a day. Education is not the priority of the learners' parents. Most of them will not come for PTA meetings because they are not aware of the power of education. In my context, teaching itself is a challenge.

Another major challenge is a lack of support from the community and the administration regarding infrastructure, classrooms and basic facilities. Even the NGOs working in our district do not provide support to low strength (i.e. smaller) classes, but I believe every individual is important. Our administration is concerned more with prescribed syllabus completion and results in examinations, not with the basic skills required, so we teachers have to teach the syllabus and prepare our students for exams.

Challenges with students' behaviour management

It's quite natural for students to be naughty, but in my context, due to the environment and lack of discipline at home, many of the students tend to misbehave. Maybe it happens due to their family background, their low performance in studies or because we teachers don't handle their behaviour properly.

Another challenge is that we teachers don't have proper exposure to the subjects we teach and we are also 'first-generation English teachers'. Before 2000 there were no specialist English teachers, and English was taught by head teachers or any teachers who knew some English. Most of the teachers now teaching in English as a medium of instruction (started in 2008) had their education in Telugu-medium schools. Collaborative learning and teaching is the need of the hour, but it's not happening.

I also face other challenges like rurality, small classes, no support for development of teaching-learning materials and a heavy workload, but they are all manageable.

> **Experience counts**
>
> In my previous school, the parents of a ninth grade girl (a minor, about 14) decided to marry her off. After learning this, we informed the authorities. The next day, the authorities (*anganwadi* supervisor and police officer) visited our school to check the girl's age in the school records. Subsequently, her marriage was stopped, but the parents scolded us and withdrew her admission from our school. Afterwards, we came to know that she had stopped her studies, which made us feel bad. More recently, at my present school, the same incident happened, but this time, after I shared my prior experience with colleagues, we didn't complain to the authorities. Since I knew the girl's parents, I visited them, and requested that they didn't marry her off, telling them about child marriages and their consequences. They listened to this, and instead of marriage, she was engaged, and the marriage was postponed for three years. That girl continued her studies at our school, and recently joined a college. Still I feel I didn't act properly in the first incident. I think experience counts. ∎

2. My teaching

I started teaching without knowing much about it, but with an in-depth passion for teaching. I have been in this field for 15 years and I am learning something new every day. I believe that by teaching we learn, and by learning we teach. I spent about a decade without proper exposure to English or guidance. When I started teaching in my first school, what I did was different from other teachers, since I taught out of my experience as a learner and using the theory which I learnt from my teacher training. I was aware that once I had been a learner and I learnt the language through exposure and regular practice. My beliefs and views are formed by being exposed to input from other professionals and trainings. Now I have become cautious in my teaching, and depend more on research-oriented and evidence-based learning. I believe that in-depth passion and patience are very important for a language teacher. In my context students learn English as a second language. A child can learn through society, parents, friends and teachers – I believe all stakeholders are very important and they must contribute in order to maintain a positive atmosphere.

All students are individuals and everyone learns in their own, unique way. I use multiple methods of teaching (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic), and use more strategies to reach students, so that no one is left behind, because for me every student is important. I encourage active participation in the classroom because I believe the

classroom environment is the setting in which student learning takes place, especially learning a second language like English. My role as a teacher is to facilitate students' learning. Before I thought a quiet classroom is good and regarded myself as a direct transmitter of knowledge. However, since I have learnt that motivation is the key to inspiring students to learn something. We can't bend an iron rod without making it hot in the fire, so I always try to ignite my students' minds in order to make them learn English.

Continuing professional development is crucial for any teacher. I always love to learn new things. When I understood that the teacher is a lifelong learner, it changed my perception. This attitude is helping me to update myself in my profession.

The impact of social disadvantage

I remember when I was working as a teacher in a private primary school at the start of my career many years ago. I used to go home to take my lunch, but one day I didn't feel like having lunch. One child noticed this and asked me about my lunch. I took this as an invitation and accepted to go to her home for lunch. She said that she could not believe that a teacher would have lunch at her house since she belonged to a marginalised group (scheduled caste). Already at that young age, this girl was in the bondage of the caste system. It was a great shock for me to know that the roots of the caste system are still present in our country. Now things are changed, but still in some areas such practices are present. ■

Relationships and behaviour management

School is the second best place for a student in the world after her/his home. The relationships among the students, parents and teacher are very important in order to have a positive impact on our school and society. I have come across many challenges to handle dogmatic, shy, and low-proficiency children. I overcame these challenges by building interpersonal relationships with them. I accept the saying: 'Spare the rod and spoil the child', but I'm against corporal punishment; I take this saying for discipline and accountability. For behaviour management I consider their background and their past experience. The relationships I have with the community helped us a lot for the smooth running of our school (supported infrastructure).

Language use and choice

I believe in the power of language and the importance of English in our country. I use the bilingual method (i.e. judicious use of mother tongue while transacting the lesson).

My choice of using L1 depends on the context. For example, I use L1 very often when teaching Telugu-medium students, more than English-medium students. I follow immersion and integration approaches while teaching English. I make use of opportunities where my students use English and I encourage them to expose themselves to English wherever and whenever possible. Most of the time I deliberately try to integrate all the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) of English. I strongly support and use the bilingual method and blended learning in my classroom.

Curriculum coverage and planning

Curriculum helps me with what I have to teach and complete in an academic year. In my initial years of teaching I thought the textbook is the Bible for the classroom, but now I am using authentic materials to support a particular topic from the textbook. I always try to make my classroom transaction as lively as possible using different materials (see Figure 1), and connect that particular lesson to the immediate society. I teach English as a language to learn and use it as a subject to complete the syllabus and prepare my students for the examinations. I plan my lessons keeping these things in mind. For large classes I use groups and for smaller classes I'm using pairs. We learn from one another. Recently I started giving importance to 21st-century skills and the sustainable development goals of the United Nations.
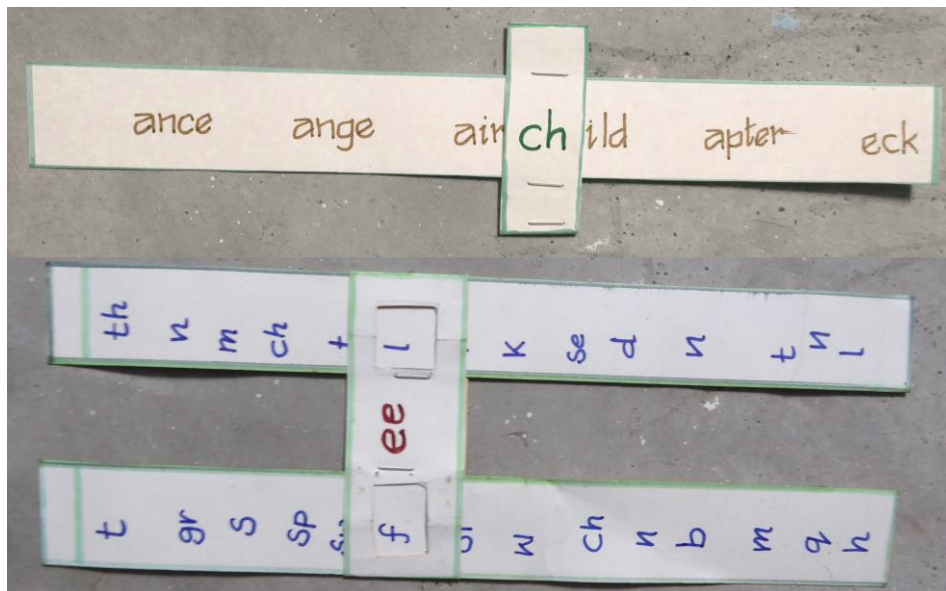

Figure 1. Teaching-learning materials for English literacy development.

Pedagogical practices

In our state, we are using Discourse-oriented Pedagogy (DOP) to transact lessons from our new textbooks. We are not presenting anything in isolation, but properly embedded in a discourse. In our context, more emphasis is given to reading. I'm using this to enhance the vocabulary of my students. I'm encouraging my students to practise extensive reading. I believe grammar should be taught by explicit instruction, rather than teaching grammar implicitly. I follow the communicative approach: I think practice makes perfect and also practice brings progress, so I give ample opportunities for my students to practise their language skills at school as well as at home. I assign group and individual activities for my students, and monitor them while they are engaged. I strongly believe feedback is essential, not only for my students' learning, but also for my teaching.


The dangers of corporal punishment

In my previous school one of my colleagues used to give corporal punishment to the children. I did not believe in this, and I told him about the negative impact of corporal punishment but he didn't listen. One day he beat a girl on her palm with a stick which had thorns on it. The thorns pricked her palm and started bleeding. The teacher was frightened and came to me for help. The girl's father came to school and scolded the teacher, but I spoke with the father and managed the issue. We were moved by the father's tears – he literally cried and explained how he is taking care of his daughter. That incident changed this particular teacher and from then onwards he stopped beating the students. ∎

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3. My advice for colleagues with similar challenges

My experience and training helped me to face the challenges with confidence. I would like to suggest the following tips to the teaching fraternity:

- Our students don't like partiality or corporal punishment. I believe they won't work for us. If you face this challenge you can try to give importance to all the students. Sometimes it's easy for us to like the students who come to school regularly and study well. In order to discipline our students we can use some other methods, rather than corporal punishment. If you find a child's mistakes or misbehaviour, instead of scolding in front of others or beating, you can try to talk to her/him personally or try to generalise the issue by mentioning it in the assembly or in the classroom as a whole (without mentioning names).

- We have to keep in mind that we are teaching to a heterogeneous group. We need passion and patience to deal with students. If you want to succeed as a teacher, you have to maintain cooperation among staff. Try to have professional collaboration. Believe in teamwork. If possible try to maintain good communication with the parents and the community.

- Respects students' autonomy. Try to follow the saying: 'Enter the classroom through their window, but come out through your door'. Be friendly, be honest and be strong.

- Try to create interest among the learners, so that they come to school regularly. In my case we introduced rewards for the regular students every month during morning assembly. Once, in my 10th grade class, out of 26 students, 18 students got 100% attendance!

- If you find that a particular lesson topic is not creating interest among the students, you can try to use authentic materials or different strategies. Don't think that the textbook is everything, try to use as many ways as possible to supplement it.

- Keep in mind the three Ps according to your context, don't copy others – sometimes it may not work in our context:
    - i.   planning ii. preparation iii. presentation

- Try to get regular feedback on your teaching. It helps us to improve. Keep a reflective journal.

- No need to worry about the size of the class. If class strength (number of learners) is high, you can try to use group activities and encourage peer learning. If it is less, try to include pairwork and role-plays. Once I had 86 students in one class, and eight students in another class at the same time. Every individual is important for us.

- Try to be flexible to learn new things in order to update and adopt new skills and face new challenges (e.g. the Covid 19 crisis).

- Try to keep in mind the generation gap. Most of the teachers are from generations X and Y, yet they are teaching digital natives (millennial/ generation Z). Let's try to upgrade ourselves too.

