

A Study of Language across the Curriculum Pedagogy on Students' Learning

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Introduction

The study was undertaken to examine the role of language across the curriculum and to understand if, and how, classroom talk can help children learn to use language effectively as a tool for thinking collaboratively. It was conducted in the five representative schools of Delhi. The representative schools were KV, JNV, NDMC, RPVV and one private school, i.e., DAV. This pilot study was designed as a multi-phase experimental study. The key variables of 'classroom talk' and 'critical thinking' were studied through a mixed method approach. This included qualitative exploration using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and field observation along with quantitative mapping of classroom practices. Both anecdotal and observed data contributed to the analysis of this study.

The importance of Language across the Curriculum (LAC) has been recognised widely in the literature. The *National Curriculum Framework (2005)* has also stated that, 'every teacher ipso facto is first a language teacher and then a subject teacher' that recommends across the curriculum approach towards language development.' Furthermore, when students listen, talk, read, and write in non-language classes their linguistic skills come into play, and can be critical for success. This is why greater interdisciplinary synergies need to be identified and tapped.

Therefore the motivation for the study came from—(i) the growing recognition of Language across the Curriculum (LAC) as both an important concept and a policy and (ii) a desire to evaluate the current state of LAC in the Indian classroom context through a study on the prevalence, and quality, of 'Classroom Talk'. At a more foundational level 'Classroom.talk' is an epistemological position (Mercer: 2016, Lefstein: 2010, Wegerif: 2010) that believes that

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dialogue lays the true foundation of learning. When teachers and learners both express their thoughts, classroom dialogue becomes generative, i.e., gains the power to generate and produce knowledge. When teachers and learners both express their thoughts, classroom dialogue becomes generative, i.e., gains the power to generate and produce knowledge.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. understand the nature of ongoing classroom discourse across curricular areas (Science, Social-science, Mathematics, English)
2. establish and map the relationship between classroom talk and critical thinking among students in LAC curriculum
3. study the potential and impact of learner-centered pedagogy on students' experience of teaching-learning
4. explore how teachers' preparedness and understanding of LAC impacts classroom practices.

Method

The study was conducted in three phases. Phase I established the baseline through stakeholder interviews and focus groups. Phase II gave interventions through workshop and FGD, and develop activities or tasks as exemplars for the classroom teaching learning process with teachers, and Phase III was concerned with going 'back to the classroom', and observe the impact of interventions through workshops and LAC training. The researcher had access to eight classes across English, Math, Science, and Social Science from Classes 6–8 per school. Overall 38 classes were observed by the researcher and of these 20 were revisited as the experimental group. Also, there were no children with special needs in the classes which were observed in the selected schools.

Results

Opportunity to Use Classroom Talk More Effectively

The results revealed that classroom talk in the selected schools was largely bilingual interaction. The primary type of talk included teacher and pupil conversations such as the teacher's explanation of a topic, teacher's questions, teacher's feedback, and modification of the teacher's speech; as well as, responses and questions by students. Student to student interaction was limited.

The students generally adjusted their language while responding to questions to match the language used by the teachers while asking questions. In instances where questions were translated into their mother tongue, students assumed that the questions were in English. Similarly, the students strived to adjust the language of their questions to the language used by the teachers for explaining concepts or questions.

For example in Phase I, it was common to see teachers using conclusive statements while teaching and students giving choral (yes or no) responses. However, in Phase III of the study, teachers were successful in making learner involvement more visible by phrasing classroom questions differently and designing tasks that entail recapping, reformulating, elaborating, and questioning — thereby expanding the range of classroom talk.

By no longer restricting themselves to 'what, when' type of interrogative words to assess students' use of language and conceptual clarity teachers in Phase III were able to also evaluate their critical thinking abilities. Invitational cues like — Explain, Describe, Examine, Discuss — addressed the quality of classroom talk, language proficiency, conceptual clarity, and HOTS. This was reinforced in responses by students. They cited boredom and difficulty, due to 'lack of comprehension', as common reasons for disliking a particular subject or class. For such subjects, their responses clearly showed that there was little space for classroom, talk or dialogue or discussions or any kind of learner centred activity in the form of peer or group work. It is evident that LAC can provide opportunities for teachers to address these issues because linkages across subjects can motivate learners to participate in subjects that may not be their personal favourites.

Heads of institutions identified— (i) gaps in English language skills among teachers and (ii) lack of appropriate teacher-talk affecting skills or learning of students. They expressed the need for correlating a teacher's classroom pedagogy and expression with learners' performances and going beyond designating a specific language as the focus of input. The respondents unanimously felt that teachers should be motivated through trainings, openness in accepting bilingualism as a stepping stone to articulation in English and through using ICT within the school and beyond. Designing activities that encourage discussion on engaging topics was seen as simple and low-barrier intervention.

In overall terms, the study suggests that classroom based tasks or activities are necessary to make classrooms learner centred. It reveals opportunities for teacher trainers to introduce the teachers to tools and techniques for leveraging classroom talk for learning. For teachers, it highlights the benefits of designing activities keeping in view learners potentials to enhance critical thinking. We must, however, also acknowledge that this can only be fostered when activities within a classroom are aligned with the rest of the school. Achieving a common vision though requires engaging students in reflection oriented processes. Schools would require hand holding and training for developing a LAC pedagogy. That said, the spirit of exploring the expectations and goals of their students, displayed by some teacher, is a sign that there is desire for an effective and positive learning environment from all stakeholders.

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