

PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE- THE ENGLISH SCHOOL TEACHER

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Abstract

Excellence in teaching is not an abstract concept but a practical reality that needs to be understood. What marks out a teacher as good or bad or excellent, goes beyond mere content knowledge. It involves their commitment to their profession and their student. This commitment goes beyond the realm of merely teaching their subject. It involves creating a learning ethos for the student that makes language learning living, joyful and meaningful. In this paper an attempt is made to explore the concept of excellence in the context of an English language teacher and how excellence in teaching can be transacted in a real -life classroom.

Keywords: *Creative pedagogy, Commitment, Learning*



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Introduction

“What marks teachers out as good, or better than good, is not only their content knowledge and pedagogical skills. It is their commitment to their teaching, their students and their learning and achievement.”

(Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kingston and Gu, 2007)

There has been a lot of interest in the question of what it takes to become an excellent teacher. It has long been felt that the progress of students is the measure of a teacher's success and remains a powerful criterion in judging the quality of teaching. We do know that teachers who perform at the highest level often learn quickly, are organized, self-motivated, passionate, knowledgeable, upgrade their skills, are reflective and over and above all this they try and ensure that students achieve important learning objectives, remaining committed to the students and their profession (Silcock and Brundrett, 2002). Teaching that is excellent and impactful goes beyond merely supporting student's performance in examinations. Excellent teachers play a key role in contributing to a just and tolerant society. They continually work towards social justice by creating equal opportunities for pupils coming from diverse backgrounds. They recognize that it's their duty towards society to support all students in

achieving their aspirations, rather than assuming that students from disadvantaged backgrounds don't have aspirations and expect very little from themselves. Their main driver is the moral purpose of making a difference to the lives of their students. Teachers perform an important social duty by responding to the social dilemmas that crop up in their student's lives. They never shy away from performing social duties. These teachers understand the importance of working closely with parents. Matthew Arnold had put it succinctly when he said that schools should provide "the best that has been thought and said in the world". The global perspective is extremely important in defining excellence in teaching.

Teaching English in the Indian context

English is taught as a second language in India. It is not merely a language but is a medium of communication giving a leverage in the professional context that, unfortunately, no regional language can. English is not merely the language of Britain; English is not merely the Queen's English or the medium used to appreciate and interpret English Literature. It has been transformed into the language of the people, people who wish to communicate in it. Consequently, the English teacher needs to pursue her/his profession with a single-minded devotion to create language classrooms that are effective learning spaces - a space that is dynamic, inclusive and effective, where students can absorb and learn the English language. English holds unprecedented aspirational values for them. In this paper the key areas that will be discussed are:

- What defines Excellence in Teaching
- Link between Teacher Excellence and Student Performance
- Excellent Teachers break the Mould
- The Need to Bring English out of its Ivory Tower Existence

What Defines Excellence in Teaching

The definition of excellence in teaching is not marked or confined by the criteria that are the basis of an Excellent Teacher award, which is declared every year by the Government and non-government organizations. Excellence is a concept that cannot be confined by the parameters that define awards. In this paper excellence is discussed in the context of commitment, dedication and creative pedagogy.

The marks of an outstanding/excellent teacher:

- Set high standards that inspire, motivate and challenge pupils
- Promote good progress and outcomes by students
- Demonstrate good subject knowledge
- Plan and transact well-structured lessons
- Adapt teaching to the needs, abilities and learning styles of their students
- Make an effective use of assessment to give feedback
- To ensure a safe, inclusive learning environment
- Fulfill professional responsibilities
- Is reflective in thought and practice

(adapted from Grigg, 2015)

Can the English language teacher be evaluated on the basis of the above parameters or do we need to evolve a different scale and different criteria for them? Of course, each pedagogical context will require the addition of more specific criteria but they can be subsumed to the above, evolving a more comprehensive framework for evaluating excellence in a teacher.

Excellence and Equity

Excellence as a criterion for assessing or understanding good teaching, is a complex concept. Inherent within it are the principles of equity and inclusiveness. A teacher cannot become a teacher who is impactful, if the principles of equity and inclusion are not inherent in her/his persona and negotiated through the classroom transaction. There is an 'educational justification' for educating all children together, in an inclusive environment which forms the basis of a non-discriminatory society. We need to reorient our thinking, focusing attention on the barriers experienced by some children that leads them to become marginalized (Ainscrow, 2019). Ainscrow, continues that there is an 'economic justification' for educating all children together because of its economic viability. Language learning is a process of language acquisition through the process of socialization. Consequently, English teaching must provide opportunities for all students to acquire language skills in equal socio-cultural contexts. They also need a learning space to practice and experiment without fear of failure. English language teaching should facilitate the entry of every student into classroom discourse and educational space, so that it does not become, in the words of White (2002), a means of alienation. Moreover, teachers need to support each student in his learning journey. Each student has independent and individual learning needs and individualistic language learning

styles. The teacher needs to create scaffolds for them so that learning a language is transformed into an achievable goal. Teacher Education programs should foster the teacher interns with skills to identify and support struggling students. This will help transform their school space into an inclusive one. When an English teacher works with this objective, then learning the language is not an experience of alienation for the student. Every student irrespective of their background can learn the language and can be assured that their learning will be supported and scaffolded by their teacher. English can then be brought out of its ivory tower existence.