- Be a part of the teaching community. Be a member of the teacher association to improve your CPD and attend national/international seminars and workshops so that you will get a global perspective. It's always good to have a mentor – if you find that you are facing some problems in teaching, or you need motivation to teach, you can consult your mentor in order to get some help or support. ◼
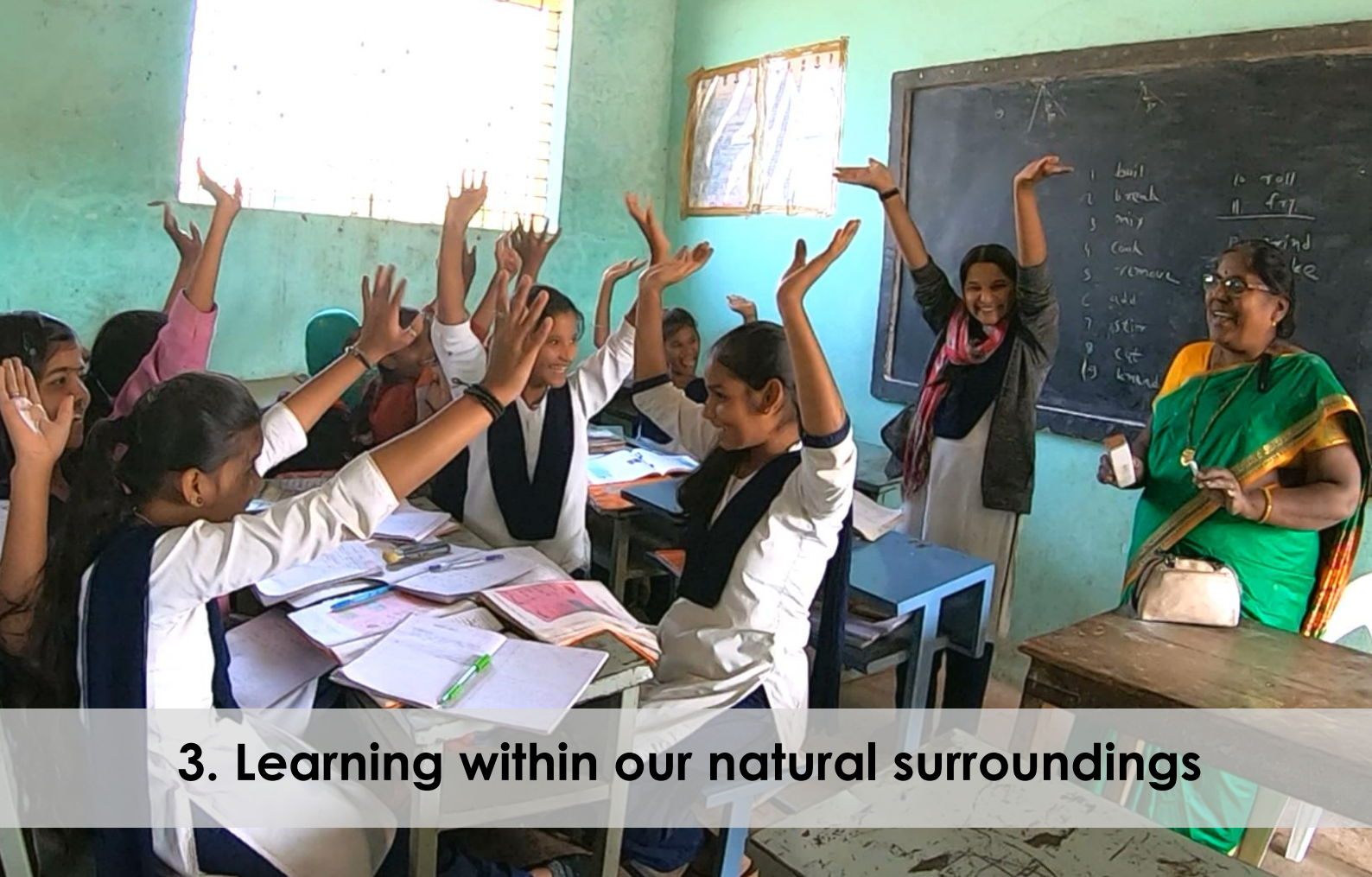
3. Learning within our natural surroundings

Manjusha Sagrolikar

1. My context and challenges

In my school I face many challenges while working with students. I have been working in a government girls' secondary school in a small rural town in Maharashtra since 1994. Twenty years I had larger classes, including higher secondary grades. Students enrol at the school from remote places where they do household chores, work in their fields or other's fields, from the beginning of the monsoon and during production and cultivation time. During harvesting also they support farmers and earn with their parents. This is the seasonal work when parents won't allow girls to attend schools. This is the earning period for them, a valuable time for their yearly saving. Amongst all these challenges of life, my students complete assignments, study and score more. Here, summer is a hard time for them. My village students have to go in search of water barefoot and carry heavy pots on their heads.

After 2014 my timetable changed and I started working with Hindi medium classes. These students are from slum areas and BPL (below the poverty level) families. The parents are illiterate. They are not very aware about education. These students lack basic skills. Other challenges relate to their broken families. Single labour mothers take care of their children, and many students live with their grandparents or uncles. They have to do household chores, help parents with work and earn for themselves. Many older students have to look after their younger ones after the early death of their parents. In such situations, when they enter class they can't pay attention to their studies, so I try to make them feel comfortable with me.

Occasionally I donate school uniform, casual dress or educational stationary on my son's birthday, or without any reason, when they need it. Some come to school barefoot. I give them money to purchase footwear, too. I use soft words and give them motherly affection so they tell me about everything that is happening in their lives: How they are suffering, how their alcoholic father beats their mother and children, how he grabs money from their mother who is doing work in other houses to save money to bring home grocery. All the students know each other well, so often in the class we discuss their family issues. When a topic opens for discussion all want to say something about their problems. I take this privilege to discuss freely and help them relax. This solution I apply to bring them back to learning. This challenge becomes the hardest for me when students are unable to concentrate on learning if they are emotionally distressed. I tell them stories of girls, people who have achieved great success despite having more challenges in their life. I write quotes related to life on the blackboard and give examples.

Shifting from higher classes to lower ones is another challenge for me. I accepted this as my learning journey. I have to learn about their behavioural strategy, how they react to tasks, how they react to my projects, what I can choose for them. At the beginning of the year I keep the textbook aside. First, they need my attention to develop essential language skills to understand the book: How can they remain in the flow of the recent syllabus unless I can build schemata for them? As a teacher, what should I do if, in my class, only three students can read well out of thirty? How can I bring the remainder onto the track of recent studies? This is the biggest challenge for me.

Flipped collaborative learning

One of my recent experiments is the 'Empowering English Learner's Club'. This is a type of flipped learning. Students planned their tasks in school hours and worked in their groups after school. They used encyclopaedias, dictionaries, grammar books, story books, the internet and a variety of resources when working together. I believe in collaborative work. It gets students to take responsibility for their own learning during self-study and they can also learn from others better. ■

2. My teaching

Learning is not the kind of activity where the teacher pours knowledge through a thin pipe. Students learn within their natural surroundings. I believe in this. I start my lessons with simple chat. My Hindi medium students are quick respondents. They give responses in a natural way in their mother tongue. They like to chat with me about their favourite things, routines, parents, relatives, friends, holidays. They have a bucket of things to tell me. I observed that they have innovative minds, creative minds.

I try to make a balance between their ideas and learning language. I keep writing in English on the blackboard whatever they say, whatever they urge, whatever are their views or opinions. They take it down and read aloud. This has become a part of my routine work. Students form groups, sit in circles, keep notebooks with them and share their views. Simple sentences, simple words give them the satisfaction of speaking. When they try to speak in English, they may have many errors, not so fluent, but I avoid correcting them. Instead, I allow them to correct each other's work. I allow them to use wrong words, wrong structure, wrong spellings. This is the zero step of the natural learning process, from where students can themselves write correctly after learning things.

When they use more and more English, read from the book, participate in projects, then they can use structures. I provide them with simple structures for reading and writing. In the group they read aloud, guided by stronger students. My role is to move around to observe and guide students at the right place. Then they write in their project notebook. Sometimes I provide them with attractive pictures of nature, places, things, working people, surroundings, for vocabulary building and reading for comprehension. They love it. When I exhibit those colourful printed papers on the

table they argue with each other, complain, quarrel for selection while doing groupwork. When I distribute them in groups they carefully observe what I am distributing to other groups. I manage to keep activities in rotation, so that they come to know that in the next turn they will get another group's activity/pictures for work. This is the natural behaviour of teenagers. I have never tried to interrupt them. While arguing with each other they sometimes use abnormal words which they learn from their surroundings. They don't feel that this language is accepted by educated people or in gentle culture. I discuss with them why learned/educated people need to use softer language which is accepted in general surroundings? How will this support them when they grow up and work in different places/sectors? I show them short stories, simple pieces of conversation on my mobile. This is how people need to appear in gentle attire while communicating.

My students prepare language game charts, board games, information graphs, mind maps and other visuals as part of their project work and groupwork. They have to plan in class and do the remaining work at home. My students, even strong ones, can't work independently. They need individual support. In classroom I sit with them in groups and tell them how to do it, how to practice it. They need two demonstrations, then they can work independently at home. This way they learn vocabulary and basic grammar. This helps them to understand their textbook. When they play a board game using verbs from a provided structure, they understand the function from their textbook. When they prepare information graphs for all tenses, they understand their use in the text. They can connect their project work with the textbook activities. How is their preparation associated? I try to develop these basic skills, facilitate them by using all the above forms, and provide them with colourful, attractive ELT materials and activities. I arrange role plays, circle reading practice (see Figure 1), conduct language games like dictogloss for listening practice, gap-fill activities, chit chat with their partner, word ladders, word chains, slap the board, hot seat, quiz the other group, guess the word and so on.

My student's favourite activity is learning vocabulary through pictures. For example, I brought pictures of a sewing machine where all its parts were labelled with words. Students learn the different parts first. Then I provided a few sentence structures for writing definitions of each part. Students understood the function of each part and using those structures they prepared definitions of all parts. After collecting all the sentences together, they prepared a short paragraph/description of a 'Sewing Machine'. In the next activity I brainstormed ideas in Hindi. While they spoke in Hindi

I wrote what they were saying in English on the blackboard. I then asked them to read it aloud in English and write it in their notebooks.

Figure 1. Chain reading develops basic literacy and pronunciation skills.

Developing their creative writing skills is the most challenging task. For example, I asked them to bring wrappers of food items to the class. Then in a group they observed the wrappers carefully. I gave them clues such as the name of the product, the ingredients, the recipe, manufacture date, expiry date, etc. They understood the key points. Then they have to imagine themselves as the manufacturer of health food items and prepare nutritious food products. They liked this idea. Step by step, they started thinking, sharing their ideas and with the clues they created their own products and had to present them in front of the class. In such activities they need language support so I provided them with inputs. Again here they were sharing their ideas in Hindi and I converted them into English. They gave funny names to their products.

In the above two examples, I learn from my students that they are equipped with ideas and imagination. With simple language inputs I can craft it so they can learn and build their confidence. The whole class is engaged in their respective groups. In exams they could write descriptions, prepare paragraphs, give response to writing skills sections. I have to take tremendous efforts to prepare them for examination through careful planning of activities, trying to create interest in them, giving time for practicing or giving samples for reading. When exam activities have been conducted in a fun way, using the play-way method, students can use them in their writing. It takes away the need for rote learning. The learning-by-doing technique is the effective one. I learnt it from my students. How to shape their ideas in English? How to build their confidence

for exams? What type of activities I need to plan? Which ELT materials they need? They taught me. Teaching is not a one-way process, it is a continuous interaction with the ideas of students.

3. My advice for colleagues with similar challenges

Here I have a few natural flavours for novice teachers so that they can add a 'pinch' to their teaching routine. I promise, your learners will love these ideas!

1. 'P' for planning

This is your own recipe of the upcoming academic year. It's your own creation. You decide the ingredients, what to add, what to omit, how to cook, how to process, how much essence you need to spread the aroma. It's all in your hands. You are the master cook of the year.

You need this at each stage. This means asking yourself: what will your students do in their daily routine? What will they learn by the end of week? How can your learners reflect upon their learning at the month end? How can you be sure about your student's learning? You ask these questions about your plan, then you can add this 'P' flavour for taste.

In the beginning of the academic year, teachers need to focus on planning. How much time we need to spend per day? And how many weeks we need to connect previous knowledge with the current syllabus? This saves some classroom time for conducting warmers or other pre-learning activities. Teachers can give students a few activities related with reading comprehension or grammar, as a part of project work. Make a list of projects at the start of the year when school begins. Observe students' performance and then distribute the work in groups. Students can share the work and give responsibility to other group members.

2.'P' for purpose

This flavour helps you to keep yourself on the right track. It makes your dish nutritious. Your purpose will help your students to keep their learning purpose in front of their eyes. They will come to know what they need to learn and how much time they need to spend on it, the purpose of a lesson and the purpose of your planned activities. Your learners can help you decide what they need, in which areas you need to focus. Just keep them observing and interacting with a continuous flow of

conversation, brainstorm ideas in their L1. Why are you planning that particular activity? What do you want to teach? Which skills do you want to develop? By the end of the lesson, what do you want to achieve? Why are you using that particular ELT material? Why didn't you choose another one? Have you achieved your goals of teaching?

3.'P' for practice

Try again till you and your learners achieve your goals. Then your recipe will become stronger and stronger. Students will work on their weaknesses. Practice leads you to perfection. That is permanent learning. ■

Introducing collaborative learning: Rainbow belts

In 2004, I planned for higher secondary students an interesting contest. At that time collaborative learning was not being practiced but I wanted to try it out in my class. Students were not ready to work in groups and they wanted to work individually, but I didn't want them to. At that time in the class there were 105 students and a noisy bus stand outside the classroom. I told students on the first of January to celebrate New Year's Day we would organise a contest and declare seven winners according to their performances. Those winners would be groups. They would be honoured with seven rainbow-coloured belts on which one best quality would be crafted. And the first one would get a crown of excellence along with a quality belt. Then they started preparing their group files.

