***Topic 3 of March-April 2018***

*How culturally or socially & economically diverse are the learners in your classes? Do you do anything in your classes which address the differences between the students in your classrooms?*

**Capitalising on the Differences in ESL Classrooms**

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Like most Indian classrooms, my classrooms were a cross-section of the larger diverse Indian society. Students from varied cultural, religious, social and economic backgrounds mix in the classroom space. As a teacher, I strongly believe that this diversity can be capitalised in order to build a society of citizens who treat each other with respect. Especially during our times when people hate and kill each other in the name of differences of faith, colour and region, we language teachers can make a difference in our classrooms.

I take personal initiative to break down taboos and popular misconceptions about particular groups of people. Learning materials, classroom space, group and pair activities, and classroom interaction are used for this purpose. I find language classrooms particularly useful for this purpose where the tool and content are language itself. A few ways of doing this are discussed below.

An Ear to Listen: During the course of each semester, I make sure that each student’s personal story is listened to. Often, acceptance from a teacher makes students much more confident and enthusiastic in adopting better learning strategies.

Being Sensitive: Being sensitive to students’ emotional-cognitive status and worldview is very important. Students from different backgrounds may understand the same concept differently. For instance, taking ‘pizza’ and ‘barbeque’ for granted as common food items is insensitive to students who are never exposed to such food items due to where they come from or their financial/religious backgrounds. Preparation for class thus involves a lot of careful work including selection of vocabulary to be used in class.

Equal Opportunities: In my classes, I make sure that students from all backgrounds get equal opportunities to represent themselves. The brightest students are not always selected as class representatives and leaders. Responsibilities are given especially to students who are timid due to their backgrounds. Listening to their personal stories enables me to identify and remedy such diffident students, and guarantees their positive response.

A Voice for Everyone: In class I invite students to talk about themselves, family and village. Students are publicly appreciated for what they are, and where they come from. This lets the class stand in solidarity to understand and help each other irrespective of their backgrounds. Such sharing sessions are very useful language learning sessions. Feedback for improvement for speaking in such sessions is given in person so that individual students are not discouraged in front of the whole class.

Language Activities as Tools for Equality: Language activities are great tools to make the class feel and act equal. Task-based meaningful activities enable learners to break free from their pigeon-holed understanding of society and work together in teams for a purpose. Often, this has resulted in developing new friendships across social barriers.

Written Work: When it comes to written work, students who could afford better learning opportunities perform much better than those who couldn’t. If this issue is not handled, a teacher should be held responsible for perpetuating this difference. Therefore, I give personal feedback to students’ written assignments, and exhort them to work harder. Also, common errors are identified and discussed in class without naming anyone who made these mistakes.

Gender Taboos: Many Indian classrooms very strictly maintain a line between genders. Boys and girls are not allowed to sit together. Often any communication between boys and girls is either discouraged or prohibited. In my classrooms, I make sure that pair and group activities break this taboo. At the end of a semester, students who participate in across-the-gender activities appreciate and respect the opposite gender in a much better fashion when compared to students who don’t have this opportunity. Also attempts are made to provide equal opportunities to both genders in terms of time and resources in class.

In my observation, all students are good-natured. How teachers nurture them in class plays an important part in how they grow up and flower. Students bring differences to class. I look at differences as strong points. The best way to treat differences in classroom is to treat them positively by acknowledging and projecting their advantages. A teacher can do this by embracing differences positively. Activities and attitudes like the ones described above certainly help teachers to capitalise on the differences among students.