

THE NECESSITY OF DEVELOPING TEACHING PORTFOLIOS FOR TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN ESL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe to what extent the English language teachers at various professional colleges are applying 'Teaching Portfolios'. It will also explain what teachers say and what they really do in the classroom. This paper is not to propose or evolve a practical methodology for developing interpretative abilities among the learners / language teaching methodology at secondary or graduate level. Although many English language teachers are familiar with the language learning skills (SRW) and language registers, they don't instruct the learners to interpret the texts independently for they are in confusion with various approaches, methods ,and techniques for language teaching. Another category of teachers, we can call them theorists, use some 'preachy models' for narrations, and also talk about 'grand narratives' in the classrooms without dispensing practical methodology , and without making their learners feel a practical experience of handling texts, and this is a huge loss for the learners. Interestingly, the present day situation demands from the English language users the productive aspects of English language they learn from their course of study. In this paper I have tried to explain the concept of 'Teaching Portfolios' which are complementary to language teaching methodologies.

Key words: communication, class room, competence, philosophy, portfolio, learner

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I explore the benefits of teaching portfolios and how the process of compiling portfolios can help shape a better teaching practice. A discussion is also made on the practice of compiling teaching portfolios in institutions can get teachers started on documenting choices made in the classroom, re-examining their practice and lead to sharing the insights gained with colleagues. We conclude by showing how fitting one's practices into a framework enables one to come to grips with one's practices and become aware of the thinking behind them.

In an ESL context in India, two questions often heard are: do teachers pay attention to approaches, methods, and techniques - in the daily classroom practice?, and do they really matter?. According to Brown (2002) methods are "no longer the milestones of our language teaching journey" because they are too prescriptive and over-generalized. Language pedagogy, he says, is "artful and intuitive", and a

"dynamic composite of energies within a teacher that changes with continued experience in learning and teaching." He suggests that teachers are "dispensers of knowledge", diagnosing needs of students, experimenting with known pedagogical techniques, and assessing their

outcome. Richards (2002) also sees teachers moving from theories of teaching to self-discovery with top-down approaches replaced by bottom-up approaches or a blend of the two. Johnson (1999) refers to teaching as a "highly situated and interpretive activity" which "hinges on the robustness of teachers' reasoning "involving" critical reflection." Stevick (1998) continues in a similar way, seeing language teachers as "neither mere technicians nor mere improvisers" but as professionals who make informed decisions based on their experiences, research findings, and the "accumulated, crystallized experiences of their peers."

The teachers with an obsession for searching for the ideal method, and innovating in the classroom, they can become reflective practitioners. They should become aware of their personal philosophies how these are translated into the choices they make in the classroom, and engage in evaluation of their practice. Johnson (1999) agrees that this is not easy to sustain without "supported opportunities" and is best carried out collaboratively.

The methodology of language teaching runs parallel with the philosophy of education in general. The constructivist theory has moved further to include the social aspect of education of the child. This social constructivist theory of education believes that learning is individual and social (Pollard 1997). This means that learning takes place in social context by interacting with other people, and because of this the learner has to share information, experience, new ideas or knowledge with others, for example, his classmates in the classroom. "What the child can do in co-operation today, he can do some tomorrow" (Vygotsky 1962: 104). All this depends on communication with others did that is what Vygotsky called interaction with the knowledgeable others. Vygotsky's conviction is that social interaction plays a very crucial role in a learner's education. So, transfer of skills is facilitated. Creating communicative atmosphere for learners is basic in their education. "The basis of success-through-others is language and communication... success in learning depends on creating a communicative framework for learning' (Fisher 1995: 90). Learner- centered language teaching later developed with the advent of communicative language teaching (Nunan 1988).

Teaching portfolios

Edgerton et al (1992) define the teaching portfolio as "a structured collection of evidence of a teacher's best work that demonstrates a teacher's accomplishments over time and across a variety of contexts". Wolf (1991) declares that it "documents the unfolding of both teaching and learning over time" as it "provides the connection to the context and personal histories of real teaching". As a collection of evidence of one's practice, a teaching portfolio would contain a collection of materials used. As a document that traces the growth of a teacher, it would also contain a statement of beliefs (teaching philosophy), the choices made, how they fit into the circumstances and contexts in which he / she operates, and translation of these into activities in the classroom, and reflection on their efficacy. These portfolios being dynamic as opposed to static in nature, would of necessity vary from teacher to teacher, reflecting his/her

approach and accomplishments. Some institutions, however, in order to monitor their staff, or to guide them into the practice, would require them to follow a certain format.