Students planned for the contest, decided on background music, brought a tape recorder to the class to play the music. The seven winners would appear in front of the class on a catwalk. All others teachers had been invited to honour the seven winners with the rainbow belts on which students crafted seven qualities, such as orange standing for 'excellent', meaning the winner had completed all tasks successfully. The blue belt stood for 'brilliant' as the winner had added their own ideas in a brilliant manner. The red belt was for those winners who had corrected errors and revised again. Purple was for those who had worked on a few tasks but more than other groups. The white belt was for those who co-operated with others to involve them in the tasks.

This idea helped my students to work in their respective groups and enjoy the experiment with fun. Generally, passive students don't get sufficient opportunities to participate in activities. Strong students prefer not to work with weak ones as they want to win the contests through their own individual efforts. In this experiment all types of students engaged in the tasks. Those who were weak participated in crafting, such as preparing the belts, crafting qualities with unused materials (pieces of broken bangles, dried flowers and all). I did this to help them understand the importance of learning. It's not only for giving exams. Learn the aspects of language, collaborate, think, share, cooperate and learn with fun. ■

4. Making learning meaningful

Vinayadhar Raju Prathikantam

1. My context and challenges

I work in a rural government secondary school run by the Telangana state government. The media of instruction are Telugu and English. Most of my students are from economically disadvantaged social groups. Their parents are illiterate and depend on farming for income. My school is located at a crossroads, from where it is accessible to seven villages so students from different villages come to our school every year. Though my students are travelling from far away villages, they are very regular in attendance and very enthusiastic learners. I teach class 6, 7, 9 and 10. The average class size is around 40.

The first challenge is that our classroom space is small so we are facing problems while working on collaborative tasks and groupwork. Most of the time we are using the space available outside to work in groups or sometime students will sit on the floor to discuss activities (see Figure 1).

The second challenge we are facing is support to integrate technology into our classrooms. We have a computer lab but it is non-functional. Only one projector is available. I am using this to show the digital content. In our projector room we don't have proper infrastructure like chairs and desks so students have to sit on the floor to watch the digital lessons.

The third challenge is maintaining records and reports. We were asked to send different reports on quantitative data like how many of our students got 'A' grade based on gender and caste. The website repeatedly asks for the same data with different formats. This consumes a lot of time and is a distraction to classroom teaching.

Figure 1. Students find it easier to sit on the floor when working in groups.

The fourth challenge is engaging the older boys in classroom activities. Most of the boys are not showing much interest to participate in classroom tasks. They often try to copy from others, never having tried to do the tasks on their own, even though I encourage them to do so without worrying about any errors or mistakes.

The fifth challenge is examination oriented teaching. Teachers' performance is judged by class 10 exam results, so we are generally more focused on class 10 and neglect other classes. Joyful learning is possible with the lower sections but due to pressure from the authorities, we focus too much on class 10 performance.

The sixth challenge is attitudes of the inspecting authorities. They always check for correctness in students' work rather than focusing on the originality of their work. This forces the teachers to depend on readymade materials from the market which kills the creativity of the students and makes them dependent. This also encourages the student to learn by heart (i.e. rote memorisation).

> **Using simple action research to learn from your learners**
>
> I recently conducted a post-teaching survey with one of our outgoing batches of students. This is a way of taking feedback from students. I created a survey and asked them to answer the questions. It helped me to understand what students think about my teaching, what they like most in my teaching, and what they don't like. This also helped me to introspect (reflect on) my classroom practices. Based on their opinion I changed some of the strategies. For example most of the students expressed the opinion that my classroom is noisy and I can't control the students so I asked the students what I can do to control them and to avoid noise in our class. We came to conclude that ground rules must be framed so that everyone in the class must follow them to avoid unnecessary noise in the classroom. ■

2. My teaching

My beliefs

I believe that learning is possible when students are engaged in meaningful activities. Learning is redefined as a meaning making process. Students are engaged well when the activities are meaningful. Learning is strengthened when they are provided with an opportunity to use their learning in real life situations or real contexts.

Language learning is continuous. It does not happen within one or two months, so don't expect immediate results. It takes time, so don't try to visualize learning. It happens, but we don't know when, where and how it happens. The teacher's responsibility is to engage the students in meaningful activities. The students' responsibility is to take an active role in classroom activities.

Every classroom is heterogeneous in nature and every child is unique. They learn differently and at a different pace. Understand them, don't judge them.

Key steps in my lessons

Based on my belief system, I include the following steps in my lessons:

- Input
- Explore
- Collaborate/discuss
- Apply/output
- Share or present

Input may be by reading a text, a listening activity or watching a video. Sometimes I use more than one form to address multiple intelligences. For example, visual learners may learn better by watching a video. After providing input, students are asked to explore by providing reflective questions or by providing worksheets, mind maps and graphic organizers. Thereafter I ask the students to work in groups to discuss their exploration. This will strengthen their understanding. Applying what they have learnt by exploring is a crucial stage of learning. I do not miss this step. Sharing with their peers is the last step that will help them to build their confidence and motivate them intrinsically. While doing all these stages my talk and instructions are crucial. I encourage them at every stage, I don't find faults or correct them when they are doing it. For me, the process is more important than the product. I believe learning is process-oriented, I never try to visualize it when it happens. It happens and takes time to assimilate. I give them time to assimilate what they learn, thinking of long term goals.

Here are some examples of questions and tasks I use to encourage process-oriented learning in my classroom:

Before watching or reading questions:
1. Have you ever heard about … ?
2. Do you have any experience of … ?
3. Have you ever visited … ?
4. Can anyone share your personal experience of … ?
5. What do you think about … ?

During reading or watching:
1. List the character in the story or lesson.
2. List the main events or incidents in the lesson or story.
3. Pick important incidents in the lessons.
4. Prepare a timeline based on dates and years.

5. Complete the given graphic organiser.

Post reading activities:

1. I ask the students to answer the questions given at the end of the textbook individually.
2. I provide an opportunity to personalise the learning by asking them to do the following activities:

    - Imagine that you are a reporter of a daily newspaper and take an interview of one of the main characters in the lesson.
    - Write a letter to your friend about a text that you have read recently.
    - Imagine that you are a character in the text and make a diary entry of your experiences.
    - Write the conversation between the two characters in a text.
    - Convert the story into a skit.
    - Prepare a report of the incident in the lesson.
    - If there are any celebrations or social functions in the lesson, I ask the students to prepare an invitation card or message to invite them.
    - If there are any social issues or problems in the lessons I ask them to prepare a poster based on their understanding.

International project work with limited technology

I connected my classroom with a classroom in the USA using limited technology. We planned to work together for about 10 weeks consisting of two projects of 4 weeks each. For the first 4 weeks, we asked the students to introduce themselves by giving two truths and one lie about themselves. They also wrote film reviews of films from their own countries and posted on Padlet (https://padlet.com/), a collaborative online tool we used for asynchronous collaboration. The students in the USA and my students read each other's posts and interacted by adding comments. I used my school computer, one tablet and one laptop of my own to connect my classroom with the classroom in the USA. For the next four weeks they worked on a school backpacks project and made some interesting suggestions about how to reduce the weight of school bags and presented them to the students from the USA. ■

Languages

Meaning is more important than language so I encourage my students to use their mother tongue whenever they struggle to use language. Even I use their mother

tongue sometimes while providing instructions to them. If they get meaning out of what I do in the classroom, the language should not be a barrier to expressing their ideas and feelings. In the initial stages they use broken sentences but over time they start acquiring language and use it confidently without any inhibitions. I encourage them and support them at the beginning, I don't discourage or demotivate them. I believe that attempting is more important than a successful attempt. I also believe that failures are part of success stories.

Collaborative activities and groupwork

I divide the class into 6 to 8 groups depending on class strength (size). Each group consists of 5 to 8 students. Due to time constraints I do it once at the beginning of the year and ask them to work in the same group throughout the year. At the end of each lesson, after post-reading activities, I ask them to sit in groups to discuss their individual work. After discussion they will update whatever they have written and plan their class presentations. Each group will come to the front and read out whatever they have written to the whole class (see Figure 2). This presentation will help the students; those who didn't understand well or never tried to answer the questions can learn by listening to, or watching their friends' presentations.
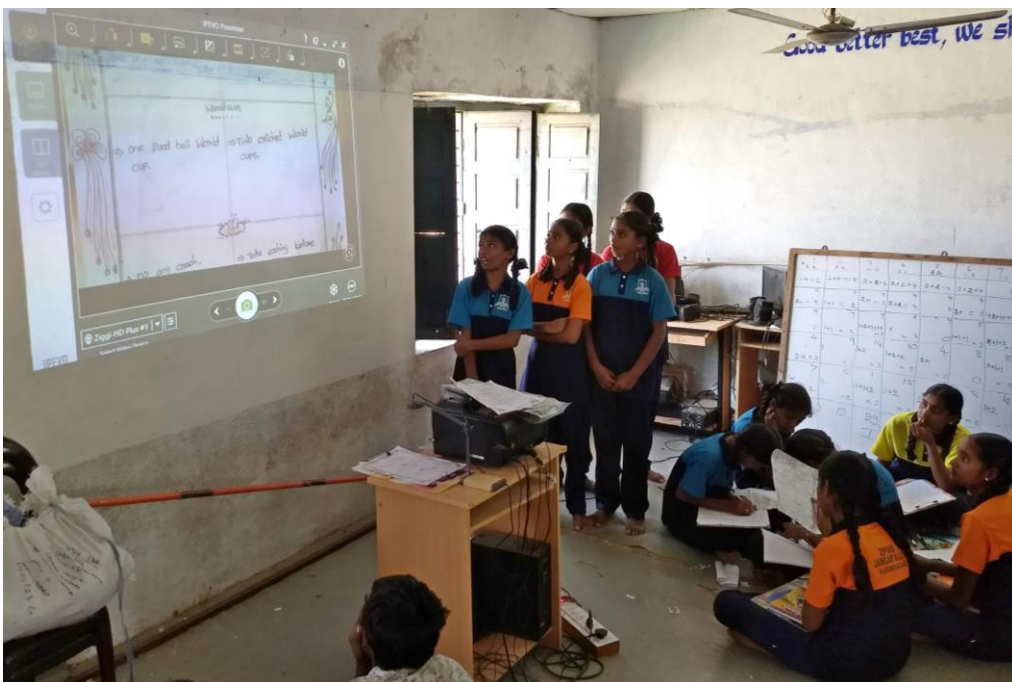

Figure 2. Students presenting to the class using simple (hand-written) 'slides'.

Editing and Constructive Feedback

At the end of each presentation I provide the learners with constructive feedback. For example, if they have missed anything. I sometimes ask them to rewrite it if their work is not relevant or not appropriate. In the process of working independently, they make a lot of mistakes. I just ignore them so that they will work with confidence. If they are working continuously they will rectify their mistakes and become independent learners. If I point out their mistakes, it hinders their confidence level and they never try to do the tasks on their own. Or sometimes they copy instead of writing on their own.

Children as co-researchers

To increase students' participation in the classroom, particularly boys, I participated in a research project 'Children as co-researchers'. During this project we created some pro formas to check or record students' participation in the classroom activities. For example, we created a pro forma like this:

student number	name of student	name of assignment	given date	due date	completed on	signature of the parent	signature of the teacher

This helped us to track the students' progress and classroom participation. We developed another worksheet to record students' engagement in the classroom by asking group leaders to record questions asked and answered by the students during group activities or group presentations. ■

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3. My advice for colleagues with similar challenges

- Learning is a meaning making process. If students are engaged in meaningful activities, they learn better. We remember better when we share, present or teach whatever we learn, so as teachers we must provide ample opportunities for the students to co-teach and share whatever they learn in the classroom.
- Don't expect everyone to go at the same speed, and, at the same time, don't leave them. Design activities so that everyone has scope to learn and explore.
- While designing activities, let's provide an opportunity for struggling learners. For example, while designing reading activities we can give skimming

activities to active learners, and scanning activities for struggling learners. At the same time, try not to spend too much time on a single activity.

- Provide different activities to activate learners. To do this we need to maintain an activity bank. Differentiated learning strategies is also a good idea.
- Develop error tolerance. Errors are part of learning, so we need to develop error tolerance. Look at the errors as evidence of students' learning. They are experimenting with the language. It is the evidence of their experimentation. Let's encourage students to experiment with the language, not discourage them. ∎

5. Understanding the learners

Dipika Gode

1. My context and challenges

My school

My school is a coeducation, government-aided, Hindi-medium school in a slum area of Nagpur. The locals around my school belong to working class and lower middle class. The majority of the students come from the migrant community, originally coming from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar or South India, most with Hindi as their mother tongue. The infrastructure of our school is satisfactory. It is on a main road with no grounds or parking facilities. The school is run in two shifts: Middle school in the morning and high school in the afternoon. We have limited rooms, although all the basic amenities are present. We have approximately 70 teachers and 20 non-teaching staff. Our school has earned a very good reputation and 2020-2021 is a Golden Jubilee year for us!

