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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AS A MEANS TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Language can be used not only as a vehicle for transmission of ideas but also as a means for transformation of societies. In the context of the global challenges faced by the world, learning can be channelized to realise sustainable development goals if learning is transformed from 'transmissive toward transformative learning'. Although Language education can aid in realising Sustainable Development, we do not find English Language courses focusing on this. This paper aims at discussing how English Language education can be designed as a means to promote Sustainable Development. Such a goal can be realised by i) reformulating the content making global issues a central core to make it relevant ii) reorienting the curriculum to content-based teaching so as to infuse the attitudes, skills and competencies through active and experiential learning iii) using a student-centered, content-based and task-based Communicative Methodology promoting interaction, negotiation and communication.

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Introduction:-

Globalization and the concomitant challenges of the 21st century have triggered a need for sustainability and sustainable development. Sustainable Development encompasses environment, economics, and society. We cannot ignore the problems of poverty, education, unemployment, water shortage, religious conflicts, environmental degradation, climate change, destruction of natural resources, conflict and war that our planet faces. In order to find solutions to such problems, we must focus on Education for Sustainable Development.

Education is one of the most powerful tools that can promote sustainable development. It must focus on creating "citizens capable of designing and maintaining sustainable societies" (CEL, 2009, cd. in Rachel Bowden, 2010). But then our education has not been able to do this because our education system suffers from a mechanistic paradigm. Sterling, (2015), observes that most learning is 'functional or informational, oriented towards vocational goals that do not lead to sustainability'. This instrumental view of education is fundamentally opposed to sustainability goals.

In the face of such challenges, Sterling, (2015) recommends a reorientation of our education systems to guide us towards a sustainable future. What we need is a shift from a transmissive to transformative learning. For this to happen, we need to integrate sustainable development into education.

Larisa Voronova and AstaBalčiūnaitienė (2018), explain the meaning of Education for Sustainable Development as 'the creation of a space for transformative social learning'. Such space they say, 'includes space for alternative paths of development, space for new ways of thinking, valuing and doing, space for participation, space for pluralism, diversity and consensus, but also for respectful disagreements, and for contextual differences'

Stephen Sterling (2001), defines “sustainable education” as:

“ a change of educational culture that values, sustains and realizes human potential in relation to the need to attain and sustain social, economic and ecological well-being, recognizing that they must be part of the same dynamic”.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and English Language Teaching (ELT):

With emphasis on sustainable development, our education must focus on equipping the students to participate in international dialogue and debate; in negotiations and discussions on a variety of issues ranging from free market trade and inequality, climate change, social discrimination, conflict resolution and socio-economic development (Kennett, 2011) to work for a just and equal society.

Such an activity requires individuals to function globally and cooperate with partners all over the world (Pullen, 2015). Discussion of international problems with international community and finding consensus requires persuasive discourse, negotiation, problem solving discussion, and exchange of experience and knowledge. This further implies creating a friendly and social environment of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect. To achieve all these, language is necessary as a tool for communication and social interaction. Further, the language employed for communication must be realistic, meaningful through the use of appropriate language functions.

Since a majority of speakers in the world speak English Language, and since English is used in multilingual societies as a tool for expressing and ‘accessing ideas and opportunities’, it can be used as a medium for international dialogue and debate. (Graddol, 2010).

Therefore, to develop communicative competence in speakers, it is a must to launch educational programs focused on language learning.

In addition to communicative competence, ESD requires developing a range of critical and reflective competencies such as collaborative working, intercultural awareness and interpersonal skills to communicate with local, national and global communities (Rachel Bowden). This can be achieved through Language Education since the methodology it uses is conducive to teaching the tenets of sustainable development (Kennett, 2011). For example, the skill of persuasion and finding consensus can be taught using a task-based approach to critical thinking.

Richards and Rodgers point out that "tasks foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning"(228).

Thus language education becomes important for sustainable development (cf. Skye, 2015) not just because it exposes students to global issues and equips them with knowledge about the world problems, but also with the skills, values and attitudes necessary for critical and creative thinking, problem-solving so that they become socially responsible citizens, and work towards building sustainable societies (Cates, 1990; Maley, 1992; Alexander Leicht, Julia Heiss, Won Jung Byun, (2018) and Brudermann et al. (2019).

Methodology:-

In order to achieve such a gigantic task, English Language education can be reoriented to the goals to promote Sustainable Development by:

1. reformulating the content
2. reorienting the curriculum and materials
3. using appropriate Teaching Methodology

Reformulating the content:

The content for a Language Teaching Class must integrate global education where students are introduced to world issues, so as to get acquainted with relevant information and develop the skills they need to work towards solutions. Such a content must create appropriate learning experiences, building the capacity of individuals for working towards a better society (Rachel Bowden, 2010).

