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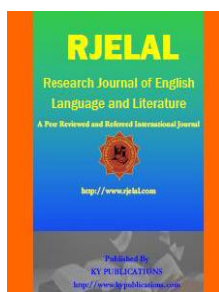
INCORPORATING VISIBLE THINKING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM OF YOUNG LEARNERS: NURTURING A CREATIVE MINDSET

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ABSTRACT

Creativity is an endangered species in the current model of education, which is increasingly subject to institutional, curricular and assessment constraints. Creative thinking involves a focus on exploring ideas, looking for many right answers than just one and sharing of results. In this paper the researcher deals with on how to encourage creative thinking in the English class room using visual stimuli. More practical suggestions on how the approach can be useful with the experience of working on this with a set of 12 to 13 years old students who are in senior secondary school education of Andhra Pradesh.

Key words: Creativity, Assessment constraint, and Visual stimuli

INTRODUCTION

Integrating creative activities in English language teaching encourages learners to practice an important element in language learning which lies behind personal growth and the development of culture and society. Creativity is a process that promotes a more open, curious and questioning relationship to others and to the world. The first part of this research paper explains Visible Thinking and its link to creative thinking. Then a more practical part follows with suggestions on how the approach is useful in the English classroom.

Visible Thinking

Visible Thinking is a research based approach that looks into how we can encourage learners' engagement and understanding. The idea is to nurture students' thinking by 'externalising' it when they are engaged with content. In this three principle ideas are important: a) learning is the outcome of thinking, b) thinking is intricately connected to content and c) thinking does not happen in a linear manner (Ritchhart et al., 2011).

Visible Thinking deepens content learning and fosters thinking skills and dispositions such as 'curiosity, concern for truth and understanding. These dispositions nurture creative mind-set and elements are:

- Wondering and asking questions
- Close observation and description
- Explanations and interpretations
- Reasoning with evidence
- Making connections
- Capturing the heart and forming conclusions
- Sharing thinking with others
- Thinking about thinking
- Making mistakes
- Not jumping to conclusions quickly

Making students' thinking visible is about getting an insight into what and how they understand something.

How to make thinking visible: Visible thinking of students depends on three aspects: questioning, listening and documenting

Questioning: Thinking routines will be at the core of Visible Thinking which is short, flexible structures like a short sequence of steps or a set of questions – questions that enhance curiosity. Instruct students to observe, make interpretations, connections and build ideas. Students can work in pairs or groups, when these are used systematically – in this case in combination with visual learning stimuli – can be made relevant to specific content.

Listening: Listening is active sharing that involves the extent to which we sincerely listen to and value individual's ideas. It involves a constant interplay between the group and the individual that allows for a better relationship between teachers and learners.

Documenting

Documenting includes:

- Using sticky notes where students' responses are recorded
- Taking notes
- Keeping journals
- Papers of constructive ideas on the walls
- Writing learning articles

Students reconstructing classroom experiences in writing helps them to become more attentive and concentrated. Their commitment levels grow and note-taking skills too. Their active involvement in such fosters their motivation, self-confidence and responsibility. They start monitoring their progress. It elevates their self-understanding and awareness of group dynamics.

Practice of Visible Thinking: In this the researcher deals with the selected thinking stimuli and how they are applied in teaching. During this experimentation the researcher explored how visual stimuli and Visible Thinking approach can be included in the English classroom. It is clear that thinking cannot be nurtured without content and a wide variety of visual stimuli such as images, animation films and paintings where each session was of 40 – 50 minute teaching sessions. For every theme apart from the thinking routines, activities that focused on vocabulary and grammar were developed. Constant was done, not in the form of tests but through notes and projects prepared by students. The researcher worked with two groups that consist of 11 to 13 students of mixed ability whose age group is of 12 to 13 years. They are of 8th

grade state school whose English language is from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate. Here are the descriptions of the thinking patterns used in the classroom atmosphere.

Perceive-believe-care about: This activity makes the students to step inside a character and deepen their understanding of other's perspective.

Aim: It helps to stimulate empathy.

Materials: A photograph, a story the class has read, or a video.

Note: events related to social justice (racism, a historical event or slavery) can evoke an emotional response and lead to more creative understanding.

Procedure: Introduce the material and ask the students to step inside and place themselves in the situation. From this perspective ask them:

- What do you understand?
- What do you think?
- What do you care about?

Students can work individually, in pairs or in groups.