Learners are the backbone of any educational institution. We have a large number of learners, and almost all of them come from deprived families. Only some of them are interested in learning and co-curricular activities. They are financially weak and need support. The caste and community to which they belong has a very great influence on their behaviour, and some lack good manners and discipline. However, I have realized that all learners understand the language of love and acceptance.

As for me as a teacher, I have very little to say about myself. My work speaks for me. I don't follow any approach or methodology, rather I cater to the needs of my learners. For me, teaching is fun and has become my passion. I feel privileged to be with the future of my country and mould the future citizens. Mine is a friendly relationship with my students but, on the other hand, the students very well know that I am a disciplinarian and very strict at times. I teach in a way my students like, understand and enjoy.

My challenges

There is no work without challenges, although I have never seen them as challenges. I have taken them in my stride, adjusted and moved ahead. Challenges bring out the best in us and help us to learn. They are as follows:

1. Large classes
Large classes are the biggest challenge we have. Our classes consist of 50-70 students each. This year for the first time I had the opportunity to teach a class of 38 students and came to know how easy it is to handle fewer students. The problems faced in large classes include discipline and attendance, learner understanding, repetition of content, a lack of a personal touch, the need to speak in a loud voice, difficulty in planning, monitoring and correction, fewer activities and groupwork, no connectivity with learners' parents. On the other hand, students also face problems, like sitting in small, overcrowded rooms, lack of proper seating space, difficulty in getting personal attention, keeping pace with learning , lack of appreciation (praise) for their work, too much noise and disturbance, and peer pressure.

2. Learners
You may wonder why I have listed learners as a challenge. I feel learners are the raw material in the hands of teachers and it's a challenge to mould them effectively so that they aspire to gain knowledge, both for their, and society's, betterment. My learners come from all types of disadvantaged backgrounds and from all faiths, religions and cultures. There are different ability levels of students in each class, which sometimes

leads to difficulty in managing their progress. The families earn a meagre income, due to which some learners have to work part time to make ends meet. This has a direct effect on their behaviour in class. Some indulge in bullying, some are there only because they get the free midday meal. The majority of the parents don't take responsibility for their children's education. They think that they are a pain in the neck and feel relieved when the learners are in the school. Most come from uneducated and illiterate backgrounds, often trapped in superstitions, and follow old rigid customs. Irregular attendance is also a great cause of worry – classes where the learners have good attendance are more involved in teaching-learning activities and progress well.

3. Urban challenges

Educators talk a lot about rural challenges but I feel that there are urban challenges too. The main one is exposure to various influences from a very young age. Learners are under peer pressure and face competition. This leads to the tendency of suicide among adolescents. They are always short of finances as the standard of living has to be maintained. Many live under false pretences, and there is sometimes a herd mentality, for example of joining private tuition classes to supplement their government schooling. It's very difficult to keep track of some students. For example, when a learner is absent regularly we call the parents and many a time come to know that the child leaves in time for school but he never reaches school. It comes as a shock

Kindling the spark of empathy

It was during my first year as a teacher that a boy always used to come late to my class .When I asked him the reason, he wouldn't answer. I used to make him stand outside till I completed taking the attendance and then let him inside. He never insisted that I should take him into the class. One day after the class was over I asked him the reason of his coming late. He said that he had to distribute milk to many households and then come to school. He used to live with his grandparents who were old and wanted to help them. I was amazed to come across such a considerate and helpful child. I narrated this as a story to my class and asked them how they could help if the person was their colleague. The whole class was full of ideas. Unanimously, the class decided to collect money and buy a second hand bicycle. When the bicycle was bought I told them that the person was none other that their own classmate. They all were very happy to help him. The good work of collecting the money didn't stop there, it carried on. They made it a habit of helping other students in the school. To this day one of the students from this class donates dress material for school uniforms. ■

for both the parents and teachers. This is a difficult situation and a lot of counselling has to be done.

4. Student behaviour management

As the students are of different levels and come from deprived strata of society there are going to be some challenges. These challenges are wholeheartedly accepted by me. Large classes, noise, infrastructure cannot be changed, but the mindset of the learners can surely be changed. There is no one between my learners and me; any lack of good upbringing, manners, use of abusive language gradually changes with love and patience. Unless you make them feel that you are one amongst them, they do not open up. While teaching there shouldn't be a divide of *you* and *me*.

5. Poor school infrastructure

I feel the infrastructure of the school has a major share in the maintenance of an appropriate teaching-learning atmosphere. It has a direct effect on concentration and peace of mind. As our school is on the main road, noise and overcrowding have become its identity. We don't have a playground, which directly affects the physical development of the students. It is a tightly packed building with small rooms and little open space. Sometimes some classes even have to be taken in the corridors. The rooms on the second floor have tin roofs, so teaching becomes difficult due to noise during the rainy season. Washrooms and drinking water facilities are also limited.

2. My teaching

Introduction

Over the years, teaching has become my passion – it gives me a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction. I never get bored of it. I feel when one does a job with total dedication and responsibility, even if they are not cut out for the job, they start loving it and become effective. I believe that whatever we do we should do to the best of our ability. I have this competitive spirit in me – I always want to be the best! Praise from my students works as a booster for me. I like it when my students say that I am a good teacher, they want to be like me or they miss me when I am away on training. This relationship and sense of oneness helps me get results. I always put the students in the place of my own children and think that if their teacher hadn't taught them properly, how would I have felt as a parent? Teaching has given me recognition, love, respect, honour and satisfaction. How could I be insincere? Why shouldn't I change for the betterment of my practice? I can never be dishonest to my profession.

Points that influence my planning

1. curriculum and syllabus
2. results
3. how to make my lessons interesting
4. use of language
5. groupwork, activities and projects
6. reflection and feedback
7. the all round development of my students

While I plan my lessons, my mind is preoccupied with many things, the most important being the completion of the syllabus in the given time. I am not into the habit of making a detailed lesson plan in my daily notes. I just write down what I have to do in class.

I try to make my teaching interesting by using different examples, using anecdotes and relating it to day-to-day life. I believe that until and unless the students are interested, no learning takes place. Once the students have developed interests, I make them aware about the importance of learning from the point of view of the exam and their future. Keeping in view which language skill I want my students to develop, I plan activities and design worksheets. Sometimes I just chat with them on various topics related to the text.

I teach them how to read, understand and write the language. However, I have not yet succeeded in making them speak English. As I don't get the expected response I let them use their mother tongue - it gives them confidence that they were able to answer, which in turn boosts my spirit that the students have understood what has been taught.

Reflection and feedback play a vital role in my teaching. After each period there is an automatic reflection which goes on in my head. I always think whether the lesson was effective or not. Many a time it happens while teaching; I try to improvise. While reflecting it's not only my teaching or activities that are taken into account, but also the atmosphere and surroundings. Reflection has helped me a lot in my profession.

As for feedback, it is only my learners who give me true feedback. My friendly relationship with them doesn't scare them off from telling the truth. The head teacher and supervisor also give their feedback in the logbook but I seldom believe it (it's just a ritual to be followed). We are not into the habit of peer observation – it's a taboo. So no feedback from my colleagues.

I am worried about the all-round development of my students. I believe that they should be good human beings first and the rest will follow. I share with them a lot of information, I make them aware of the things going on around them, I discuss about their future and try to make them believe that everyone is unique, with a purpose in life and the most important thing is that we should never quit.

To be very honest, I've been in this profession for 31 years, and all the above comes automatically to me. Self-improvisation has become a habit. Constant innovation in my teaching practices keeps me fresh and enthusiastic.

Factors that affect my teaching

There are many factors that affect the teaching-learning process. I have tried to mention the ones which I think are important from my point of view as a teacher (see Figure 1).
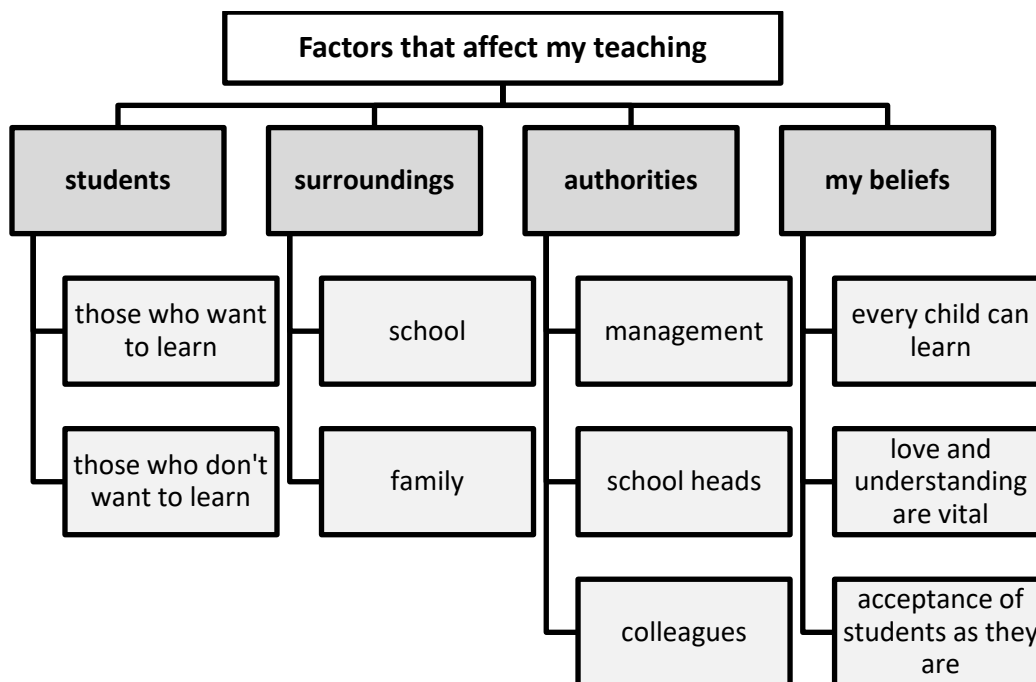

Figure 1. Factors that affect my teaching.

1) Students

Students can be divided into two groups: Those who want to learn and those who don't want to learn. Now this number varies according to the teacher and the subject. When I teach the whole class, there are some who listen, understand, ask and do what is assigned, there are some who pretend to listen and answer but are not mentally present, and then there is a bunch who make you feel their presence but do all the wrong things in class. When I was a novice, I felt depressed when I didn't get the

expected result from them, but over the years I have come to the conclusion that given time we can create interest in 90% of the student and change their attitude towards learning. Still there are 10% who won't learn the language or subject you teach, but accept the life skills taught by you or the inputs to make them good human beings. My experience tells me that the learners who don't score good marks or are less interested in learning are very often good human beings. They are empathetic, helpful and very humble.

2) Surroundings matter a lot

When the child enters a school he or she gets a lot of exposure. If the infrastructure of a school is good, this means that it has got all the facilities required by the learner: good, airy, well-lit and spacious classrooms; a big playground; a well maintained library; reading rooms and washrooms. Trees and greenery in the surroundings make the atmosphere pleasant and peaceful. It really has a very good effect on the teaching learning process. However, many schools in Nagpur do not have ground facilities (see Figure 2), which means there are no games or physical activities for the learners; even during the recess they don't have free space to move about. Everywhere there is a crowd which affects the mental state of the child. I feel and have observed that such children fight a lot, break furniture and school rules. Is it their fault? I don't think so. They don't have a good outlet for their energy. Physical activities and games help a lot by improving blood circulation and developing co-operation, team spirit and tolerance.

Figure 2. Crowded school grounds.

The second surrounding is the learner's family. A lot depends on the parents - if the parents are literate and supportive of education we get good students and cooperation from them. The income of the parents and the area in which they live is important too. Both are closely connected. Low earning families below the poverty line live in densely populated slums with no basic facilities. They are exposed to all the ills of society, which has a negative effect on the minds of the learners in their growing years. For them, doing wrong and taking shortcuts gives power and money at an early age, so it's the right way in life. They live a life of scarcity - earning money by any means is a safe prerogative, coming to school is a daily ritual.

3) School authorities

I would like to make it clear that this is my personal experience and others may differ. The three main divisions here are:

1. The management
2. The school heads
3. The colleagues

My rapport with the management is very good. I respect them and have never been in conflict with them. For them I have been one of the best teachers throughout.

