

Challenges in Indian Classrooms to teach English as a Second Language

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Abstract

This paper examines the present status of English as a second language in India. It defines language and identifies the factors that affect second language learning. It discusses different problems faced by learners of English and what is the right way of language acquisition for second language learners in India.

Language acts as an instrument to express effectively in various communicative situations. However, it is the very second language which requires a conscious and diligent, systematic efforts to acquire or master it. Second language acquisition is really a big challenge for all native speakers of that language who really deal with it. The majority of Indian students, particularly from rural pockets, especially in the states of Bihar, eastern U.P. and Maharashtra, consider this seven –letter word as a magical and mystical word. A feeling of uneasiness sets in, the moment they hear something in English. As a result of this, teachers who handle English classes face insurmountable difficulties. Students find it difficult to listen and to understand the English language. What are the reasons for this? What are the remedial measures to be taken to alleviate these problems? This paper is an attempt to discuss the nature of second language acquisition and the factors responsible for its slow acquisition, especially in the rural pockets of India. Appropriate and adequate remedial measures are cited for the successful rectification of these problems.

Keywords: Language learning, second language acquisition, Slow acquisition, Remedial measures

1. Introduction

The study of language is the foundation of all other learning. Language defines us as human. To be human is to use language, and to talk is to be a person. Language is the medium of communication. English as a powerful vehicle of communication serves as a link language in a multicultural and multilingual society like India and also as a global linguistic mediator. It holds a place of status in our country, even after seven decades since Britishers left India. No other language however, has come up to replace English, either as a medium of communication or as an official language. Over the years, it has emerged as a language of choice for commerce, economic growth and social mobility. Teaching students English has consistently emerged as one of the top expectations of parents from school.

2. Problems of Teaching English as a Second Language in India

In a country like India, classes of mixed ability groups are a feature of every small town or village. In most of the rural parts of India, learning-teaching process is done in the vernacular language. On the other hand, most of the competitive examinations (higher education and employment) require English as medium of instruction.

The ratio of students to teachers is high, leading to ineffectiveness. The rural atmosphere does not provide students the opportunity to speak and learn English. The size of the classes everywhere is considerably large. This is one of the reasons why individual attention is not possible to the students.

Teaching of English needs a drastic change for the benefit of learners in schools and colleges. The students of rural and semi-urban areas in India face a lot of problems as English is not their mother tongue. English is their second language. In many places, English becomes the third language as they have a local language, then Hindi followed by English.

As compared to the learners from urban areas, learners from rural areas face more difficulties during the process of language acquisition. In urban areas parents are mostly educated. So, the domestic environment helps the students from urban areas acquire the language quickly.

Students do not get chance to speak or read in English in the rural parts of the country. In villages and small towns students mainly hail from rural areas. Bilingual method is adopted in language classes. This method helps only to slow-learners to some extent. Moreover, this act reduces the real learning process as a whole. If a student does not understand in English, he or she asks for an explanation in

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L1 i.e. in his or her mother tongue. Consequently, the English teacher is in a state to adopt bilingual method.

Lack of trained teachers in rural areas has become a reality. Teaching is a continuous process and teachers in rural India are often debarred from attending workshops and seminars to acquaint themselves with new ways and methods.

The rural population of India, which depends on agriculture and limited income, end up sending their children to government schools where English is not taught as a skill but as a subject. "Throughout India, there is a belief among almost all castes and classes in both rural and urban areas in the transformative power of English. English is seen not just as a useful skill but a symbol of better life, a pathway out of poverty and oppression". (Graddol p.12)

Grammar translation method is used by the teacher to teach young children, where the teacher explains every word to students in the native language to make him/her understand and learn English. However, this method faces a major disadvantage. Both the teacher and the student concentrate more on L1 rather than L2. In this method English language class seems to be L1 class rather than L2 class. Students get only limited benefit through this approach. Unfortunately, this is still in use in many rural schools throughout India.

Language could be mastered by practicing all the four skills viz. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The rural surrounding does not allow the learner to practice any of the skills. Many teachers are unable to teach English effectively because they face a lot of problems due to the lack of teaching aids, non-availability of required technical support and relevant atmosphere to teach English effectively.

