

Life Skills Approach to Education: Role of the English Classroom

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Abstract

As is widely recognised, there is a need for life skills education in the light of the demands being made on individuals owing to changed social realities. It is imperative that schools act as sites for engagement with skills that help the contemporary youth to cope with these challenging demands successfully. This paper delineates the concept of and the need for life skills. While outlining the need for developing life skills in the contemporary school going population, this paper suggests a way forward through adopting the life skills approach to education with the help of an illustrative example.

Key Words: *Life skills education, English classroom, activity-based learning.*

1. Need for Life Skills

Life is becoming increasingly complex, with the number of personal, social and emotional demands increasing each day. On one hand there is the concept of 'global village' in which, each aspect of life—every thought, act and institution is being reconsidered in the light of what is happening in other parts of the world, and on the other, most people evade decision-making even though it concerns their very own life. The demands of contemporary urban societies call upon individuals to cope with long distances, pollution, traffic congestions, noise, fears and anxieties of being exposed to violence and crimes being committed and health and life style related issues. The limited abilities to cope with emotions and stress have been compounded by a lack of empathy and warped communication, leading to dysfunctional personal relations and insecurities. More often than not, individuals are being subsumed by the larger social phenomena as a result of which structures and support systems available to the individual have dwindled. This necessitates developing

abilities in each individual that would enable him/her to lead an optimally productive and satisfying life. This would go a long way in achieving the goal of a harmonised, happy and productive society. These were some reasons for WHO's recommendations of a Life Skills Approach to Education.

2. What are Life Skills?

WHO defines life skills as abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals' everyday living (WHO, 1997). They are considered significant for the promotion of healthy child and adolescent development. They prepare adolescents and children for socialisation and prepare them for changing social circumstances (WHO, 2004). The following life skills are identified as being crucial for charting the life course more meaningfully.

3. What is Life Skills Approach to Education?

Life Skills Approach to Education enables learners to develop skills that help them

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Life Skills Identified By WHO (2004)

Decision-making helps one in weighing one's options and deal positively with their lives. It engages with identification of possible options before arriving at the most relevant one and deciding in its favour.

Problem Solving skills are needed to solve the day-to-day problems encountered by one. Some problems are more complex than others, but careful analysis, planning and execution can solve even the most complicated of these.

Creative Thinking is a novel way of perceiving or attempting things. It calls for flexibility, adaptability, freshness of approach and innovation.

Critical Thinking is the ability to analyse or evaluate things. It calls for logical thinking.

Communication includes the ability to listen and respond meaningfully, while signalling to the other that one is interested in what is being talked about. This would include the use of appropriate gestures and body language.

Interpersonal Skills help us relate positively to people. This would engage one in making and maintaining meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Self-awareness calls for an engagement with knowing one's own strengths and weaknesses; likes and dislikes. Self-awareness helps one in growing positively.

Empathy is the ability to stand in someone else's shoes and perceive things from their perspective. It helps one bond meaningfully with others at home and in society.

Coping with emotions calls for putting a check on your negative emotions, while optimising the positive ones. It is important for maintaining a peaceful and harmonised self.

Coping with stress means dealing with the innumerable demands placed on each individual. Presence of problems in one's life can be a precursor of anxiety, stress and other negative emotions. One must try and engage in activities that help one reduce their effects.

live competently in their later lives. Life skills education is designed to facilitate the practice and reinforcement of psychosocial skills in a culturally and developmentally appropriate way; it contributes to the promotion of personal and social development, the prevention of health and social problems, and the protection of human rights. These skills would help learners to acquire additional competence in the cognitive, social and emotional spheres. Some of the objectives of the Life Skills Approach include:

- Developing a knowledge base among learners.
- Fostering healthy attitudes of living among learners
- Enabling learners to effectively cope with peer pressure.
- Providing learners with the necessary skills to resist peer pressure.

- Developing greater self-esteem, self-mastery and self-confidence.
- Enhancing cognitive, behavioural, social competence to reduce and prevent a variety of health risk behaviours.

(CBSE : Life Skills Education and CCE)

It is significant to note that these skills can be developed in isolation, however, as the term 'approach to education' suggests, life skills need to be integral to the school curriculum. It is believed that inclusion of life skills in the curriculum would help the youth in facing an uncertain future, learning to assume responsibilities of adulthood and to enter the world of work. Not only can these be interwoven with the school ethos, with a visibility in assembly, inter-house activities, clubs and other aspects of the school; they can very well be integrated with the syllabi of various school subjects and be enhanced through pedagogic interventions. It is extremely important to ensure that learners

across the nation are engaged with these in order to improve the quality of their life.