Next come the school heads. There have been many school heads since I started working. With some, I had a very good relationship, some moderate and with one or two, very bad. But all accepted that I was good at my job and a good human being. The biggest drawback that I have is that I am honest and frank, I don't do things to please someone, I do what I feel is good for the student. I am the one who has the guts to question when things are going wrong. I always stand for things which are right. However, because of this attitude the school heads sometimes are in the state of dilemma with me. They know that they can make others do what they want but not me. I give them due respect and co-operation but I cannot tolerate wrong – I fight against it.

Last but not the least are my colleagues. They don't influence me, but they expect a lot from me. They see me as their mentor or leader. We all are a big family. There is a lot of competition. Some are in a constant tug of war of being good in the books of the authorities. I attend many trainings and work as a teacher trainer. I have learnt many new activities, approaches and styles of teaching, but my colleagues are reluctant to accept them and even ask me not to introduce them.

Motivating learners with worksheets

Three years ago I used to teach a class in which most of the students came from low-income families. They were unable to afford workbooks or extra material required for practice. It was then that the idea of worksheets came to my mind. I started preparing my own worksheets and distributing them to the class. It helped the students. The worksheets solved two purposes: The students felt that they were answering some kind of test and gave it their best, and the worksheets could be used in other classes too. ◼

My beliefs

My Beliefs are very strong and put to test many a time. I believe that each child can learn but exception proves the rule. Here one has to understand the difference between a child and an adolescent. When the learners come to the high school they are adolescents with their own habits, beliefs and likings. It's very easy to develop a habit of learning at an early age. It is a chain reaction. If it is not done in the lower classes it becomes very difficult in higher classes when they develop their own likings, which are very rigid.

My second belief is that love and understanding can bring about a tremendous change in the attitude of a learner. It is not that the child doesn't want to learn. He has never understood the importance of learning and the beautiful avenues learning can open up for him. It is the responsibility of the teacher to introduce the learners to this magical world of learning. Create an interest in the vast ocean of knowledge and information.

I believe that it is the duty of a teacher to make the child see what his forte is and then tell him why he has to learn other things, as it will enhance what he does best. Children understand the value of materialistic things but fail to understand that the most precious thing is *time*. The teacher should inculcate in their learners the value of time and the importance of discipline and regularity. I tell all my learners that time never forgives, and we have only one life so why not do things to the best of our ability?

Last but not the least, there should be an acceptance on the behalf of a teacher that not every child is meant for learning and the teacher should make that child's struggle easier. She should never humiliate or demoralize a student. She should never say that a child is good for nothing. She should let the child know that he is one amongst them, she is there to help them, that she has a good ear for their problems and has solutions for them.

3. My advice for colleagues with similar challenges

All that I am going to pen down here is because of my passion to teach. I know that nothing is as precious as education. I feel blessed to be a lady teacher with whom the learners have a direct connection:

Set an example for your learners
If you want to earn respect, keep enriching your knowledge, work hard, set goals, achieve them, understand your learners, update yourself, be humane, stand for what is right and respect others. You can try to be what you want your learners to be. Try blending with your learners, never let them feel that you are someone different. Try to be regular, punctual and disciplined. Cultivate a no-nonsense attitude in yourself. Be interested in your learners and show patience.

Link your subject to your learners' interests
If you find that your learners are not interested in your classes, find out what they are interested in and link your subject to it. Be patient with slow learners because it's not their fault – try helping. God has put you in the position of a torch bearer, you can change their lives for good. I feel that a teacher is like a seasoned juggler who knows how to juggle with change, problems, time behaviour and adversity.

Structure your teaching
If you have the stress of completing the syllabus, plan it first and then come back to teaching the things which are necessary to achieve good results. Structure your academic year so that you have ample time left for revision and clearing the doubts of the students. Remember revision does wonders – always have time for it.

Three age groups of learners

According to our educational system I would like to divide the learners into three groups as the learners have to be tackled differently in these three stages:

Stage 1: Primary level (age 5-8 years)
During the first stage, the learners look for a motherly figure in their teacher. The teacher is more than a mother as she introduces them to the wonderful world of knowledge and learning. I suggest you make a bond with your learners at this stage so that they feel safe and secure. Make sure that the learner entrusts faith in you. You can try this by showing acceptance, practising patience, showering love and kindness. At the same time, try to inculcate the love for learning and reading. Habits of

regularity, punctuality, cleanliness and discipline should be taught now or it's too late. This is the stage where the foundation of all the above is laid - if it is properly structured and strong, the future is surely going to be bright.

Stage 2: Middle school (age 9-13 years)

This is the stage where the students start developing their likes and dislikes. This is the actual stage where a small mistake on our part can cause the learner to start drifting away from learning. These four years are very crucial. Try becoming their friend, facilitator and guide. Try to quench their thirst for knowledge and information by linking smoothly to your subject. Never humiliate learners or distance yourself from them. Try to tell them now and then that good moral values, habits and etiquette enhance their personality. Let them understand the importance of respect , honour and humility by including them in your behaviour. Now the structure of the building is ready for its finishing touches.

Stage 3: High school (age 14-16 years)

Your learner is no more a child. She/he has stepped out of their cocoon and now has wings to fly. This is the period when they are testing you as a teacher. Remember they have been in school for seven long years and are very good observers. Be a friend but don't let them take you for granted. Try to win over their trust so that they can confide in you. I teach in a co-educational (mixed gender) school and at this age boys and girls have a strong biological infatuation. When I see them gazing at each other, I ask them to look at me as I am more beautiful. They all start laughing and enjoy the humour. I never scold them for it, instead I say that if they want more admirers, they have to be the best at what they are doing and that involves studies – they understand and take it positively. This is how an adverse situation is changed to your benefit. You can't fool them now they start judging you.

Don't let your many challenges affect your teaching or behaviour. Large classes and poor school infrastructure is permanent. You have to make your own solutions, like changing places of the learners, having a rotation system. Schools like ours are always going to be full of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It's our responsibility to make them feel at ease at school and provide them with a better atmosphere. If you experience the burden of high expectations of management chairpersons and parents, learn from it. Make learning enjoyable and give them good memories of their school to cherish in the future. Help them to cope with urban challenges. Tell them not to fall in the trap of the rat race, but instead to do what makes them better learners and good human beings. ■

6. Supporting the least fortunate

Gajanan Tayade

1. My context and challenges

I work in a context that may be similar to many schools across India. The majority of students are from disadvantaged groups, and the students belonging to more privileged backgrounds (so called 'general category') make up only 1-2% of my students. The major occupations of parents of my students are farming, including general labour and keeping sheep or goats. The literacy rate among tribal communities is very low and the parents are often not aware of students' performance at school, so this rural setting greatly influences the learning of their children. The parents are often greatly satisfied with the teachers who provide their children with free education and even transport facilities – apparently it seems a

great act of charity, but it creates other challenges like economic exploitation, and problems in interpersonal relationships between children in the school domain. The students who have other mother tongues feel inferior when using the language medium of instruction in the school, Marathi. They are not proficient enough at it. Their competency and proficiency in English is also very low. This presents a great challenge, particularly for language teachers.

With regard to class size, the enforcement of the Right to Education Act (2009) has brought drastic changes in the domain of the education system in India. The size of classes now averages from 35 to 40. In our school, we have smaller classes which allows us to focus on every child in the classroom. This has many advantages. For example, it helps us to form groups and to do pairwork.

Despite different initiatives by various stakeholders, our school has limited infrastructure. Challenges include a lack of a school compound wall, sometimes no concrete classroom floor and no security of classroom furniture or learning materials. We also need to ensure appropriate use of the computer laboratory, the reading library, use of technology in the classroom, and to create more learning resources. In my context, the principal has given autonomy to me in respect of classroom activities. She is supportive of my approach. However, I face a challenge of personal time management as I am often asked to do additional clerical or official administration work. Of course, I take it as an opportunity to develop my skills, but it sometimes reduces my lesson preparation time.

I do not bother about writing traditional lesson plans or maintaining a diary or daily notes. However, I reflect on my teaching using tools, like recording my lessons on my mobile phone and watching afterwards, and recording brief personal reflections in my free time.

2. My teaching

My beliefs

Students are more comfortable if they learn a language naturally in the same way they acquire their mother tongue. If we try to follow the same principles in second language learning as we follow when we acquire our first language it will be a great support to the students. They will internalise the structures. This is how they can become users of the language. However, if I try to teach English in an explicit way and

introduce some rules, they will not always be able to memorise those rules. When they try to use it, they will fail to perform well in that language, even though they know the rules. For example, they know the rule for 'she goes to school' – to use the 'es' on the verb. However, when they compose the sentence in a real situation, they fail to present the right sentence, and may say, 'she go to school'; that may happen if I use the explicit approach to teaching. To teach them more effectively, we should try to create some natural situations in the classrooms and outside the classrooms for language use. In this way, students learn better.

A language is learnt in a society. Of course, we can also learn on our own, but we usually learn language from society. For example there are different conventions, and traditions between societies and cultures which are necessary for us to understand each other, and everyone in society contributes to developing these conventions. When we learn a real language, we don't just try to pick up the language, we have to learn the different functions of language in a society. So society is the main source of our language acquisition. In contrast with this, English is a foreign language in the Indian context, so it's the main responsibility of the teacher to create the natural context in the classroom, create the need for these functions, so that the students can bring their own language resources into the classroom. For that we have to utilise many resources in the classroom, both offline and online. But the main thing is that the human touch should be there. When we pick up the language from our childhood in our L1 community, it has a human touch. We try to understand each other. For example, as a teacher, when I am in the classroom, I have to see the face of the child and understand it; the body language, the psychology, the context of that student, everything. The teacher should be very careful to understand the child and their background. If we do this, our students can learn from the teachers and society together.

Relationships

When we come to the question of relationships, I prefer to be very friendly with my students, so that they can share with me when they have a problem, either academic or non-academic. I think this informal talk to the students is very important. For example, last night I had a call from a student, who was in 10th standard last year, not even my student any more. I found out that she had a financial problem, to pay a fee for her education. It was just 50 rupees (less than one US dollar). When I asked her about the fee, she explained that her mother and father are not able to pay, and asked if I could lend it to her for a few days, so I did. My point is that we should try to

understand the problems of the child, academic and non-academic, and keep in mind the context of the student.

Regarding behaviour, I talk informally to the students and don't get angry with them. I'm not too strict. The students may take some time to improve their behavioural errors. One technique I use is to use certain words like I use with my children like '*beita*' (son) or '*beiti*' (daughter). These words can be used in the classrooms to establish good relationships. Appreciation of the child (praise) is also important, appreciating their work. There's no need that they should show great talent. Whatever little is produced by the student, if we try to appreciate it, then she/he becomes our friend, and there is a heart-to-heart relationship established, so they have no hesitation in mind, and are ready to share their problems and listen to you. When the students form groups in the classrooms, sometimes there are some trifles or fights, there are some rowdy students, or others for whom socialisation is a challenge. So we have to console them, converse with them, so the relationship helps us to establish the good work for the students.

Languages

When it comes to questions of languages, while supporting the learning of English, there is a great debate on how much L1 we should use. It depends on the students' language level in a class. I monitor them and prefer to use English when I can, but sometimes I mix English with their languages. While interacting with the students, if I find they don't understand English I mix up the languages. If I continue for too long it will not support them, but initially I mix them to provide a little support. For example I say: 'He was *dagabas*' ('treacherous' in Marathi). That word came up in a lesson, so it was used by the students, but I used it in an English sentence. This helps them consciously and unconsciously to think about the structure of the sentence.

Marathi is the formal language here, but there are some students who are from rural areas where their language is different, such as the Wada language, and also local dialects. So what I do, I try to pick up certain expressions from them. For example: '*Tintin roti*?', which means (in Wada) 'Have you had your food?' I pick up certain expressions which are very common from them and I try to find equivalents in Marathi or English to share, so that the students think that their teacher belongs to *our* language community. Whenever there is an off-period and I'm sitting under the tree, they invite me to the classroom to learn their language. That helps me to establish the relationship with the students and they become conscious of language. For example, in class 8B last year, we had a discussion on different languages. And the

students started thinking 'Can we produce a book on our language?' I asked them what script they would use. They said we don't have a written script. So they first had to decide on a script. This helps to develop their higher-order thinking skills, and helps them to think about how language is learnt. They were thinking to produce a dictionary, a pocket dictionary with words in English, Marathi and after that their language. So they were thinking to produce this type of resource, and to standardise their language. This is why I try to learn certain expressions from their language – it can lead to these processes.