Portfolio Implementation at Manipal Institute of Technology

In July 2012, at the Dept. of Humanities and Management at a Staff Meeting it was decided that the practice of compiling teaching portfolios in M I T be instituted:

- i) for assessment and promotion purposes,
- ii) to inculcate a 'reflective awareness'
- iii) to increase productivity and efficiency, and
- iv) to ensure the quality of teaching and learning.

This first portfolio introduced a format as shown:

- A. Introduction
 - i) describe your rationale / motivation for teaching.
 - ii) what is the extent and scope of your teaching?
- B. Teaching Experience and Repertoire
 - i) range of teaching experience.
 - ii) efforts in tackling issues.
 - iii) impact of new methods on student learning rates.
- C. Evaluation and Amelioration of Teaching.
 - i) action taken to enhance effectiveness.
- D. Conclusion
 - i) summary of competence in teaching.
- E. Evidence Available (List it down)
 - 1)..... 2)..... 3)
 - 4).....

B) Current practice of portfolio construction at Manipal Institute of Technology

The earlier format of 2008 was replaced in 2012 with a new format listing 8 items

for inclusion in teaching portfolios:

- 1. Philosophy of Teaching
- 2. Notes and Handouts
- 3. Syllabi and Scheme of Work
- 4. Sample Questions and Marking Scheme
- 5. Sample Coursework, Marks and Grades
- 6. Feedback and Student Evaluation
- 7. Teaching Repertoire
- 8. Evidence of Excellence in Teaching

Following this new format without giving it much thought can result in a mere collection of materials put together to satisfy institutional requirements. So it must be used in conjunction with the earlier one to help teachers at M.I.T to further their thinking, guiding them into formulating a philosophy and adopting a reflective approach. If it serves to help monitor professional progress: to know where one is, what one is

doing right, and what one can do differently, it would be well worth the effort taken as teachers begin developing some of the habits of mind that come from the process of portfolio compilation.

How does compiling a portfolio help shape a teacher's practice?

Putting together a Teaching Portfolio involves documenting one's teaching performance and this encourages reflection of classroom practices and forces the teacher to examine his/her approaches and to articulate a philosophy. Articulating a philosophy and approach will affect the choices made in the classroom. It directs one in selecting techniques and materials for use, and causes one to re-evaluate materials used in the classroom in the light of one's understanding and not choose them at random. Further, it forces one to identify the skills needed to accomplish tasks set for oneself and for the students and prompts one to think about one's professional accomplishments and career development. Collective effort in compiling portfolios provides a framework for thinking about one's practices and ensures accountability in lesson delivery. It should also encourage sharing and discussion among colleagues and help one reflect on one's own convictions and practices.

Developing a philosophy

Do we teach unthinkingly, following institutional guidelines given in robotic fashion? Is this possible, and will such adherence bring the desired results given one's own inclinations, the varying classroom situations faced, and the prevailing climate not only in the discipline itself but the society at large? We often have vaguely formed ideas about what we want to achieve and how best to do it. Articulating this in writing would help make clear to us why we do what we do in the classroom, and whether we are doing it in the best possible way. Stevick (1998) states that too many students and teachers subscribe to the "Evaluation Paradigm". Classroom materials are used as directed, with teachers satisfied with taking "small steps to linguistic competence". In articulating a philosophy, it becomes necessary for teachers to start evaluating not only oneself but also the materials for use in the classroom. A link is established, therefore, between one's teaching philosophy and translation of this into choice of teaching materials in the classroom. Becoming conscious of our philosophy or forming one also enables us to justify our classroom practices to administrators and parents, if need be, and helps us give students a sense of direction when we explain to them our rationale for the choices we make in the classroom.

How do we frame a teaching philosophy?

Framing a teaching philosophy involves asking ourselves questions such as:

What is involved in learning / teaching?

What is my role in the process?

What objectives do I set myself? How can I translate my convictions into practice in the classroom?

How do I teach and why?

What are the goals set for the students?

How can the various activities and materials chosen for the classroom help accomplish these goals? What are the outcomes?

Seeking answers to the above questions constitute reflection of ourselves as teachers. Phi Delta Kappa (2001) defines reflection as "the process of looking at information or events, thinking about them, and then using the results to change or enhance future events". Wolf (1996) adds that these reflections should consist of three vital components:

1. Description - who, what, when, where and how?
2. Analysis - break the whole apart and look for patterns.
3. Planning - write about the evidence and how it will affect future actions.

Once the answers are thought out, we have a picture of ourselves as practitioners - we can chart our growth and have a chart of our growth.