The content of the lessons that are currently in use show that there is no real connection between the topics discussed in the classroom and the issues of the real world. This disconnect creates a disinterest among the students. Instead of using ‘fact’ based subjects that are dry and uninteresting, themes on global issues that are interesting and are conducive to integrating skills, and competencies through practical work need to be selected. The curriculum

needs to be reoriented to content-based language teaching, where the materials are designed around the themes of social problems and global issues which are crucial for understanding the concept of sustainable development. Interest in the lessons can be brought about only through real issues that manifest a sense of urgency for action on the part of individual self. This sense that the individual has an important role to play in tackling real problems imminent in the society will involve him and promote active participation for finding solutions to problems existing in the society.

When students deal with the content presenting a knowledge of global issues, it makes them realise their role as participants of the society they are living in. Not only that, it involves them personally and stimulates their thinking, seeking their opinions, attitudes, and solutions to problems faced by the society. Themes focusing on human rights, gender equality, conflict mitigation and promotion of peace, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity can equip the students with the knowledge and skills required for sustainable development. Not only that, these issues manifest a sense of urgency for action on the part of individual self. This sense that the individual has an important role to play in tackling real problems imminent in the society will involve him and promote active participation for finding solutions to problems existing in the society. Such a content infuses the attitudes and approaches that trigger innovative ideas and solutions for realising sustainable development.

Sterling, (2001) calls this "sustainable education" and defines it as: "a change of educational culture that values, sustains and realizes human potential in relation to the need to attain and sustain social, economic and ecological well-being".

Thus, a global education approach in foreign language teaching involves integrating a global perspective into classroom instruction through a focus on international themes, lessons built around global issues and classroom activities integrating concepts such as social responsibility and global citizenship.. The importance of global issues and sustainable development ideas and their application in foreign language learning is enormous.Cates (2000, p. 241).

Reorienting the curriculum and materials:

The curriculum needs to be reoriented to content-based language teaching, where the materials are designed around the themes of social problems and global issues which are crucial for understanding the concept of sustainable development.

Since Language education essentially revolves around the four skills of Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking skills, these skills can be taught through content based lessons on global issues such as environment, human rights, hunger, their causes, and solutions presented through videos, games, quizzes, discussions, role-plays, and simulations and discussions. Through these lessons, students can be sensitized to how environmental degradation impacts our living, how religious conflicts are disturbing our day-to-day life, and how communities are working to create more balanced lifestyles, social structures, and economies.

Reading materials and tasks can include topics such as 'Advantages of Kaleswaram Project' or information on Amnesty International. Listening tasks can encompass discussions of the World Economic Forum and other kinds of listening through videos on issues such as poverty, education, unemployment, Water Shortage, environmental degradation, climate change, destruction of natural resources, conflict and war.

Speaking tasks can include role plays, discussions and debates, on issues concerning human rights such as fight against marginalization of minorities, social justice and equality, religious conflicts, poverty alleviation, generating productive employment, education for all, as well as students' reflections on conflict and war. Active involvement of the students takes place when they explore the topics, interact with each other, discuss the problems and work out a solution collectively. Here, collaborative learning as well as cooperative learning takes place leading to exchange of ideas, and then interaction of ideas and finally, innovation of ideas.

Writing tasks can include Reports, Letters and Proposals for Projects on issues such as Education for all, Employment Generation, Afforestation, Generating Electricity from Alternative Energy Sources, etc.

When teaching Grammar, Global issues can be used as content to teach sentence structures. Teaching tenses becomes more interesting and meaningful when students study the past, present, and future of our societies (Pike

and Selby 1988: 239). Subjects such as 'Impact of Globalization on third world countries' or 'Consequences of Urbanization' can be used for teaching tenses. Students can discuss about the standard of living or economic progress before and after Globalization or before and after Industrialization for teaching tenses. The subject of 'Environmental Degradation', 'Industrialization and its consequences' or 'Evolution of Internet and its impact' can be used for teaching comparatives. Structural changes in the economic policies can be used for teaching conditionals. Voice, aspect and the like can be taught through activities in the content area of Sustainable development using topics such as 'Basis of Indian economy- Manufacturing Sector or Service Sector? Teaching Language through such content which involves current affairs that affect our lives will create curiosity and interest in the students and enables the internalization of the language aspects since they are presented contextually.

Using Appropriate Teaching Methodology:

The main aim of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is to develop key competencies that enable individuals to participate in socio-political processes, moving their societies towards sustainable development (Rieckmann, Marco, 2017). This requires the emergence of learning environments that are more participatory, reflexive and learner-led. Practical engagement of the students which includes inclusive participation, critical review, re-visioning and practical change projects are required.