Groupwork

In class, one of the methods I use is to make groups. For example there are both semi-English medium students (who study some subjects in the curriculum in English) and Marathi-medium students in some classes. So there are students who are stronger in English and others who are weaker. Sometimes I mix them, but sometimes I assign a more challenging tasks to the stronger students to develop their writing and reading skills. I ask that group to read a story, write about it and then they should present in the classroom. The other, weaker students can listen and learn from this. But while they are working on this task, I can provide more personal support to the weaker students in the class (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Providing support to struggling learners.

Using stories

Sometimes I include stories in my teaching. I start by explaining word by word, but once I am satisfied that they can understand me, I can simplify the story and tell it in English. Then we have a discussion about the story, and give handouts to check they understand. Using elicitation and monitoring I can see whether they have understood it or not. Sometimes when I am teaching a story, I even use real things in the classroom to represent the characters, such as stones, a small log or a broom, whatever material is there. Once I even used a dustbin! I picked it up and said, 'This is the king' from the story, and the students all laughed, but it helped me to narrate the story to them. Gradually, this helped me to build their bottom-up and top-down knowledge together. Afterwards, I asked them, 'What do you know about the king?'

Low literacy students

Sometimes I have noticed that the literacy level of a new student is very low. They are unable even to read. So first I ask them to write the alphabet. For example, one new boy could only write 5-7 letters of the alphabet – that was a challenge for me! This should be taught at pre-primary level, but they are in my classroom, so I should help to bring them up to the right level. So for this reason, I thought the phonic technique would be useful. I formed a group of these students, and whenever I had free periods or engagement (cover/substitution lessons), I put aside the coursebooks and the curriculum and did a little action research with phonics. First, I showed them the letter sounds (e.g., 'b' = /b/), and then wrote simple two- and three-letter words on the blackboard, showing for example, 'bat', 'hat', 'cat', 'mat', 'fat'. The students see the letters and hear the rhyme, so that they can become familiar with the letters and the sounds together. I then changed it to 'bar', and showed some more words, 'far', 'car'. This was the structure – once it's in their mind, they will become familiar with the sounds and the letters together, which helps them to read. I also chose certain words that they could take from the local surroundings: pen, pencil, box, book, school, and used phonics to teach these. Many students found this useful, and could repeat the words. So interest was created in the students in this way.

I also showed them some online resources that they could use to help with these skills. I connected these activities also to the coursebooks, such as a short poem related to childhood and showed the rhymes. This helped some students to recite the poem. After that I gave them some words from the poem on the blackboard and asked them to try to find and read these words. Some students were not able to read, but they

could find and match the word on the board with the one in the coursebook. In this way, phonics helped them.

Even teachers can be scared of English

Once I was working on a training programme in Hyderabad for English teachers. One teacher – let us call him Arvind – came to me and said: 'Forgive me, but I have not studied English beyond 12th standard. I have only studied in Marathi, but your training is in English, and I will not understand. Please relieve me from the training programme.' He asked me if he could do other activities, such as snake catching, but please no English. I appreciated him, and heard that he is a snake catcher, so I asked him to tell me more about his hobby. We spent 5-10 minutes talking, and I said: 'I will not admit you in my class, but just stay in the classroom for a day, and if you feel comfortable you can join. If not I can remove you.' After one day, he said he can't make up his opinion. I said, you can stay for as long as you want. If you are uncomfortable you can withdraw. So unofficially I kept him in the programme. He stayed for 10 days. By the time we came to the validation programme, he was using a little English. I asked him: 'Why are you afraid of English?' After that he was motivated. The motivated teachers on the programme were offered a one-year correspondence course, and he wanted to join it, and to learn on his own. Successfully he completed the course, and also completed another American programme. His CPD journey began in that first workshop, and continued for many years. So the message here is: Even if your English is weak, if you take interest and make an effort, you can obtain excellence. Arvind is now a fluent speaker of English. ∎

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3. My advice for colleagues with similar challenges

Here is some advice for new teachers who work in a context similar to mine:

- You should first be very friendly with your students and should not think that punishment would serve you well. Instead of punishing the students, you should try to understand the students: who they are, their context, and their difficulties. If they are not studying well, ask them why.
- You should use simple language that the students can understand. If you have learnt English literature at university, this can be very formal, but for language learning in the classroom, the teacher should avoid using words that are not familiar to the students. You should use simple constructions and avoid complex or compound sentences. Keep to familiar vocabulary. Check the language level of the students regularly. When you give instructions in the

classroom, keep them short, simple and clear. Make proper use of the words while constructing sentences. Also the length of the sentences should be short.

- Don't be disappointed with the errors of your students, because these errors are developmental. So you should analyse the language of the students first. Suppose the students are committing some errors, they can be corrected by students also – peer-correction can be useful. As a teacher, you can also correct the errors, but you should also give positive feedback, instead of just saying whether something is right or wrong. For example, if they have written a text, the teacher should not just circle errors with a red pen. They should also give ideas for what should be there, and write, for example, 'Use this word here, rather than this word'. And in the classroom, if a student commits a spoken error, the teacher should not correct him at the same time. He should say 'Rahul you did well', and the teacher should continue the sentence, respond naturally but without repeating the error, so that the student realises their own error and the other students will notice the correct form too.

- Finally, you should reflect on your own practice. Reflection should be continuous, both inside the classroom and at home, and for reflection you can use various tools, because reflection always helps you to improve your learning and teaching. Ask yourself, 'What was my objective today? What was the intention of that activity?' First you should think about the objectives of the lesson. After that you should ask yourself if these objectives are fulfilled and to what extent. Also ask yourself, 'Is there any need for improvement for me? What resources did I use in the classroom? Was it manageable for me or not?' You should also think about your own life, to ensure there is a balance between your professional and private life. ■
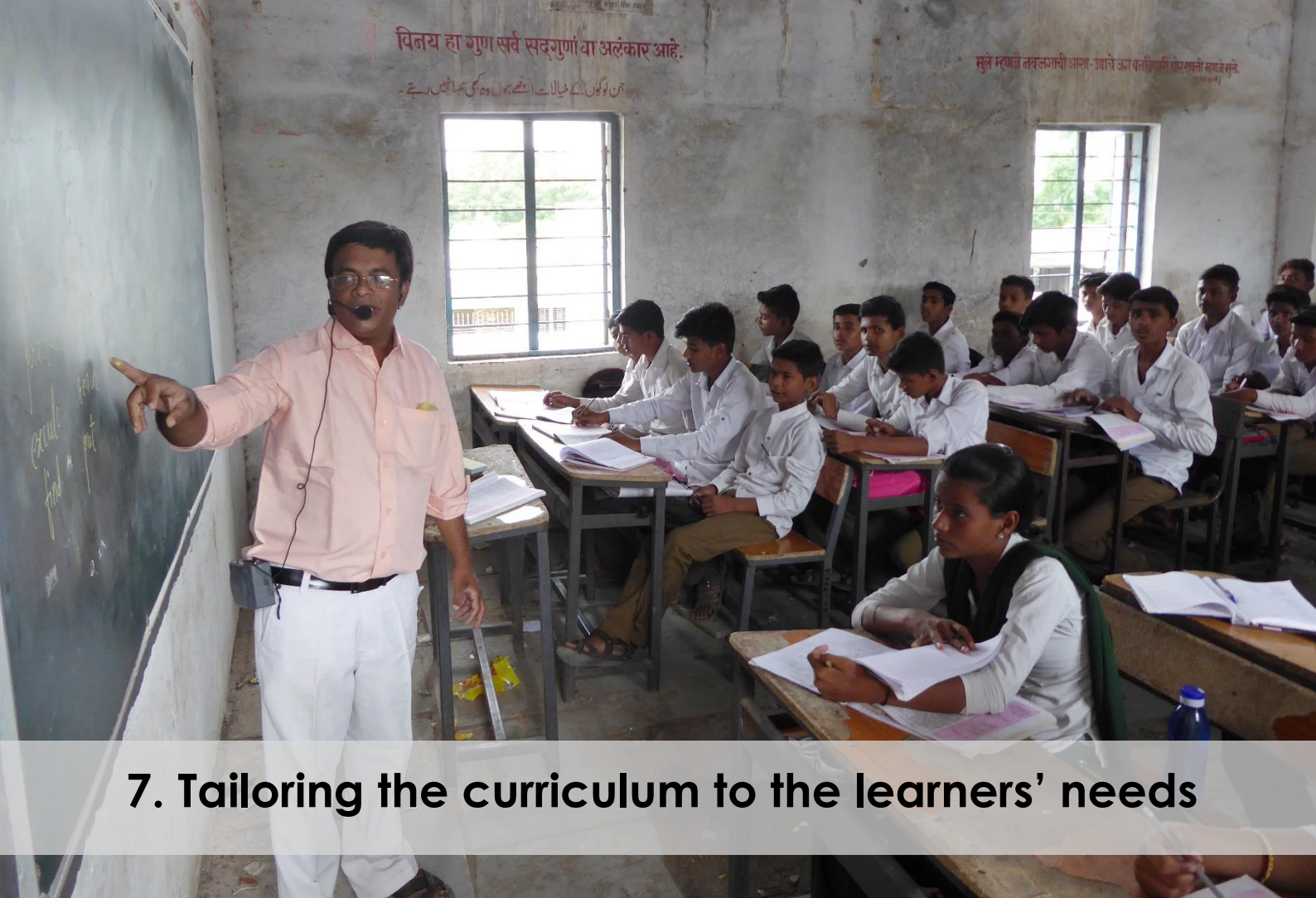
7. Tailoring the curriculum to the learners' needs

Shekhar Khomne

1. My context and challenge

I work in a government secondary school which is located in a small village in central Maharashtra. I have been teaching English and History to grade IX and X. In my school many students come from a very poor background. Their parents work on farms. Naturally they are not aware of the education of their wards. In such a situation my role as a teacher has a wide scope. I mean, beyond my teaching I have to be their parent also. Purchasing sandals, uniforms and satchels for them has become my regular responsibility.

My biggest challenge is teaching the text to my learners. Generally students' comprehension is very poor. Perhaps, this might be their family background as their parents are also low qualified. Whatever is done in the class by the teacher is final for them. Every year there are 60-65 students in each of my classes. At times the strength

(class size) is more than 70. I have only one period with each class during the day. Although I use English during my teaching, I have to translate it. With section A (the higher stream), I use maximum English. What I teach on a day, they may not remember it the next day.

Another challenge in my class is that students quarrel among themselves. It is another challenge in my class. Some have not enough space to keep their bags and books on the desks. On such issues sometimes they quarrel and even come to blows. I need to look into the matter, which consumes a lot of my time.

The challenges some learners face

I remember, a few years ago, there was a very poor boy in my nineth grade class. He had no books, no uniform and no footwear. He would come to school regularly. He was tight lipped in the class. He wouldn't study but was punctual in the class. Every day I would enquire about his homework but he would remain silent. Initially I scolded him but as days passed by I smelt that there was some issue with him. I stopped scolding him and started talking to him amicably. But he didn't trust me. Now my questions changed from academics to his family. My inner urge was to bring him to the flow of the class. I motivated him with the help of my other students, but he did not respond to the peers also. Many times I discussed this issue with my colleagues and the headmaster also but they didn't show interest. I decided to visit his home. One day I went to his village. I stopped and enquired about him to some people. They told me that his father was a drunkard. After drinking, his father would come home and beat his mother. Secondly, there were nocturnal visitors at his home. The father would be fast asleep. People in the village didn't like this at all. As a sign of their dislike they would pelt stones on the tin roof of the house. The boy could understand why it was happening. He would control his fret and fumes. I realized that all this had disturbed him a lot. He was neither able to talk to his mother, nor to the people who would throw stones. I didn't visit his home then and returned, unable to help this boy. I encouraged him in class, provided support whenever I could, but expecting good academic performance was an injustice with him. ■

2. My teaching

In my class I follow the bilingual method. I believe learners learn when they themselves speak; they learn when they watch something. In my English class, I always draw some clouds, some bubbles and some balloons on the board based on the

text going in the class. It becomes easy for the learners to comprehend such items and perceive the text rather than from the textual paragraphs.

Secondly, I feel the learners learn when they see or watch something. Sometimes there are pieces of narration by the writer that describe different situations. For example, monkeys creating chaos in a colony, children doing labour, an old man pulling a cart with his locks, cattle wandering or dying due to water scarcity, birds on seashores, etc. Fortunately, I have a huge collection of such pictures on many themes. From the beginning of my career as a teacher I believe that learners learn from looking at pictures, as it has been quoted that 'one picture is worth more than a thousand words'. I show such cut out pictures, distribute them among the learners and ask them to observe. I am sure that the learners learn and comprehend the situation vividly through such pictures.

