

My Approach to Language Teaching

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Teaching a language is, for me, first and foremost drawing the child/student into the world of the new language. This world need not be looked upon as the ‘other’ which is ‘out there’. A new language is not merely to be understood, copied, or even mastered. It is when the ‘self’ is brought into an active engagement with a new culture and new patterns of thinking and speech that language comes alive for the learner. I feel that the role of the teacher is to facilitate such an engagement.

The classroom then need not be a closed space but one with porous walls. For me it is important that my students bring *their* world into the class, so that they examine it afresh through the medium of the new language. Therefore the knowledge of other languages, cultures and the awareness of the world that the students bring with them is often the material that I like to work with. The classroom, I feel, needs to be co-created, along with the students, as a space where they feel comfortable enough to allow this to happen.

The students’ first language is neither to be banned nor explicitly drawn upon. Choosing and presenting relevant linguistic inputs in Hindi – whether orally or in print, as audio or video recordings - is the clear task that I see for myself as the teacher. It is in processing these inputs, making meaning out of them, engaging with them playfully or more purposively, and internalizing them, that the students will develop an emergent feel for the world of Hindi-speaking people, even as they are led to becoming more skilled at using its syntax and vocabulary. For becoming competent in this language, new thinking patterns need to be forged; sometimes this requires a comparative study of syntactic structures, at others automaticity needs to be inculcated through repetition and drill, at yet others dissimilarities must be highlighted between what seems similar.

Yet, teaching a new language is an invitation to address not just the cognitive dimension of the learner, but as much the social, cultural, aesthetic and even the physical. Experience is an essential teacher of language. After all it is through a varied set of experiences that we acquire our first language. If I am to teach how different tastes are called in Hindi, then I would not hesitate to pass around items that are examples of these, talking about it as naturally as possible in Hindi. Such an experience renders superfluous the list of ‘taste’ words with meanings provided. If parts of the body have to be learnt, I would invite my students to follow directions for doing some physical exercises, in which different parts of the body form the focus of the discourse. Thus, it is never the ‘noun’ or the ‘adjective’ alone that the student would encounter. The noun or adjective would be part of a context. This context helps provide not just the necessary hooks for memory, but also the connotative and subjective aspect of language. The latter help students feel more confident in using the new language because it is not simply a ‘tool out there’ which has to be manipulated; their own subjectivity is invested in the new language from the very early stages of language learning.

Yet experience is often a complex, multi-layered reality and it becomes important to draw out key patterns and structures of language usage by selectively focusing the students' attention on specific elements. Sometimes these structures can be logically explained; at others they are not so amenable to logic. As a teacher, I feel, what is of utmost importance is to gauge what needs to be explained, where spot practice would be enough, where sustained practice is required, where opportunities for overlearning need to be created and where a spiraling complexity of concepts needs to be built up. This is where I would draw upon (what Shulman calls) 'pedagogical content knowledge' garnered over two decades of teaching new languages (French as well as Hindi) to adults, young people and children.

When Hindi is being taught to students who have very little or no exposure to this language outside the classroom setting, creating an overall design of the language curriculum is important. This design need not be rigid but one that lays out the essential landscape of what needs to be addressed and in what sequence. It is this design that ensures that language learning does not become a process of random accretion, but spans a range of 'speech acts' (Austin and Searle) that the student becomes increasingly at ease with. It is this design which factors in the need for repetition and practice at the syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels. It is this design which can flag the distinction between elements presented for familiarization and exposure alone and those that are to be worked upon so that the student may be enabled to use them independently.

For instance, a rich exposure to the past tenses could begin from fairly initial stages, yet only later would one expect the student to begin to use these tenses accurately. Before I expect the student to be able to use the simple past tense in Hindi, using '*ne*', it would be essential to build up systematically the idea of transitive and intransitive verbs. Once they are able to recognize a verb as being transitive or intransitive, it becomes a simple matter for them to use the simple past tense correctly, placing '*ne*' where it is required (with transitive verbs) and omitting it where it is not (with intransitive verbs). Once the few exceptions to this rule are well established, students are well on their way to using the simple past tense accurately. It is also necessary to familiarize students with the gender of nouns and get them to focus on this through various means including games. The familiarity with gender is what will finally help them to get the accord between the direct object and the verb correctly while recounting an incident in the past tense. In the absence of an adequate and step-by-step build-up, students simply try guessing and hope they are right, which does not make for a confident usage of language. Hence the importance of a spiraling design in the curriculum.

