THE PURPOSE OF STREAMING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN INDIA

JOSEPH EDWARD FELIX

Abstract: The benefits of using English to one's advantage are manifold in this corporate world. Therefore, to help equip learners to meet this challenge is the primary concern of most academic institution, especially at the graduate level. To facilitate the productive learning of the English language at the graduate level has been a challenge in all institutions over the years. One reason for the challenge is the composition of the classes which is primarily of mixed abilities. To resolve, to some extent, this problem the idea of 'streaming' may be proposed. The paper looks at some of the purposes for which streaming may be considered.

Introduction: A lot of research has already been conducted in the field of English Language Learning in India. This is proof of how seriously the teaching and learning of English is considered in India. This also shows how important Indians consider learning this 'window to the world' language for global acquaintance, acceptance and accessibility.

In India, in most institutions of higher education, English is made a compulsory language which needs to be 'studied' and passed. This happens as part of the process in securing a degree; but the effectiveness of having learned the English language is questionable when these young graduates encounter the corporate world or seek for jobs that require them to be 'proficient in English'. It is when faced with rejection because of a lack in communication and writing skills in English, do most realize the importance of learning English as a second language. But, unfortunately, the damage is already done and much needs to be done to repair the loss.

To avoid such a dilemma, English language teaching and learning should be considered more seriously in all academic institutions in India. The pedagogical practices adopted in the imparting of English language skills needs cross examination and scrutiny. When we scrutinize the problems faced in the learning process, a mixed-bag of problems surface.

One of the many problems is the composition of the large class. All classes, if not most of them, are composed of mixed-ability learners. This is because of the diverse educational backgrounds learners come from. These backgrounds again may be varied and may depend on factors like – policy of education in the state, rural-urban spaces, the kind of institutions attended, the medium of instruction in the institutions, cultural practices, and mother-tongue etcetera. These are just a few to name, but a plethora of issues exist. In an attempt to resolve some of these issues, the concept of Streaming Indian learners for English language instruction, may be considered an option.

What is Streaming? It is the grouping of learners according to their proficiency in the target language to enable them learn at their own pace, at their own level, with peers having almost the same proficiency level in the target language, using appropriate instruction or teaching materials, adopting suitable teaching methods and aids, putting them to tests in which they can perform to their optimum best.

Streaming may be implemented in the very first year of a degree education. Learners need to be put through a diagnostic test or a proficiency test. Depending on their scores in the test, which may be followed by an interview process, learners may be grouped into two or three levels depending on the intake of learners in an academic year. The interview is sometimes required to make the streaming process seemingly foolproof and authentic.

Some of the many purposes of streaming learners or grouping learners according to their proficiency levels or aptitude levels are:

1. To help learners bridge, if not minimize, the gap or lapse in their learning of the target language when seated in a group of more proficient learners in the target language. By doing so, learners may feel more comfortable and confident as they are aware that competition from the more proficient learners has been reduced or minimized to the greatest level. Therefore, they learners in a streamed class are at ease and comforted knowing that peers in the class have almost the same abilities as any one else.

2. To keep the bright learners from getting bored in the class and the less proficient ones confused. In a mixed ability class, most of the times, the teacher caters to the learner of average proficiency in the target language. By doing so, the teacher may not be satisfying the eager minds of the advanced learners. The least proficient learner, in the process, gets least attention or gets more confused. As a result, both these types of learners loose interest and stop paying attention to the class.

3. To avoid confusion in the minds of the teachers

about the level they need to pitch their 'lecture' at. If a teacher has a fair idea of the basic level of the class; which streaming enables; then the teacher may be very judicious in his/her selection of teaching or instruction materials and the tasks and/or activities that may be employed to teach a certain component. Streaming will also help the teacher design tests and develop evaluation pattern to judge the extent of learning that has happened in a course of time.

4. To ensure that English language learners do not feel inferior to the more proficient or advanced learners of the target language from the beginning. If this is not checked, then the less proficient learners may just give up in the learning process. A sense of not being 'on par with' or never being able to score as much or learn as much as the advanced learners will automatically make the less proficient learners non-performers in the class. By attempting a homogeneous mix of students by streaming them, learners will become aware that they are not pitched against a set of high achievers. On the other hand, the learners become aware that they are competing, in the language learning process, with peers of almost the same abilities. It is an understood fact that no class can be absolutely homogeneous in its composition, but then the better ones in these streamed classes can help encourage and be sources of motivation to the other peers. A sense of defeat is not felt, but an earnest desire to learn and become equally competent with the passage of time may be a mentality that the learners come to have.

5. To be able to design fair parameters for assessments is another important criterion in the teaching-learning process. One question paper, with a certain parameter for evaluation may be unfair to both the advanced learner and the less proficient language learner. If students are tested at their level, with a little element of challenge, language learning becomes more productive. If tests are designed depending on the levels of the learners then the learners feel satisfied as they face the right level of challenge.

6. To enable syllabus and course designers to prepare materials that may be used for effective and productive language learning. For example, an excerpt from Shakespeare may help advanced learners learn the use of irony, metaphors and the use of puns. This excerpt is chosen with the understanding that these advanced learners can decipher an interpretation of the passage and are able to make an analysis of the same. If the same passage given for language study to a less proficient learners s/he is met with despair, because the words in the varied sentences in the passage does not make much sense to him/her. This may occur because of his/her not being familiar with Shakespeare, or his/her lack of the English language itself which in turn may be because of the lost opportunity of engaging with the target language at an earlier period of study. By streaming learners, appropriate materials may be selected and used for study purpose for the less proficient learners. The vice-versa may happen with the advanced learners if very simple passages or stories are chosen for English language learning.

7. To motivate the target language learners to do their best by participating in classroom task, activities and discussions. Streaming plants in the learners seeds of self-confidence. It successfully males them continuously engage themselves in learning even after they achieve their goals. According to Hussin, et al. (2001): "Positive self-concept, high self-esteem, positive attitude, clear understanding of the goals for language learning, continuous active participation in the language-learning process, the relevance of conducive environment that could contribute to the success of language learning."

Peacock (2001) states that "matching teaching and learning styles improves learning, attitudes, behavior, and motivation. Matching teaching style with learning style gives all learners an equal chance in the classroom and builds students self-awareness. The consensus is that when student and teacher styles are better matched, students are likely to work harder both in and outside the classroom and also benefit a lot"

Conclusion: Having stated a few purposes of streaming, it is to be realized that the process itself needs to be done quite scientifically. Of course, it may not be fool proof, but it may be treated as a forward step in the manner in which the English language may be taught more effectively and purposefully to enable learners to equip themselves with language skills which benefit them to take on the world.

References:

1. Hussin, S., Maarof, N., and D'Cruz, J., "Sustaining an interest in learning English and increasing the motivation to learn English: An enrichment program," The internet TESL Journal 7.5 (2001).

2. Peacock, M., "Match or mismatch? Learning styles and teaching styles in EFL.," International Journal

of Applied Linguistics 11.1 (2001)
3. Vyas, M., Patel, Y., (Eds.) Motivation and Demotivation Factors in Language Learning.
4. *Teaching English as a Second Language - A New Pedagogy for a New Century* (2009 ed., p. 188). New Delhi: PHI Learning Private Limited.

5. Saraswathi, V. (2005).Major Issues in Language Teaching.In *English Language Teaching - Principles and Practice* (pp. 156-157). Chennai: Orient Longman Private Limited.

***

Joseph Edward Felix//Department of English/ Christ University, Bangalore 560 029/ Karnataka/joseph.edward@christuniversity.in/09980847260