Discussion of some teaching philosophies and their translation into methodology

Since classroom practices are reflections of the teacher's philosophy, we randomly obtained the teaching philosophies of four language teachers at Manipal Institute of Technology to see how they translated into choices made in the classroom. These are discussed below:

Philosophy of Teacher A

This teacher saw her role:

- . as leading students to become independent learners
- . as explainer of concepts rather than imparter of information
- . as a creator of a classroom climate conducive for interaction and maximum use of language by students
- . as an evaluator not only of achievements of students according to guidelines set by the institution but also as assessor of the progress of students along the larger continuum of language acquisition as counselor, providing a listening ear for students and making herself accessible to students who needed to discuss problems.

How did this philosophy translate into classroom practice?

In recognition of the need to get students to accept responsibility for their own learning, at the beginning of

every semester she got the students into thinking about their reasons for learning English, how best they study, and the goals they set for themselves through questionnaires and other means. Throughout the semester, the students were set tasks for independent work:

- i) doing a(n) hour / week of independent study in the self-access centre
- ii) reporting on leisure activities such as learning songs in the language
- iii) keeping a journal and sharing entries with other students
- iv) compiling news items on issues of interest for classroom discussion and debate
- v) submitting a report on their learning at the end of the semester to ensure

compliance with the programme set for them

vi) To explain concepts rather than impart information, she

i) got students to accumulate details to support concepts discussed in class

ii) got students to explain concepts and language rules to other students in

interactive classroom sessions using prescribed textbooks as resource creating a conducive classroom environment:

i) had group and pair work in her language class to encourage interaction, peer teaching and learning

ii) conducted activities involving locating / exchanging / obtaining information to create

movement and student participation

Philosophy of Teacher B

This teacher identified the constraints he was working under, and formed his assumptions on what would work best for his students based on the following:

- students with 11 years of language study but without a grasp of the basics of the language
- an environment that does not promote interaction in the English language
- overdependence on lecturers for guidance
- How did this philosophy translate into classroom practice?
- His solution was to look for creative ways of making students "live" with the language, and this philosophy translated into a focus on oral work in his classroom.

Philosophy of Teacher C

This teacher held to the following beliefs:

- one learns by doing: when students do not participate in the language learning process, their language development is seriously hampered

- students must take risks
- greater student-to-student interaction removes anxiety in the classroom
- the methods used in the classroom must be informed by current research How did this philosophy translate into classroom practice?
- He acted as a facilitator in the classroom and got the students involved in various activities and texts. Input was obtained through the negotiation learners took part in as they took on various tasks.

Philosophy of Teacher D

This teacher had the following beliefs:

- . that every person possesses a natural capacity to learn
- . that education is closely linked with the needs of the community
- . that development and success at the highest level can only be achieved through education

How did this philosophy translate into classroom practice?

In the light of the above, she saw herself as:

- a mentor - to help students become autonomous learners
- a creator of connections between the classroom and the outside world in order to help students become lifelong learners and meet national goals
- an implementer of effective classroom management plans to help students become proficient in English to achieve their educational goals
- a role model, exemplifying strong values and maintaining high standards
- In the classroom she provided students with
- the necessary information and skills to take advantage of resources for continued learning through lectures, seminars, tutorials, consultation, computer-aided learning, virtual learning environment
- held discussions, group work and simulations

As can be seen, the different thinking and approaches of the above four practitioners (Practitioners A to D) translate into different activities in the classroom. Teacher A and Teacher C rely on both learner selected and learner derived materials and textbooks for the students' work and emphasize student autonomy and interaction, while Teacher B focuses on oral work with largely individual focus, and Teacher D sees it as her responsibility to provide the initial input and guidance for the students to take off. The choice of activities and materials therefore differs from one practitioner to another and their

portfolios will be a record of the thinking behind the choices they have made.

An articulation of one's approaches in a teaching philosophy gives rise to processes that are dynamic. Approaches are open to "tinkering" as Brown (2002) puts it, and yield findings open to various interpretations. Therefore, it is often enlightening for colleagues to share their thoughts on the processes set in motion in the classroom, and the thinking behind them. An open discussion with colleagues would enable the practitioner to stand back, and reassess himself/herself in the light of input obtained from them.

Both Painter (2001) and Lyons (1999) suggest a portfolio without reflection is merely a scrapbook. The substance of the portfolio is reflection, and a quality reflection requires teachers to think deeply about what they are doing in the classroom. A sample of reflection in narrative form is offered here to conclude this paper.

Reflection: A sample

My personal philosophy

My teaching activities are guided and delivered based upon a set of principles and beliefs that have evolved with time into my teaching philosophy. It is important for me to review and reflect on the English Language syllabus, the course objectives, teaching methods, student responsibility and learning outcomes. I know soliciting student feedback is good practice, and that is something I am going to make sure I do regularly. I know that multiple intelligences are important, and I am going to make sure when I plan units that I take them into consideration. Basically, I should provide my students with sufficient knowledge, information, guidance and feedback that will encourage them to develop confidence and critical thinking skills. I should nurture the talents, hidden or exposed, of all my students so that they will achieve self development. This will further lead to an enhancement of the well-being of society and the nation as a whole.

