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Teaching Language in Primary Schools: A Review of Krishna Kumar’s “The Child’s Language and the Teacher” (2000): NBT

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Abstract

Language is primary to human race. It is one of the most essential cognitive faculties which empower man to conduct in society. It is as much a biological function as is a social function. It is acquired naturally but mastering it requires careful guidance and teaching. The article reviews Dr. Krishna Kumar’s “The Child’s Language and the Teacher” (2000) in light of linguistic and sociological theories wherever possible. The article is an attempt to justify the relevance of the book for each and every language teacher. The book talks about several easy reformations in pedagogical techniques that can ensure better language comprehension and acquisition among the tiny tots. Written in a clear and lucid style the book stresses the role of a teacher and the huge impact that a teacher’s attitude can have on the psyche of a student.

Key words: Krishna Kumar, Review of “The Child’s Language and the Teacher”, language education, pedagogical techniques and language teaching in primary schools.

Introduction

Language is the most important cognitive faculty that man possesses. Primarily it facilitates communication but most importantly it acts as a medium of thought, expression, feeling and reaction. It is cognitive response to cognitive stimulus. The opening chapter sets off with a similar claim. The book is a special guide to those language teachers who confine language teaching to English or Hindi and those who teach language under the label of first language, second language or mother tongue. The book does not dictate pedagogical rules for a specific language. The book tries to portray a child’s point of view of her/ his language and how a child uses that language to make a coherent sense of the world around.

What do we mean by language?

Right from the time an infant struggles to produce sound: the cooing, the babbling and the holophrastic stage: the child learns to associate actions with words. One is meaningless without the other. The child is subjected to a wide range of experiences which find expression through language. It is the responsibility of the teachers to create a fine learning experience. One such method is to subject children to a variety of activities where they can touch, make or break objects. This is further manifested by their ongoing commentary of the activities they are involved in, irrespective of the audience. Another use of language for children is to attract the attention of their guardians towards what has attracted them. Children treat words as toys playing with them in every possible manner which serves as an enormous outlet for creativity and energy. In providing outlet to such creativity the roots of story- telling gains ground. Language, thus, provides a medium of interpreting life and events as they see and experience.

“Language allows each one of us to experience vicariously, what someone else is going through” (Chapter 1).

Child uses language to inquire, argue and to reason. Language, however, is a highly flexible and versatile medium catering to our social needs and shaping our expectations. Previous linguistic studies have clearly discussed the nature of human language that make it so powerful and versatile especially the “thirteen design features” which talk about the qualities of

arbitrariness, discreteness, semanticity, productivity etc. of any human language that makes it the only successful medium of communication (Hockett, 1960). Thus, the chapter which opened with an interrogation finds its answer towards the end of the first chapter. Language shapes a child's personality because it is language that creates the world in which a child lives. It would be very apt here to refer to 'linguistic relativity' which argues that individuals experience the world based on the structure of the language they habitually use. (Whorf, 1956) Language determines what we see and perceive. Language creates what we comprehend.

Talk

The next chapter tries to establish the usefulness of the speech act- talking. Talking is very essential in early age for learning. Schools should not restrain children from talking. By doing so the holistic growth of young mind is restricted. As much as 'talking' is important for children so is 'listening' important for adults. The author uses the term 'good listener' by which he means someone who can patiently notice the purpose and the possibilities of child talk. Thus, the teacher can create opportunities for children to talk about themselves, about objects and their experiences, about pictures and their response can be guided. Another important point that the author makes is about the story- telling sessions. Why do teachers focus more on the moral of the story? Children are more interested in the story itself and their creativity is lost once they are forced to memorize the stories. The most important thing is that how a child relates to the story and that is unique to every child. So it is suggested in this chapter that a totally different activity must be initiated after story- telling.

Similar to story- telling is the device of drama. As teachers one might think that it is very exotic and different but in fact it is just an act- out of the daily life. Children use dramatic devices in their daily lives so they do not find anything extra ordinarily different about it- mimicking, pretending, exaggerating and all those devices which children frequently use.