Accomplishing such an objective requires a language teaching methodology that is functional and suitable for language production and interpretation. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is more suitable for ESD because it is functional, transactional and interactional (Brown and Yule, 1987), and 'interactive within a specific context', (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). This is because CLT views language as a functional system. It holds language as a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning. The primary function of language is for interaction and communication. CLT "aims at linguistic competence and developing the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 66).

The role of a teacher is that of a guide and a facilitator (Richards, 2006). The teacher assumes an "interactive" (Richards, 2006: 5) and "collaborative" (Richards, 2006: 5) role leading learners to communicative competence development. The focus is on collaborative learning, negotiation of meanings, and experimentation with language (Richards, 2006: 4). Content-based and task-based language teaching methods which are part of the communicative approach are employed.

Task-based language teaching uses communicative and interactive tasks as central to teaching /learning. They provide an effective platform for language learning since they involve meaningful communication, interaction and negotiation. Task-based language teaching involves the learners in the tasks and activities and takes into account their knowledge and experience of the world.

Richards and Rodgers (2006), believe that tasks promote the skills of negotiation, rephrasing and experimentation which are important for language learning. Language learning happens when learners are engaged in meaningful activities. Learners learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while they are engaged in meaningful activities and tasks. A Communicative, task-based methodology can be used for teaching critical thinking through task types. This is when English Language becomes a tool for conflict transformation (Kennett, 2011).

Cates (1997), says that Content-based teaching provides content that is meaningful and relevant. Integration the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the activities encourage the students to think and learn through the target language.

Learner-centered teaching encourages collaboration and promotes shared commitments to learning Weimar (2013). The task-based methodology is conducive to Learner-centered teaching and the tenets of sustainable development where include accessing information, deconstructing ideas and processes, categorising, evaluating, prioritising, improving, empathising, problem solving, agreeing and disagreeing, finding consensus is daily chore.

Global education requires student-centered methodologies for active learning and involves experiential learning. This leads to simulations and role-plays that require students to get actively involved in global issues in the language class. This results not only in the practice of English language skills but also the tasks prompting the students to analyse the problems and generate solutions.

Projects, role plays, simulations, and collaborative learning contribute to experiential learning. Ideas sustainability can be embedded in role plays. Students get a lot of time to interact and discuss the issues with each other during collaborative work. These tasks promote peer interaction and a positive interdependence, improving not only their speaking abilities but also their critical thinking and analytical skills, creating solutions to problems at hand. Overfield, (1997), says that methodologies such as community-based learning and task-based learning recognise the value of collaboration and group work. Therefore a task-based, collaborative methodology, based on problem solving is suitable for preparing students for active participation in society building.

Richards and Rodgers (1986) assert that learning is facilitated by problem solving involving the material to be learned. Projects that focus on local community problems such as poverty, lack of education, unemployment, religious conflicts, and water shortage can serve as a means for students to link classroom learning to the outside world. Working on such Projects will enable students to think deeply into a particular topic as they work on them for a considerable amount of time. Projects can also serve as a vehicle for students to link classroom learning to the outside world. They allow the students the freedom to work independently towards a solution for the problem at hand.

Role plays and simulations provide an opportunity to the students to think on the issues, by putting themselves in different roles, and in different situations.

Since projects, role plays and simulations are done in groups, they encourage peer interaction and exchange of ideas. It is in the course of such interactions that students develop the skills and attitudes necessary for successful interaction and develop the ability to transfer these skills to real situations when needed. (Jacobs, 1998).

Working on a project implies writing the reports and presenting the outcomes of the project. This involves language production and language use, which is enabled through collaborative task-based learning. All the four skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are integrated in the project work since they need to read, collect information, discuss issues with peers, listen to their opinions, make presentations and write reports on the project.

Further, activities such as case studies and group discussions involving local problems and conflicts promote interaction, critical thinking and solution finding. (Kennet, 2009). Thus, each of these activities promote collaborative work and interpersonal skills.

Grammar and Vocabulary can be taught contextually. For teaching Vocabulary, the Lexical Approach (Lewis, 1993), which emphasizes on learners noticing patterns of use in context can be used. Here, meaning in context takes precedence over rules of language.


Conclusion:-

A global education approach in English language teaching can certainly become a means for promoting Sustainable development. The changes in the content, methods and social context of education facilitate educational experiences that develop a range of critical and reflective competencies and equip the students with problem-solving abilities to realise the ideals of sustainable development. Today, Materials for Language Teaching/ Learning are available on the internet and shouldn't be difficult for an enthusiastic teacher to adopt such materials. If the teachers are open and flexible in their approach and thinking, language education for sustainable development should not become a problem.

The most important condition for successful discussion of any issue is the speaker's ability to approach the problem in a pragmatic way. The speaker must be able to present the problem clearly and demonstrate a profound socio-linguistic competence to present the issue in a comprehensive and realistic manner. Therefore Language education is the only way for consensus through communication and solving social problems.

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