Professional Growth and the Teacher

The Teachers need to be continually engaged in addressing language concerns from everyday classroom processes. Problems that are unsurmountable can be resolved through action research. The solutions that are achieved when incorporated in practice, facilitates, strengthens and improves it. An excellent teacher needs to be engaged in his/her continuing professional growth. Communities of Practice (TESOL, 2018, Gherardi, 2009) that is formed through sharing of knowledge and collaborating with peers, is an important professional learning strategy. It is based upon the fundamentally social nature of human learning. Communities of Practice provides a forum to discuss problems, identify solutions to common problems, share and reflect upon it. Learning from each other through reflection and deliberation, fosters building of better practice, thereby facilitating professional growth of teachers (TESOL, 2018, Kapur, et al, 2018). It creates a support network for 'enabling' them in contributing to the classroom discourse and student learning. Reflecting on practice within teaching communities helps build insights and teachers becoming more proficient and competent in supporting student learning.

Is there a link between Students Performance and Excellence in Teaching?

Student performance can be evaluated through student progress. Evaluating teacher excellence in terms of the student marks needs to be carefully reviewed. The question that is inherent in these criteria is that, does student performance criteria measure teaching quality making student marks an indicator of teacher excellence. Students' marks are not the true measure of teaching quality. Test scores of students are only part of the information which can be used by the school administration to make judgement about teacher effectiveness. They can be only one part of an overall comprehensive evaluation (Shavelson et al,

2010). Statisticians are of the opinion that student test scores alone are not sufficiently reliable and cannot evaluate teacher effectiveness (Shavelson, 2010). To form an accurate understanding of a teacher's classroom transaction and how far it impacts student performance, a more comprehensive and sound evaluation system needs to be evolved.

Adapting Classroom Practices to the Needs of the Student

English teachers, can increase their effectiveness through, first, through their excellent command over the English language. Second, they need to be aware of the needs, abilities, interests and learning styles of their students at the beginning of the session. A comprehensive learner profile that they need to formulate at the beginning of each academic session, will facilitate their understanding of each student. Equipped with the comprehensive learner profile, the English teacher can plan lessons aligned to the needs and abilities of their students. With a "backward lesson plan" and content appropriate pedagogical strategies the teacher can plan and transact well-structured lessons.

The focus of the English teacher in today's classroom context is on the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. They are taught as discrete skills not integrated with one another, replicating the usage of language in everyday life. Second, an English teacher generally teaches English not as a language that the student will use for communication but as a subject to be mastered. The language classroom focus is on teaching the textbook and memorizing grammar rules. The approach is extremely text oriented where the structures and grammatical features of the spoken and written texts are taught explicitly. The classroom transaction doesn't stress the forging of linkages between the written texts with the cultural context of their use (Feez and Joyce, 1998). Linkages between theory and praxis is essential for making language learning meaningful and relevant. Bringing in experiences and activities from the student's socio -cultural milieu for language learning, makes it engaging and interactive. Brown (1994) indicates that interactive transaction requires that there is a large amount of group and pair work in the class, students should engage in spontaneous conversation within the context of the project they have undertaken, or during the excursions planned for them. They need to engage with an authentic, live audience, sharing their work, enacting a street play based on a social issue. These real- life activities will ensure that learning is meaningful and relevant. These tasks will prepare them for the real life beyond the classroom.

The activity-oriented classroom, based on the principle of ‘learning by doing’ removes learners from a rigid text book culture with an emphasis on academic learning. Such a classroom juxtaposes real life experiences with the theoretical understanding that the students need to develop. A teacher puts in thought and hard work in creating these classroom experiences. It requires reflective and deliberative thinking to make language learning in the classroom meaningful. The creative pedagogy employed helps to create a learning environment where students can understand and learn a language joyfully. Effective language learning cannot be implemented through a structured curriculum. Doing away with academic learning of concepts and rules of language is at the very heart of creative pedagogy.

The teacher who appreciates the nuances of language learning ensures that students do not merely read a text or are taught grammar prescriptively. Each language learning activity is planned carefully and creatively. A single prescribed textbook is eschewed in favor of a variety of resource material that can be integrated in the teaching process, ensuring that students are exposed to multiple perspectives. The focus of the teacher is to foster students’ active engagement with a text/ resource material. While students critically engage with a text, they make judgements about the text based on systematic analysis. The kind of judgements they make depends on their approach to the text. The approach brings assumptions about the nature of texts and the different ways of reading and experiencing them. Some of the strategies that can be employed are posing questions at the end of each paragraph to reiterate the main idea of the text. Students can also underline evidence from the text to support their conclusions. Collaborative tasks can be planned around textual activity to ensure sustained learner engagement. Exposing students to learning experiences that incorporate multiple perspectives through discussing and analyzing stories and non-fiction articles fosters the ability to critique and develops viewpoints which are crucial to language development. Literature and reading circles, using social media and integrating multimedia and technology, has immense potential for developing language abilities in students. Technology is a perfect medium for the learner of today because it ensures learner autonomy, actively engages the student in his /her learning experience.

Creativity and Commitment in the Teacher

Understanding the concept of excellence in the context of English language teaching reveals that these teachers are creative and committed. Outstanding English language teachers have a

clarity of purpose and a deep understanding of their subject matter and its transaction. Their work ethics takes them beyond the realm of the ordinary. Sensitivity towards their students, understanding what they want from learning coupled with innovation in pedagogical transaction helps to make their classroom space vibrant and engaging.

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