Teacher preparation courses are not able to equip the teachers with adequate knowledge, skills and the ability to be able to teach the subject effectively in class. The situation is worsened by the fact that English is not the language of transaction in rural India, thereby giving teachers a very little chance of practicing what they have learned. Teachers need to upgrade themselves through a variety of means—periodic workshops, video/audio recordings of content to be taught, projects and assignments.

The majority of Indian rural students, especially in the states of Bihar, U.P. and Maharashtra, find English as a very difficult subject to learn. Since most of the students are first generation learners, they need the guidance from parents and others. Even though students study English, they are not able to produce even a single sentence without any grammatical error in English. The reason for this is that they study subjects from the examination point of view. Our examination system is such that it makes students' rote memorization rather than testing their analytical and creative skills. In this process, they memorize lessons, reproduce them in exam halls and forget them the same day itself.

We cannot expect a uniform standard of pronunciation for a second language in such a vast country, where even the mother tongue is spoken differently by different groups of the people belonging to the same language community. In learning to speak English, the mother tongue generally interferes with its pronunciation. The learners as well as the teachers speak English with regional language habits. Even during the English periods most teachers teach English without giving the students proper practice in speech because they are not properly equipped enough to practice it. They forget that every language differs in stress, intonation and pronunciation. The result is that after learning /teaching English for many years at school and college, most people cannot speak the language with intelligible accuracy.

Listening is an important language learning skill and yet the most neglected skill in Indian classrooms. It is neglected as teachers take it for granted that learners automatically acquire this skill without any special training

Peer teaching, role-play and group activities, are rare in Indian classrooms. In India, lectures speak. Teacher talking time is more than half of the prescribed time. The class listens passively. The learners are not encouraged to ask questions. The teachers must involve their students to work in pairs, groups and teams and prepare term papers, projects, etc. Therefore, in spite of being taught English in school and college for several years, learners fail to learn the language. They cannot write in acceptable English of their own, cannot use English appropriately and fluently in speech and often cannot understand conversations in English. Why does this happen? Does it mean that the English teachers in India cannot teach?

The teaching of English in India has been text-oriented since the beginning (colonial times) because the British Government's policy was to create a class of Indians who would act as a buffer between the British and the Indians. Therefore, elementary knowledge of English was needed for a class of Indians.

Objectives of teaching and learning English have undergone a sea change in the years after Independence. Still English education in India is text-oriented.

3. Remedial Measures

Challenges before the English language teachers in India are enormous. It becomes more challenging and demanding in rural areas because in such areas it is the teacher who is the model, to whom a student looks for all learning needs. They should be able to cater to the practical needs of learners, to make them competent enough to interact with one another and also to retrieve information all over the world

Building a rapport with your class—Assuring smile and greeting from a teacher to the students, helps them bond with the teacher instantly. When the students bond with the teacher, they will find learning the language much easier.

Place of English should be defined—English offers vast opportunities to all. The policy regarding the place of English in our education system should be well defined. This should be determined keeping in view its use and vast opportunities in the field of science, technology, social sciences, philosophy, journalism, international trade and diplomacy.

Keeping in mind the primary aims of teaching English—

The teacher should enable the students to understand English when spoken

To enable the students to speak, read and write in English

Grammar translation method should be avoided

Teacher should find some ways of helping students to enjoy the language activities and of building their confidence

They should use English as a medium of expression

To motivate the students think through English

Create confidence of speaking English in public

In a scenario where neither adequate resources nor tools are available, English teachers themselves have to devise innovative ways to make their students' climb the staircase easily. This can be done with a resolve, as Patel says: " I have to create opportunities for the students to use English in meaningful, realistic and relevant situations'. (Parel, 2008, p.07).

A teacher's role is immense in rural areas as the student has only a teacher to imitate and learn from. Teachers' responsibility lies not only with the average and above average students but also with below average and slow learners. A good teacher has to handle classes for all the students in a classroom. Individual attention will solve many problems, which arise while taking class.

An English teacher has to encourage the students to talk in English only. This act makes them confident. Teachers should motivate students for participative learning. This will solve all the stumbling blocks in students. Teaching learning is not a one-way process. It is a multi-way process.

4. Conclusion

In India, majority of the workforce comes from rural areas as 75% of India lives in villages. The policy makers have to bridge the urban-rural divide in teaching of English. An English teacher teaching in rural schools has to come up with innovative strategies in the classrooms. Skilled and committed teachers need to be appointed at primary level. Teachers should be upgraded and trained to meet the problems of the learners.

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