Phonetics poses another set of issues. Students' ears need to get attuned to the sounds of Hindi (some of which may not exist in the first language of the learner). Very often students are simply unable to hear the distinct sounds of Hindi and therefore are unable to pronounce these accurately. Phonetic exercises help, but only partially so. Phonetic self-correction is often based on the auditory experiences of the learner. A memory bank of sounds, words and images can be created by the use of artifacts from popular culture such

as jingles, a few lines from film songs, riddles, slogans, tongue twisters, even punch lines of jokes etc. What is essential is that students enjoy rolling these off their tongue and thus have no difficulty in committing them to memory.

Beyond phonology, morphology and syntax, it is ‘meaning-making’ that is at the heart of the enterprise of language learning. The speaker/writer imbues his discourse with meaning and the listener/reader needs to create meaning afresh for himself. This act is much too often flattened out by the ubiquitous comprehension-type exercises. To me, comprehension is only one element of a more complex activity of meaning-making. Comprehension exercises often force a one-to-one relationship between words and their meanings, for they function mostly at the denotative level. Since Saussure, it has been well established that language is a ‘signifying system’, and meaning emerges often not from a single word or group of words, but from their connotation, from the way they are framed, from the contexts they are used in, from the said as well as the unsaid. Moreover, comprehension exercises do not allow room for the idea of ‘different registers of language’ (and this sometimes leads to fairly comic usage of words by the learner). For me engaging with the texture of text, not just to comprehend it, but to analyse it for what it is saying through the words and beyond the words, is the more exciting aspect of teaching language. For instance, I have often found advertisements for different products a rich resource for exploitation in a language class. Textual analysis drawing from pragmatics, I feel, is not just for the courses of literature, but it is very much at the heart of language teaching itself.

Various approaches to language teaching have drawn upon theoretical orientations ranging from behaviourism to constructivism. Audio-lingual methods, functional methods, Total Physical Response (TPR), communicative approaches etc. have each been in vogue for a period of time, and have subsequently yielded to newer pedagogies, newer ways of looking, not just at the material to be taught but the role of the teacher and the learner in the classroom. I feel that the teaching of any language can be enriched if the teacher is aware of these approaches, and is able to independently evaluate their relative strengths and shortcomings. As a teacher of Hindi I have certainly gained from this knowledge base and yet I find myself evolving an eclectic approach in accordance with the specific needs and age-group of my students as well as my own curricular objectives.

In terms of the psychology of the learner of Hindi, it is important that the student experience most of the time a sense of ‘success’ in the use of language from very early on. For this, it is important to carefully construct tasks, ensure that the student has been adequately prepared for these through previous classroom activities, and indicate clearly the rubrics of correction. The greater the sense of success the student feels in using Hindi, the more likely he is to remain motivated to engage with it. Yet, this doesn’t mean that errors are to be frowned upon. In language learning it is important that students take risks, and that the classroom atmosphere tolerates risks. Successful language learners are often great risk-takers, yet they also learn from their mistakes. Teachers play a key role in preventing fossilization of errors. I feel that correction of errors can be done very lightly (sometimes as simply as re-stating correctly the incorrect formulation by the student). Error correction and feedback (to individual students or to the whole class group as the

case may be) provides the necessary footholds that empower students to use the language with near-native fluency.

Finally, I would count myself as a successful teacher of Hindi if I have been able to establish a classroom atmosphere such that students want to come to the class, feel that their voice is heard there, feel free to share little bits of their lives outside the classroom with the group, feel safe enough to take risks in expressing themselves in the new language, have a sufficient sense of challenge in the activities proposed, have a growing sense of competence in using the language, and have developed a curiosity and an empathy for the culture from which it emanates.