Thirdly, I believe that learners learn in an informal way more than in the classroom situations. For instance, they learn various phrases and structures in a speech competition. They memorize the vocabulary and expressions and it becomes a part and parcel of their language. I mean they learn more in real situations. In an elocution competition they learn the skill of asking and answering questions. Here their confidence has increased. They also learn to listen to others patiently which means their listening skills develop. For me, all this is difficult to achieve in a formal classroom situation. Children learn pauses, pitch, intonations and expressions in dramatics on the stage rather than from the textbook.

Once it so happened that the annual gathering of my school was delayed. It fell in January. I remained busy preparing children for speeches and dramas. It took a lot of time as it was in English. I came to the conclusion that I had to leave some portions of the curriculum as the annual exam was approaching fast. I left some grammar parts and completed the literature parts. In literature, their thinking capacity and logical skills are developed. So I prefer to skip some grammar parts if I have less time.

When I am about to start a new lesson, generally I don't narrate the central idea of the lesson – it may be avoided. Why I don't tell the happenings of the lesson at the outset is because I believe learners lose interest. They think, 'Ah! This piece of information is sufficient for me. Now I know what it's about.' This is what they feel. Of course, I set up a good 'lead in' that brings them closer to the text. As the lesson advances, I identify some nouns, adjectives or adverbs from the paragraphs and ask the learners to make use of them, as such. Generally I ask them to do it on small chits (pieces of paper) that I give them. You may ask, 'Why on the chits? Why not in their notebooks or the

textbook itself?' I am afraid some of them may not write. If I ask them to write it in their notebooks, they are confident that it's not possible for me to peep into all their notebooks in a large class. If I ask them to write in their textbook, again there is a problem. It might be already there in the textbook from a previous class (children purchase old copies of the textbooks from their seniors). It's possible that they may get these tasks readymade. Secondly, 'make nouns from…', 'make adjectives from…' are types of activities that are asked for in grade 10 board exams. I think it is suitable to include such activities at the same time while teaching the text. You can say, 'I keep an eye on the examination'. Sometimes, the teaching should be exam oriented. The students think that it is not simply a story; it is related to their exams.

I believe an effective teacher makes effective use of the chalkboard in class. Before I say something about my board work I must share one thing with you – I use coloured chalk. It creates interest among the learners, and me as well, because it looks beautiful. I pick up my key points from the paragraphs and write them on the board as they occur in the text. When we finish a paragraph I ask learners not to look into the text. I ask them to look at the board. I start asking them 'developmental questions', and they take help from the key points on the board. Thus, the board becomes their friend. This board prepares prompts and motivates them to answer in class. If the same paragraph comes up in the exam, I am sure these key points will be the answers to the questions. Again, the exam-oriented attitude pops in. I check their comprehension in this way. Then come balloons and clouds on the board. One main point is written at the centre in a balloon and four clouds are drawn around it (i.e. a related words mindmap). I motivate the learners to write the related words in the surrounding word clouds. For example, for a word cloud analysing a character in a poem, 'the father' might be surrounded by: 'hard working'; 'fulfils all needs'; ' works in town'; 'doesn't spend on himself'.

Generally, I prefer groupwork in my class. The purpose behind using groupwork is to engage the whole class. I find scope somewhere in my lesson for groupwork and put my learners to it. But there is little space in my crowded classrooms for this activity so it is not easy for the learners to leave their places and regroup. For this reason, I often keep them in their seats for groupwork. The same with pairwork also. If I arrange something for pairwork, I cannot monitor all the pairs and there is a possibility of commotion in the class. My headmaster, when on his rounds, hears this and enters the class, completely unaware of my style of teaching and gets a false impression that I have no class control.

Many times I find the tasks in the textbook difficult for my students. These tasks have been set with the 'urban students' in mind by the textbook development committee. These tasks become 'an overhead transmission' for the rural students. Instead, while planning a lesson I set up a few tasks that match the level of my learners. I see that my learners should not be discouraged just because they can't do the tasks in the textbook. They are able to do the tasks substituted by me, their confidence increases and they feel that the lesson is not strange for them.

While teaching in Section A (the highest stream in my school) I gradually increase my usage of English. Many students here, though not able to communicate in English nonetheless understand. I am sure, if I don't give them practice in listening to English, they won't listen to it outside class anywhere. I take care of some points which need to be explained in their mother tongue, but in Sections B and C (less proficient in English) I use 90% mother tongue.

Figure 1. Wearing a collar microphone to reduce voice strain in a large class.

I use a collar microphone in the class (see Figure 1) so that I don't need to shout or speak loudly. I take care that I should be audible enough to the last benches. My waist band speaker is my facilitator in the class. I speak absolutely normally in class. Moreover, the prominent benefit of the speaker is that I have the whole grasp of the class. I have complete control over my class. If you are not audible in a large class children start taking undue advantage. They start whispering. This never happens in my class. This waist band speaker is a relaxation to the teacher. If I am tired during the

seventh or eighth period I insert a pen drive into it and get my students to listen to a speech, a song or a prayer.

3. My advice for colleagues with similar challenges

Friends, you might have the same challenges and limitations that I have. What will you do then to overcome them?

- For large classes, appoint volunteers (students who are sincere) and assign them the task of collecting the notebooks of students, checking and returning them to the students. Project work can also be managed by these volunteers.
- Try to manage your classroom without furniture if possible. Take your headmaster into confidence for this. If there is no furniture you find a good amount of space in the class (see Figure 2). Your learners can leave their places and move here and there. You become a bit more comfortable forming groups. Even regrouping is also possible. Learners can reach the board for some activity. Individual work can also be monitored because you get enough space to walk here and there.
- If you can revise content through 'content games' like quizzes, it will save your time and elicitation can be done in a play-way manner.

Figure 2. Groupwork can be easier in classrooms with no furniture.

8. Bringing the best out of our learners

Kuheli Mukherjee

1. My context and challenges

My Context

'Creeng–creeng–creeng!' the phone goes on ringing. I open my eyes and pick up the phone. A happy and childish voice says 'Ma'am I just submitted my assignment. Have you received it?' Oh, what time is it? A look at the bedside watch confirms it is just 6 a.m. in the morning and yes, that is how most of my days start during Covid induced lockdown... This was one of my 7th graders completing the task I had assigned on a social media group of my school students the evening before. Well, I have been teaching English as a second language (ESL) in a well-known government run Higher Secondary school in Kolkata for around three decades. My school, with a history of

more than a century, boasts a number of high achieving alumni spread across the globe. Currently there are twelve hundred students from grade 1 to grade 12 and three media of instructions. From grade 1 to 10 learning takes place in two media – Bangla and Urdu. In grade 11 and 12 we have English medium too. The school was established in 1911 by one of the greatest visionaries, Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein, whose mission of spreading education for women emancipation made her a great educationist of the world. The school, though located in the heart of Kolkata, is unique for its greenery on a nice sprawling campus including a small playground (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Greenery in the school playground.

I am proud of the fact that my students consider me their friend and share their worries as well as dreams with me. Most of my students come from urban middle class socio-economic backgrounds, although as it is a girls-only school, they receive a number of scholarships to support their studies as well as mid-day meal from the government. However, in each class there are a few students from disadvantaged backgrounds also. Another unique feature of my school that I must mention is its multilingual and multicultural atmosphere. We have students from different faiths, cultures and languages. This multilingual atmosphere helps my students to be effective language learners. Their exposure to the globalised culture of a metro city provides intrinsic motivation to pick up different languages. This makes life easier, at least to some extent, for a language teacher. However, disadvantaged students are often found lacking in motivation to learn English at the initial stage.

My challenges

For me the greatest challenge lies in the fact that my classes are mixed ability. Consequently, I have to cater to advanced and motivated students in the same class where there are two or three students who are lagging far behind. Usually those lagging behind come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is challenging for me to provide tasks appropriate for all ability levels within a single period and ensure that at the end of each class all achieve desired learning outcomes. Naturally I need to think of different learning outcomes for students of varying abilities in the same class. It often happens that I feel I am neglecting advanced students by paying attention to ensure the minimum expected learning outcome for everyone in the class. Usually I try to provide extra support to these advanced students out of the class but that takes a lot of time.

This takes me to my next big challenge as a professional – time management. As a senior teacher in the school I am always entrusted with assignments related to administration. I take on average 23-25 classes in grades 6-12 a week. Along with my own allotted classes, often I am allotted one or two periods in other classes with other English teachers because the authority feels it is beneficial for students. But it does not give a clear picture of my workload. The additional duties, academic as well as administrative, make it difficult for me to plan for my classes with four or five different grades per day. So, developing materials and tasks for my mixed ability classrooms becomes all the more difficult for me due to lack of time. My role as an in-service teacher educator for the government also proves challenging at times from the perspective of time management. Coming back to school after such work I have to compensate for the classes I missed. Usually I give writing assignments or allot project work during such absences but that again increases the regular workload. Parents and school authority have high expectations from my classes, and if my students cannot perform up to their expectations, I would be accountable. So the pressure goes up for me.

Then there are my research studies. Research is important for me to reflect on what I do in class and thereby develop myself professionally. I have been doing research from 2008. Usually the topics of my research originate from classroom issues or problems. For example I did a study on what type of feedback would help my learners improve their writing skill. However, finding time for planning and implementing such research studies poses a challenge that I really enjoy overcoming through hard work. I am well aware of the significance of keeping a reflective journal for my professional

development but the fact remains that even as researcher I find it difficult to record my reflections regularly and systematically due to time constraints. Still I do scribble thoughts or reflective notes in a diary on a regular basis.

2. My Teaching

My Beliefs

My own experience of learning English has played a vital role in developing my beliefs about learning a second or a foreign language. Studying in a vernacular medium school, my interest in English grew because of the attitude of my English teacher. She was always encouraging us to use English notwithstanding the mistakes we made. She would be recasting my sentences with an affectionate smile that was reassuring and confidence boosting. So from the first day as a teacher I felt I should try to make my class interesting to my learners and try to be someone whom learners are not afraid of. Secondly, I always believed that learning a language means being able to use that language in speaking as well as writing. So enabling my learners to use English in their practical life was my objective. Since childhood I was a voracious reader of literature in Bangla, my mother tongue, and English also. I would always keep a dictionary handy to understand difficult words while reading anything in English. I strongly believed in the effectiveness of such extensive reading on the language learning of my students. Later, my training in TESOL along with my long experience as a teacher and in-service teacher trainer helped me realize that these beliefs have played a significant role in making me the teacher I am.

Curriculum coverage and my planning

The mandatory pre-service teacher education course taught me how to plan lessons to facilitate language learning. However, while teaching in school I hardly have time for meticulous planning. Nevertheless, I have realized that if I did not have overall planning to cover the syllabus, it would be difficult to achieve curriculum objectives for my students. Since we have to follow a prescribed syllabus for each grade, at the beginning of the term I make a plan for how much of the syllabus I would cover and what learning outcomes I should be targeting. I do not believe in merely covering the syllabus, but in attaining expected learning outcomes of my learners. So it might happen that I do not complete teaching all the lessons in the prescribed text with equal emphasis.   Rather, I would focus on developing skill-specific language

proficiency. Here I am usually guided by the evaluation pattern. For example I believe that speaking is very important for English Language Learners of the 21st century. However, the prescribed evaluation pattern currently followed in my state does not accord importance to this skill. Consequently, my planning for preparing learners for evaluation cannot spare much time for the speaking skill.

Speaking about planning I must mention one point. I may not plan formally in writing but I do plan for each of my classes in different ways. I have the basic objective in mind that I have to enable each learner to attain minimum learning outcomes. To obtain this I plan different approaches, design task types and teaching-learning materials (TLMs). It may happen that for the same topic I use different planning with different groups of learners. The planning also needs be moderated at times according to the demand of the situation. In my opinion the planning about how I introduce a new topic or lesson is important in developing interest among the students. So before going to any class, I reflect upon how to catch the attention of all my learners. Learners usually pay attention to tasks requiring them to use their experience outside the classroom. This also gives them a voice in classroom proceedings. Activities like mind mapping, word webs, predicting the theme from the title, brainstorming using familiar pictures and anecdotes from familiar contexts prove very effective in the introductory session with my learners. Sometimes if I find a prescribed text too abstract for a particular group of learners I plan to use TLMs as well as tasks that make use of learners' background knowledge to make the text more comprehensible to them. For example before asking students to read a text entitled 'Book of Nature' I planned to use an atlas and asked students to play a game using the atlas. Next I showed them a video on my mobile phone or tablet describing fossils, rocks and natural objects found in their text. This way I was orienting learners towards the text they would be reading for comprehension. So if I go to a class without any planning, it turns out to be a less effective class for me. Today's class helps me plan for the next day's class on the basis of learner responses.