Classroom experience: The researcher used the theme of bullying. The source material used was the cartoon picture of children's games by R.K. Laxman. It shows four boys holding another boy by hands and feet. This involved bouncing someone's buttocks on a wooden plank as a form of punishment. The students were asked to imagine the situation as the boy in the middle and enter the class. The students' ideas are:

- "I think that they are playing a game – believe they might make fun of me – care about my physical state."
- "I think I shouldn't play with them – believe they might hurt me – care about my family".
- "I think I have no future – believe that this is my end – care about escaping process".
- "I think I am frightened – understand I am in danger – care about myself".
- "It's not fair because everyone makes mistakes, he shouldn't be punished".
- "Even if he had done something, six members punishing one boy is not fair".
- "The children are cruel and rude because they are six against one".

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What makes you say that?

This routine asks students to observe, describe and interpret.

Aim : Students have to share their ideas about what they listen, see or read with substantial evidence.

Materials : Works of art, pictures, readings that give scope for predictions.

Procedure: Introduce the material and ask the students to respond to the following questions:

- What's going on?
- What makes you to say that?

The second question should convey a genuine interest in how the students understand something. Students can work individually, in pairs or in groups.

Classroom experience: The source material used was a painting with an older girl with clenched fists and an aggressive stance leaning over a younger one, at the edge of a cliff. Some dark and gloomy shadows are at the back of them. Here are some of the students' responses:

- "An older girl is threatening a younger one because some other people told her to do it. I say that because the little girl is at the edge of a cliff, some shadows are behind the girls".

- "The older girl is threatening the younger girl, I say that because the older girl has the fists".

- "I see an older girl threatening a younger girl and it is because the younger girl is at the edge of the cliff. I think someone told the older girl to do so because I see some shadows behind them".

- In the painting there are two girls and six shadows. The older girl is very threatening because she has tight fists. I would be afraid and frightened if I were the younger girl. I am sure that the younger girl is in danger".

See, think and wonder

This activity demands students' careful observation, then thinking and ask questions. It stresses close observation as the basis for thinking and wondering steps that follow.

Aim: It stimulates students' interest and curiosity.

Materials: A picture, an object, a video a piece of text or anything that encourages observation and interpretation.

Procedure: Introduce the source material. Ask the students to reflect on the questions:

- What can you see?
- What do you think about it?
- What makes you wonder?

Students can work individually, in pairs or in groups.

Classroom experience: One of the concepts I used to 'see, think, wonder' was of war/peace. The painting represents one of the aspects of Indian freedom struggle. Students are encouraged for more careful observation. Some of the students' ideas are:

- "I see dead people, sad faces, lots of horses and fighting humans – it's a fantastic painting – I wonder how the painter went through when he was painting this"?

- "I see war, frightened faces, giant gun taking the lives of men, and dying horses – I think it's strange but fantastic painting – I wonder is this painting from real life"?

- "I see a fight where many people lost their lives – I think people are drowning in chaos – I wonder what does this painting symbolize"?

- "I see many people whose hands were cut may be in the fight, someone holding a broken knife or sword – I wonder what does the painter want to show through the painting"?

- "I think the violence and sadness are strong but when people fight for their freedom the same violence and sadness become weak".

- "Out of this we must say that peace is more important than war. The painting represents the negative thinking of the people and one of the war situations".

- "What made the painter paint like that? It's because the Britishers took the lives of many Indians during freedom struggle which might have shocked the painter".

Chalk talk: This activity makes the students to think and respond silently to prompt and to the thoughts of other.

Aim: It helps the students to read others' points of view and comment on them or ask questions. It

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helps them to build collaborative understanding. It is a silent conversation on paper.

Materials: A single word, a phrase, a question relevant to a topic of study. Questions generally encourage more thoughts and comments.

Procedure

- When starting a topic give students a relevant prompt to reflect upon.
- Ask students to write their thoughts, ideas and questions about that theme on a piece of paper.
- Ask them to comment on their classmates' thoughts, ideas or questions.
- Instruct them to do it in silence. They can move freely but they can't speak.
- Chalk talk works best when done in two rounds.
- While working on activities the flow of ideas is more important. Students can work in groups, focus has to be on the accuracy of the written sentences

Classroom experience: The students liked the fact that they could stand and walk freely in the classroom, reading and writing. They responded warmly.

The researcher tried the chalk talk on the theme of school. The students were shown some pictures of diverse school settings. Then they were asked 'what ideas, feelings or wonderings do you have about school?' After the first round it was elaborated more on the same theme. At the end the second round of chalk talk was conducted.

Conclusion

Visible Thinking has been developed within the context of the education system. A mixture of professional curiosity and the potential of the students led the researcher to explore it and experiment with its transferability in the English classroom. The approach can have rewarding effects, provided that the thinking patterns are not used just once but they are attached to meaningful content. They need time, careful choice and systematic use. The aim of this experiment was to teach English in a way that would encourage students to unleash their creative thinking, improve their self-confidence and motivation. The researcher wants this approach to be associated with values.

Through an ongoing exploratory effort Visible Thinking has been of considerable help.

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