Reading

Another milestone in language teaching is the introduction of the habit of reading in children- an activity both challenging and exciting. The chapter is an effort to find out the most 'successful' way of teaching how to read. By 'successful' the author here means a habit which is lasting as well as interesting for the child. The author defines reading as:

"we will define reading as a process of finding meaning in written words" (Chapter 3)

So, the key question that is discussed is how to make initial teaching of reading meaningful?

The role of books is very important. Instead of using flash cards and charts, children should be provided with picture illustrated books that they can read and enjoy. Poems and rhymes can also be introduced at this stage. Such book reading session can occur in group, but then the children should not be tested for their comprehension. The prose and poems should be playful where language use is natural. Didactic poems should be left out.

Another important role for teachers here is to make reading material especially books for the children. This can be done for children aged five and above. Children will vary with respect to their interest towards the books but the teacher should care only about the children and not about the different pacing. The alphabets and 'matras' can be taught through various class activities. One such activity will lead to another class activity. The teacher's job is to make sure that the child uses reading for a variety of purpose.

Writing

After talking and reading, writing is another means of communication entirely dependent upon language. In simple words, writing is talking to self at times also done with an intention of preserving one's own experiences. The author here feels that: "It is the job of the teacher to ensure that children see writing as an act of addressing someone". (Chapter 4)

Teaching to write should not be a mechanical drill, on the contrary, it should be introduced as a creative activity. While drawing comparisons between talking and writing, the author clearly makes a point that talking should precede writing just

as language precedes literature. A child must have the confidence to talk before attempting to write. Writing involves the use of abstract symbols with sound and meaning attached to each abstract character. So it is the responsibility of the teachers to guide children successfully without limiting their cognitive faculty. The teacher should not 'demand' rather should be willing to 'accept' what comes out of the young and nascent mind. Drawing and painting should be carried out in free and enjoyable environment. Similarly, children should be given the freedom to touch objects so that they get to know how to handle objects.

When writing is introduced it is the duty of the teachers to find out if the children are ready for it. They should be given the opportunity to choose topics and place to write- a floor can an excellent place, the author suggests. As for correcting the mistakes, the teacher should go a step ahead and instead of just making right or wrong she should give correct alternatives. Also, the child should be encouraged for spotting errors, by doing so, the teacher encourages the capacity of critical evaluation in the child. The author then suggests various activities that can make writing a better learning activity.

Textbooks, Spaces and Examinations

In the culminating chapter, the author presents to his readers the actual life at a primary school. He argues if following the activities suggested in the handbook would fulfill the requirements of an ordinary primary school. In a stereotypical setting, a teacher is expected to complete the chapters of the prescribed textbook. But for language teaching such a job is wasteful and inefficient. So larger responsibilities rests on the teacher herself where she has to imply her own resourcefulness choosing textbooks carefully.

One must not forget that in a language classroom the teacher should encourage the teaching of experiences related to the development of children's mind. The teacher does not teach them anything novel, just sharpening their skills in something that they have already been using. As for examination, the author rightly brings out the point that our students are afraid of examination because they lack confidence and self-reliance. This happens because of a consistent lack of opportunities to children which would gradually improve the quality of language that the students learn in schools. Better language ensures higher self-confidence.

Conclusion

Language is a very important aspect of human behavior and personality development. Language shapes the world as we see it. So it is very important that a strong foundation is laid right from the outset. This book is an excellent guide to all those language teachers who continuously strive to improve their pedagogical techniques. The book highlights the essential components of language technique pointing out minor details of child psychology. Children learn while they play and they play while they learn. So it is the responsibility of the teachers to choose the subject matter carefully. The book is not prescriptive rather it is descriptive. It explains the various situations that a language teacher in a primary school might encounter and the book tries to provide easy and practical solutions.

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