Pedagogic practices

I believe that unless I create opportunities for my learners to use English in class, their productive skills will not develop. Accordingly my classes are learner-centred, with me as the facilitator providing scaffolding till needed. This initially becomes challenging because a group of learners not used to the concept of 'autonomy' might find it difficult to work independently. So I try to involve them in decision-making regarding classroom issues. For example, while asking them to do a project in groups

I may let learners choose group leaders and so on. I remember once an advanced student suggested that in place of mixed proficiency groups it might be better to form groups with more or less equal proficiency. She gave the logic that the so-called weaker students, if entrusted to work on their own, might put their best endeavour to perform, but in mixed ability groups they always depend on the more able ones. I experimented with her suggestion and found her right. Thereafter, I started asking for suggestions from students more regularly than before.

In order to create opportunity for learners to interact in English I often make use of techniques such as 'think, pair, share' in my classes. Even while listening to an individual answer I invite other students' opinion about that answer in order to develop critical thinking as well as helping students to take part in the ongoing discussion in the class. Regular use of group work is also part of my classroom strategies. My learners are fond of group work. They know that they can ask for my support whenever required because during group work I always monitor by moving amongst my learners. Although I always encourage learners to use English in their group conversations and group presentations, I do not prohibit mother tongue in my class. Use of mother tongue helps me clarify concepts, which would take too long to be clarified in English, if at all. During group discussion I insist on use of English by learners but when I hear them use mother tongue for arguing about pertinent points I feign not to hear. I know that when they present it will be in English mostly. I

Building on students' interests

Two years ago in grade 9, I came across a student who kept silent in my class, never participated in the conversations or chats we had. I started talking to this student individually every day, in Bangla, asking casually about what she ate that day, whether she liked the topic of my conversation with her friends and such light issues. She gave me one- or two-word answers in the beginning. After a week or two I was discussing how to write paragraphs on the process of making food. I realized that she loved cooking and was a very good cook. I pretended not to know how to make certain dishes. I asked for her help. She gave me a step-by-step description of the process. I used her description to teach the class how to write sentences using passive voice to describe a process. I praised her knowledge in cooking and asked the others if they were so confident in cooking. From that day this student started taking part in classroom conversations. Gradually I became her friend and realized that despite her endeavours she cannot perform well. I coordinated with her parents and special educators. The doctor informed her mother that she should not be pressurized for study as she had special educational needs. However I continued with her as before. My colleagues also did the same. To our surprise she passed her grade 9 and grade 10 examinations. ■

encourage team efforts when one member of a group helps another when she gets stuck during a presentation. For me it is the process and not the product that is more important.

While giving feedback I try to make sure that my feedback is concrete enough to help learners correct themselves and thereby arouse their critical thinking. For example, I do not give comments like 'good' or 'fair' without explaining why I consider it good or fair. At times I provide the rubric for assessment to students before asking them to write. For juniors I simply ask them to read the question prompt carefully before starting to write because I will be looking for these points in their writing. I spend a lot of time giving feedback because I believe if I do not pay attention to what the learners have thought or written, they will lose interest. Secondly while giving feedback to one student's response I try to keep others alert by asking for their opinion about their friend's response. I feel these feedback sessions are enjoyed by my learners as it acknowledges their contribution to the learning taking place in class.

Even though believing in an eclectic method I have faith in the efficacy of tasks to promote learning. I try to use a variety of tasks involving four skills often catering to multiple intelligences. Peer correction and peer review form integral parts of my classroom pedagogy. I should also mention a strategy that has never failed to draw learners' attention. This is story telling. I tell stories from my own life, from my travels with emphasis on funny incidents and this helps me to draw the attention of even the most distracted ones in class. Another strategy that helps me keep learners attentive is the use of language games. For example after discussing prefixes and suffixes I ask learners to play a game with them. I make a soft ball and throw it to a learner while saying a suffix such as 'less'. She has to say a word with the suffix. If she can, she will then throw the ball to another learner saying whatever prefix/suffix she likes. It is the turn of the second learner to continue the activity. The game serves three purposes – revising use of prefixes and suffixes, learning new words and clarifying concepts of prefixes and suffixes. When some students falter in their response, others explain what they need to do and why. However, learners are happy playing a game. The idea of this game came to me suddenly. One day I was going to give boardwork on prefixes and suffixes. But I could see that my learners looked bored as they had been writing for three consecutive classes. As soon as I asked them to play this game the class looked lively with everyone waiting eagerly for her turn. This kind of little innovation I always try out to keep learners motivated.

Relationships with my students

The narrative in the beginning of this writing reflects the sort of rapport I have with my learners. I feel building a good rapport with them always helps in facilitating learning. If students have a very strict image of you they might be too afraid to experiment using the language and again indulging too much has its negative impact. There must be a balanced attitude. With the sixth graders, the youngest of my learners, I spend a lot of time reassuring them that no one would laugh at them if they make mistakes. And as they try to use English, though broken or mixed with their mother tongue, I never stop them. I recast their sentences, making necessary corrections and usually they pick up after three or four such attempts. Once learners start having faith in me, they come out of their shells and start using English in class without being too conscious about making mistakes.

Gaining confidence from classmates

Around ten years ago I had a learner in grade seven. She was very shy, not confident to speak English and would never come forward in my class. If I asked her a question in English she would just keep mumbling, staring fixedly at the floor. For this class I planned a project where learners in groups of five would develop a script from a story in the textbook and then perform a drama of five minutes on the basis of that script. On the day of performance I was surprised to see this girl delivering a speech in the role of a queen in front of all English teachers of the school. I could see that her group-mates supported her in achieving this. However, the confidence she gained from this experience gave her the motivation to try speaking English in class. I was happy as well as surprised to see her taking a leading role in school performances later on. I realized that the new type of task, peer support and democratic atmosphere within the group helped her overcome shyness and put her best effort to perform. ■

Some students shy away from asking me to clarify their doubts or to repeat something I said for further clarification. They respond positively when I ask if they have understood. But keeping eye contact with them helps me identify that they are unsure and I ask them very simple questions which anyone can answer correctly. This I do to give them a feeling of confidence. Gradually I draw out their doubts or uncertainties about the concept being discussed. Sometimes I pair such a student with a more confident one to discuss and give the answer as a pair. Working in pairs helps in enhancing confidence of these shy learners. It is also more convenient to manage noise levels in a large class. Presenting in pairs also lessens the challenge. While assigning tasks in groups I make sure that each member contributes something. And I

entrust learners to choose leaders and distribute the work among themselves. In the beginning of a session, learners would often come with problems in distributing work or choosing leaders but I insist that they solve their problem by rationalizing among themselves. This procedure helps develop logical thinking as well as sense of responsibility. However without constant monitoring this is not feasible. Sometimes I speak confidentially to a weak learner to motivate her and support her in gaining confidence. I feel that before accusing a learner of being insincere or disobedient I must try to put myself in her shoes and find out why she cannot perform. This way I have identified learners with special needs and coordinated with a special educator to provide appropriate support.

Reflection

When I look back at the long 28 years of my teaching, I realize that I have done a number of experiments in class where reflection played a significant role. This is true not only of me as a teacher but also for my learners. I firmly believe that reflection is the key to learning for anyone. As a teacher I reflect before and after class and also during the class. While planning I try to think of tasks or activities that would help me introduce the topic of the day and at the same time help me revise a previous day's lesson. Even when I do not have much time to plan specific tasks I try to elicit the main learning points of the previous class from the learners through very casual interaction in the beginning. Then, during the class, I reflect upon the effect of my plan on the learners. Sometimes it may happen that the plan I came with needs to be altered to have the desired impact on learning. As soon as the class is over I start reflecting upon what went well and why or how that helped in attaining the desired learning outcome of each student. So if the strategy used does not appear to be as fruitful as expected I start thinking about what strategy would get better results. So, for me, reflection goes on in a cyclic order. I often do professional development courses on MOOCs (massive open online courses) as they allow me the scope to reflect on my classroom practices.

Again I have experimented with 'reflection' by the learners also. For example, with a group of learners who were about to sit for final examinations I was doing revision activities. I asked each of them to look at the expected learning outcome at the end of the textbook. I asked them to think and then frame a 'Can do' statement with each of the topics (e.g. ability to scan and find answer to questions based on a reading text, ability to guess the meaning of an unknown word from the context of a reading text, or ability to use adverbial clauses in sentences). I instructed them to identify the abilities that you think you are not confident of and ask me to revise concepts

accordingly. I was really happy to see that these students could identify their own weak points for extra support. On another occasion, I asked learners to assess the story writing performance of different groups in the class. Students of each group sat together to decide the criteria for assessing other groups. All the learners enjoyed this activity and I was successful in helping them reflect about the issues they should focus on while writing a story.

Hence I would say reflection is something that a teacher can always explore for greater benefit of the learners.

3. My advice for colleagues with similar challenges

- Build a relationship of love and trust with your students. If inattentive students realize that you trust them, usually they will try to follow your advice.
- Be honest with your students. I have observed that if I am late, when I give an explanation for being late, students understand and try to make the most of the time available. Sometimes students come with questions that need me to consult other subject teachers. I honestly ask for time to discuss with colleagues and then give an answer. This increases their trust in you as a teacher.
- Try to treat all learners equally. Sometimes I feel tired and do not feel like probing the weaker learners to identify learning gaps and remedy them. The advanced students usually come out with the right response. But it is my responsibility to help every learner feel that I am there to help her learn.
- Practise creating opportunity for learner autonomy. Take learners' views regarding your class to improve. Learners should not feel afraid to ask you to clarify a point or challenge your opinion.
- If you expect students to follow your advice, be concrete in your instruction and your feedback. Your instruction must be very clear and specify exactly what you expect your students to do. Secondly, in your feedback on learner's assignments mention the good points first. And then instead of pointing out mistakes only, provide concrete feedback which your learners can use to revise the response and improve.
- While planning, specify the learning outcome you are targeting. Without a concrete learning outcome it is very difficult to make your class effective. For example if I aim to enable learners to write an official letter, I plan what sub-skills are involved and what steps are involved to develop these sub-skills and

reach the main learning outcome (LO). For example, I may plan learning outcomes like: being able to identify features of an official letter; being able to differentiate between official and personal letters; and being able to write the subject of an official letter. Having such specific LOs can help you design tasks for each step accordingly. Having clear LOs will also help you decide which part of the syllabus you should focus on and which may be skimmed through.

- Jot down your reflections in a diary if you cannot keep a reflective journal. You can use Google docs (https://docs.google.com), Penzu (https://penzu.com) or Evernote (https://evernote.com), or simply scribble your reflections. This will help you to learn. Try to join available MOOCs to keep reflecting on your practices and update yourself.

- Try not to be monotonous in class. Use language games at times to break the monotony.

Learning online during the Covid lockdown

A few weeks ago one of my students was asking me every day on a social media group for my students if I had a class with them that day. I was about to be angry with this learner but then I restrained myself. I asked on this social media group, 'It seems you would like to have regular English classes just as we have in school, wouldn't you?' To my surprise the entire group wrote 'Yes, Ma'am' and then the bolder ones added that they were missing my stories, my light chats with them in class. Guessing their mood I gave them a different type of assignment that week. I gave them the link to a story online and asked them to read the first five pages of the story and then send me a voice message telling me whether they would like the rest of the story and to give a reason for their answer. The very next morning I got the phone call I started this narrative with! ■

Connecting Eight Effective ELT Classrooms

Contexts, Challenges & Solutions

This AINET publication offers detailed accounts of the ways that eight effective teachers of English teach their subject in different contexts across India. All eight also work as teacher educators, contribute actively to teacher associations, write for regional, national and international publications, and present regularly at national conferences. They also support colleagues through mentoring and teacher research initiatives and were the subjects of a study into teacher expertise conducted by Jason Anderson.

This publication provides these teachers with an opportunity to tell their personal stories, describing their teaching contexts, the challenges they face and the innovative solutions they offer to these challenges. It may be of use to teachers of English across India and beyond, particularly trainee and novice teachers who face similar challenges and feel they would benefit from the advice and suggestions offered herein.

"The narrators in this book are passionate and committed teachers sharing their efforts to experiment and innovate in order to be effective teachers ... These stories reflect how effective teachers show an awareness that the personal cannot be separated from the academic and must be addressed if learning is to improve.

We must whole-heartedly welcome collections like this, particularly in India, since such narratives of useful experiences 'from the field' are conspicuously in short supply. The key value of this collection lies in many broad ideas, as well as specific lessons and insights, it offers for us to boost our own efforts at becoming effective teachers."

Dr Amol Padwad, Ambedkar University, Delhi