

September 3, 2012

Partnerships that speak



REACHING OUT:Senior-junior bonding.

The shift from the secondary to the tertiary level of education, from one system to another and from one campus to another may be an unnerving experience, especially for those students who come from regional medium schools, from rural background, for first generation learners, and for others who feel diffident for some reason or the other as they enter college.

If the student doesn't possess at least an average proficiency in English she feels like fish out of water in most city colleges. There emerges a wide divide between those who can speak English fluently and those who can't. This concern is the underlying reason for launching the English Language Skills Development Programme at Stella Maris College. A target group of about 170 students were identified from the I-year undergraduates who had just begun their course.

Principal Dr. Sr. Jasintha Quadras firmly believes that intensive training and regular follow-up can turn any student into a competent user of English. So, the campus is replete with innumerable support systems and this 2 hours-a-day, 20-day programme is one such attempt.

The unique feature of the programme is that the teachers are not teachers but senior student volunteers from the II and the III year UG or from the PG classes of any discipline — Economics, Commerce, Sociology, Mathematics, Zoology, Botany, International Studies, Public relations, English Literature, and so on.

In spite of being an English teacher myself, I strongly believe that informal and interactive teaching methods may be best used by student-turned-teachers, and the enthusiasm which they radiate in the classroom leads to an instant rapport with the learners. Active involvement of both students and teachers facilitates language learning. So, with 47 such teachers, formed into teams, and 170 learners, divided into 18 sections, the programme began in July.

Interactive

The approach was interactive and the lessons were activity-based, integrating all four skills of language, though the primary focus was on speaking.

Lessons varied from simple conversations to be used in situations, to storytelling. There was a lesson on ‘Opening and Operating an Account in a Bank’; a lesson based on the pet pals column, ‘Take me Home’, from *The Hindu*; a reading of the story of Rapunzel (*Tangled*) and watching the movie *Tangled* the next day and many more. The classes were interspersed with singing sessions to break the monotony.

The teachers used every conceivable method to get the learners communicate — they drew pictures on the board, enacted and mimed the situations. At the end of each session was a review session for the student-teachers when the faculty observers gave their feedback and suggestions for improvement. The teaching-learning process took place in a non-threatening environment and the senior friends succeeded in enhancing the communicative competence of their juniors.

It was heartening to watch the shy freshers coming out of the shell to interact in English. Though I wouldn’t claim that they now speak flawless English, I am happy that their fluency has improved to a perceptible level.

The writer is
Dean of Student Affairs
Stella Maris College,
Chennai