The next part of this paper exemplifies how well can life skills be integrated and transacted in an 'English as a Second Language' context. It focuses on how pedagogy can be used as a vehicle for Life Skills Education. Similar pedagogic interventions situated meaningfully in the context of other subjects, too, can lead to the development of life skills among school-going learners.

4. The English Class as a Site for developing Life Skills

The English class lends itself quite naturally to the development of life skills. It is important to note that the thesis of this presentation is to use the already existing ELT pedagogy to develop life skills in school-going learners drawing on the content from their English syllabus. *Life Skills Approach* can be achieved with great ease functioning within the framework of LSRW — the four language abilities, grammar and vocabulary development as well as teaching language through literature — widely accepted approaches in ELT in the Indian context. Contemporary approaches and methods being used in the language classrooms can provide us with a number of opportunities to foster and nurture various life skills.

- **Communicative approaches** focus on the functional use of language. For this, they rely on role-plays, simulations, dialogues, language games and activities. Each of these can help in the development of life skills in learners. All that is called for, on the part of the teacher is to identify issues from the learners' context that can be used for the development and enhancement of life skills.
- **Role-plays and simulations** can help learners *manage feelings and emotions, develop communication skills and interpersonal relationships and help them deal with conflicts and the resultant stress*. These pedagogic options can help

them analyse their problems, identify their feelings and come to terms with situations that they face in their real lives e.g. adolescents who are not able to perceive their parents', siblings' or teachers' perspectives invariably end up taking very similar decisions when called upon to do so in similar circumstances. They even defend these by giving a number of logical reasons. Role-plays provide the learners with a perfect opportunity to understand aspects of a situation from different perspectives. It has the potential to bring objectivity to their perspective. Role-plays can help them access the subjective worlds of others to gain an understanding, thereby developing a *feeling of empathy* that brings in them the sensitivity as well as the sensibility to be there for others in times of need.

Example:

a) Role-play / simulation for developing communication skills and interpersonal relationship

Language Area: Grammar: Modals

Situations are written on chits, which are placed in a box. Each pair of learners picks a chit and enacts the situation using appropriate modals. The range of situations can vary from formal to informal requiring learners to use not just appropriate modals but also vocabulary and structures suited to the given situation.

b) Role-play / simulation for interpersonal relationship/ communication skills / decision-making / empathy

Language Area: Listening + speaking /writing abilities

Learners listen to an incomplete dialogue between a parent and a son who wants to

buy yet another latest electronic gadget. Learners take down notes and

- Complete the dialogue
- Role-play the situation in pairs clearly stating the end of this dialogue

Such a role-play will not only engage them with the functional use of language, but it would also provide them with an opportunity to 'communicate correctly', 'build on interpersonal relationship' and 'empathise' with the father, who would otherwise come across as unreasonable and authoritarian.

- **Discussions and Debates** in ESL classrooms provide learners with an opportunity to hone their listening and speaking skills. A good discussion provides the learners with an opportunity to improve their communication skills as well as manage their feelings and emotions. The topic of discussion, stances taken by peers and learners' own subjective experiences can give rise to a lot of emotions which need to be taken care of / resolved. Setting out clear norms, ensuring that the learners adhere to these norms and guiding the discussion in a manner that most of them are able to express their opinions and come to terms with any differences of opinions that may arise can help them grow into adults who would be able to communicate successfully in order to resolve issues in future.

To be good at debate requires learners to be thorough in their understanding of concepts, to listen to others' perspectives closely and patiently, to be analytical and reflective and then come up with logical arguments to put forth a diametrically opposite view point or put forth a point of view in a manner that it seems extremely different from the majority opinion. This often requires outstanding communication ability as well as creative thinking. Often the winners come up with an out of the box detail / idea that draws the judges' attention to them. Debates have found a place in the ELT classrooms and can be used to promote *critical and creative thinking, communication ability and develop*

better interpersonal relationships.

- **Language through Literature** is a widely practiced approach in the Indian context. Most textbooks comprise literary pieces, which are used to create a variety of functional situations in the classroom. It places the language in a context, thereby providing learners with an opportunity to engage in critical analysis and appreciation of literature. The processes that this can lend itself to can be excellent resources for honing the cognitive life skills of learners. We can help develop the critical thinking ability of learners by asking them to: Express if a character's action was justified or not on the basis of logical reasoning. They need to justify their own choices too.
 - Identify character traits of individuals on the basis of their behaviour.
 - Be the character and answer questions on the basis of their understanding of the context .
 - Alter one situation in the story in order to change the end (critical and creative thinking).
 - Think of an alternate ending / conclusion.
 - Given this situation, what decisions would you have taken if you were the protagonist.
 - Change the story / poem into a play.