Statement of objectives and self-evaluation

At the beginning of every new semester, I often ask myself the question, "What do I want to accomplish in this course?" and towards the end, I ask myself, "How well have I met the objectives I have set for myself?" I feel this type of frequent questioning and soul searching has helped me to develop my skills in reflection and improve my teaching performance.

Assessment of constraints

I have made it a point to observe my ESL students during the first two weeks of class to see how they act and interact in my classroom. I make it a point to open lines of communication with the students early in the course, and try to find out their

prior experiences, and encourage them to express their ideas about what they believe is and is not appropriate language and behaviour in the classroom. This has given me a great deal of insight into who my ESL students are, and why they interact the way they do in my classroom.

I have formed two conclusions, which are: firstly, that since my students come from a culture in which the status of the instructor and the role of students are seen as hierarchical, probably it is considered rude for a student to interrupt the teacher to ask questions. Secondly, the students come into MIT armed with silence, a habit they seem to have developed during their school days.

Adjustments to teaching

During my teaching sessions, I change my pace, and try to adapt my language and behaviour in the following ways: I watch my students for feedback as to whether or not they understand what I am saying. If my students do not seem to understand me, I don't say the same thing again in a louder voice but I try to speak more slowly, or I paraphrase my ideas. And in order to encourage them to speak more and also to see if they have understood me, I often ask them to repeat things in their own words.

Awareness of the thinking behind practice

I believe that all students will take their cues on how to participate in class from what we do and say as teachers. So I keep reminding myself that if we accept the students' answers as valid contributions to our class discussions, they will quickly recognise that there is more than one right answer to any given question and that what they say will be respected. This will lead to more participation from them.

Furthermore, I can help my students adjust to the communicative behaviour expected in my classrooms by making my instructional activities predictable. And to do this, I need to *show* my students, as opposed to merely *telling* them what is expected of them. Showing students what we expect them to do can be of great help to them. Making our instructional activities predictable also means giving students ample opportunity to prepare for what we expect them to say and do. This means providing opportunities for them to test out and/ or rehearse their ideas in private or in small groups before performing in front of the class.

As group discussions require someone to become the leader, they are given phrases and expressions to use for leading the discussion in a structured manner, with the leader using different expressions to lead them through the various steps of a discussion.

I think that if students are not guided properly during their speaking and writing sessions, they cannot be blamed if they do not achieve the results we expect from them. Therefore, I use the same principles when teaching writing and I find it useful for them to brainstorm and apply the process approach when I teach them to write. I show examples of mind-mapping on various topics and get them to draw their own mind-maps before they speak or write on any topic. This helps them to develop the habit of preparing and planning something systematically on paper first before presenting / reproducing it in class. Recognition of the need for development and collaboration.

In addition, as a teacher it is my duty to update my knowledge and teaching skills. Therefore, I have made it a point to attend a number of English Language conferences, seminars and workshops, throughout my teaching career. I also widely read English Language journals and current literature on Second Language Teaching, Learning and Acquisition.

Finally, I realise that collaboration with peers is essential. So very often, to get another perspective, I review the syllabus and my teaching approach with colleagues. This sharing and exchange of ideas has trained me to keep an open, enquiring mind.

In attempts to improve teaching, we should focus on a few areas for change instead of wholesale transformation of our teaching methods. Our change should be incremental and gradual but we must continue to work to remove our weaknesses, and build on our strengths. We should not be intimidated during the process of formulating our teaching philosophies which may often be guided by constraints like; curriculum, working environment and the culture that prevails in the organisation. We must move beyond the constraints we encounter daily and focus on pedagogy, accessing materials consonant with our thinking about language acquisition, and set ourselves on the road to professional competence and growth.

Moreover, there are no clearly defined theoretical and/or practical approaches which especially deal with teaching English as a Second Language. For instance, teachers, lecturers and professors assign reading sources to learners and they expect learners to synthesize ideas taken from the sources in activities such as note-taking, report writing, summarizing essay writing, essay type examinations, etc. So, students need to know to compose or synthesize from assigned reading sources. Synthesizing from sources may also encourage students develop their own perspectives on a topic. They can

see other possibilities of composing their own texts. They can also examine the divergent views and writing processes. Therefore, we can say that construction and use of Teaching Portfolios would document the efforts of teachers and set them on the path of reflection, collaboration and systematic work in the classroom. Perhaps after this, we could go on to investigate how portfolio use has affected teachers in their teaching and use his / her teaching methodology judiciously.

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