Some of the tasks mentioned above , with appropriate instructions and class management, can lend themselves to the enhancement of creative thinking as well (changing the end/ story; change of form).

- **Character Journal / Diary Entries/ Letter Writing**

Extrapolatory questions help in building bridges between the content and the situation in real life of the learners. After reading a short story or a play, learners can be asked to assume the identity of one of the characters/protagonists and write a diary entry about what they felt or

write a letter to another character to change something in the story. In both the cases, learners are likely to come closer to developing empathy — as they need to understand the nuances of the situation the character finds itself in. This can even be replicated when reading a novel. The learners will definitely be able to understand most of the nuances of at least one character's travails / situations with the help of a character journal.

Focusing on writing skills is integral to language classrooms. **Guided writing tasks** for helping learners write short stories, advertisements, posters, poems, brochures etc. facilitate divergent thinking and instil creative thinking. A few examples could be:

- Given here is a set of dialogues that occur at different points of a story. Think of character, setting and plot which fit the dialogues. Write your story.
- You are provided with a catch phrase for a product. Frame a suitable advertisement.
- Look at the pictures below. They are about a happy and healthy family. Study their lifestyle. Using the pictures as a guide; write a short talk on how a healthy family can have a happy and successful new generation.
- Given below is a set of postcards, including holiday destinations and activities. Who, do you think, would be interested in these? What positive words or phrases would you use to describe them? Work with a partner and write down your ideas for each one and a caption for each picture.

Besides such tasks, **the process approach to writing** lends itself to the process of self-awareness. It reinforces reflection as the very process of drafting and redrafting, along with editing, rephrasing, choosing apt expressions and words cannot be undertaken without some amount of reflection at the very least. Drafting and re-drafting are inherent in the process approach. Each draft provides the learners with an opportunity to reflect on their writing and improve upon it. In case of prolonged engagement with the process approach to writing, learners would become

both reflective and self aware and developing *self-awareness* in the learners. It makes them recognise that writing is a process with immense scope for improvement. The threshold for perfection gets pushed further with rising levels of self-awareness.

Last, but not the least, awareness of the self is intrinsic to the process of language learning. One who is aware of the mistakes tends to learn from them. *Making learners sensitized to their expression and gradually improving upon it can develop self-awareness as a life skill.* Awareness of concepts and gaps that exist in their understanding (with the help of concept maps) are likely to enhance *self-awareness* in the learners. Not only does this develop the language abilities but such processes tend to make learners truly reflective.

5. Perceived Challenges and the Way Forward

Over the last few years, I have had the opportunity of working with both the pre-service as well as the in-service teachers to facilitate the development of life skills in school learners. The challenges I have faced with each set have been quite different.

Pre-service teachers have more time on their hands and are trying to build their understanding of educational concepts. As a result, most of them are able to gain an understanding of the concept of life skills. But their experience of the class is extremely limited and they are in the process of developing an insight into the day-to-day demands teaching makes on them. As a result, their engagement with life skills as a part and parcel of the everyday transactions is rather limited. Only about 30 per cent of them are able to draw connections between life skills and pedagogy.

Another limitation faced by them is the constraint of time faced by them. Since their engagement is restricted to a particular number of days, it is difficult for them to engage in life skills development even with one group of learners.

However, it is hoped that the beginning of this orientation would eventually reap rich results in the longer run.

In-service teachers are adept at identifying and using pedagogy but their understanding of life skills seems rather limited. Life skills come across as a relatively new concept, and a significant number of in-service teachers are unable to relate to newer concepts. Their engagement with these remains partial, at best (with very few exceptions). Workshops are time bound and clarifying the nuances of each life skill can be quite time consuming. Therefore, helping them understand aspects of life skills can be quite a challenge.

Most in-service teachers are in a hurry to complete the syllabus; and despite developing an understanding of the life skills and integration with pedagogy, they are unable to include these regularly.

Finally, each teacher's real test is in the classroom. The final challenge, as I perceive it, is how to ensure that each learner is not just involved in the class, but involved enough to enhance both language ability as well as life skills. This will lead to the development of integral understanding.

Persistent efforts in this regard are likely to result in responsible and responsive adults, whose contribution to society will make a big difference.

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