**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Vol. 3. Issue.3.,2016 (July-Sept. )**

# TEACHER-CENTERED CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AT TERTIARY LEVELS FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

## DHANYA.M
Research Scholar
School of Social Science and Languages
Vellore Institute of Technology [VIT University]
Chennai.

**DHANYA.M**

**ABSTRACT**

Among all the employability parameters, it is the ability to "Communicate" well, that most employers look forward to from potential candidates. And usually, what they mean by "Communication" is the skill to "Read, Write and Speak" in fluent English. This brings to the forefront the very essential aspect of knowing English as more than just a language, but as a key decider of one's professional success. This also reflects on the need to learn the language not just from the semantic perspective, but also the ability to use it for practical day-today conversations.

English is today a language of choice for most nations. This makes it important for countries to devise effective ways of teaching the language to their present and future generations. However this is easier said than done, as many of these countries are not native speakers of the language and have to acquire this skill through more formal systems of education, much like how they learn Science, History or Mathematics. The acquisition of a language through formal means poses several challenges to the Learner, the Teacher and the Educational System.

This study aims to describe the challenges in acquisition of English language skills especially at the Tertiary levels with a focus on Teacher-centered challenges. It will also hope to make some recommendations that could benefit the larger student-teacher community involved in the pursuit of learning the English language.

**KEY WORDS:** English Language Teaching, Tertiary level, Teacher - centered challenges.

**INTRODUCTION – The Emergence of English Language in India**

One of the most prominent outcomes of the colonial era is the spread of the English Language, especially among those countries which were part of the erstwhile British Empire. India was no exception to

this phenomenon as she had remained under the British rule for more than three centuries. When the British did finally leave in 1947, they had left a legacy of scores of English speaking native citizens.

The effect of the colonial era continues to linger and today India can claim to be the nation which has the second-largest English speaking population in the world (next only to the US). As per a report published by TESOL – India, (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), It is estimated that over 350 million people in the country can read, write and understand some form of the English Language. Even the Analysis of **India Census 2001**, concluded that approximately 86 million Indians reported English as their second language and another 36 million reported it as their third language. The preference for the language is very evident from the rapid adoption of English as a medium of instruction especially at the secondary and tertiary levels of education. The nation has also seen a tremendous increase in the enrollment numbers of those moving to English medium schools. In a 5-year longitudinal study conducted by the National University of Education Planning and Administration, between 2008 and 2014, there was an increase of 89.6% in the number of children moving to English medium schools while the increase among Hindi medium schools was only 24.7%.

**Reasons for Changing Language Preferences:** The reasons for such changes in language preferences can attributed to the fact that a large number of citizens view English language abilities to be directly linked to socio-economic progress. While the lower strata of the society look up the language as a ticket to escape their abject poverty; the middle classes are taking to the language as a means to further advance their own economic progress to join the elite upper class.

It is also widely believed that competency in the English language can open the doors to myriad opportunities and lead to fruitful employment, which is a basic concern for most graduates who pass out of colleges/universities every year. Several studies in the past have shown that higher capabilities in the language can significantly increase employability among graduates.

**Challenges in English Language Acquisition at Tertiary Levels:** Like any other language, English too has to be acquired at an earlier age, such that students possess a fair degree of familiarity with the language by the time they have reached tertiary levels. However, this is not always the case in India, where English is often introduced only in the secondary or tertiary stages of education. This puts students at a considerable disadvantage when compared to those who are introduced to the language at primary levels.

Thus the acquisition of English language skills in colleges (referred herein as Tertiary Level) remains a major challenge in India. These challenges are compounded by the fact that Indians are non-native speakers of the language and most of the learners come from diverse linguistic backgrounds with little or no exposure to the language either at home or in the immediate community.

According to (Kun-huei Wu, Nov 2011) challenges related to English Language learning can be categorized into three pronged viz. **Teacher-centered, Student-centered and Educational System related**. This paper will delve into "Teacher- centered" challenges which usually leads to a less than desirable learning outcome among students. Among these three areas, it is most viable to address "Teacher-centered" challenges first, as they are issues within the realms of the teacher and are the easiest to solve. In the Indian Tertiary educational context, there are three major teacher-centered challenges which can be specified as shown below:

    A.   Non-Native Identity of English Teachers
    B.   Teacher's attitudes and Beliefs
    C.   Teacher's Competency levels

**A.   Non-Native Identity of English Teachers**

The extent to which the non-native identity of English teachers impacts language acquisition has been a long standing debate. Many researchers believe that foreign or second language learning also involves acquiring a second identity. According to Brown (1944:155), learning a second language often involves taking on a new identity and in some contexts also leads to an identity crisis. Certain teachers do believe that it is important to emulate native English language speakers so that they can look as authentic as possible from the student's perspective. This leads to teachers putting on a foreign accent (fake accent) and using dialects or

vocabulary which could be way beyond the comprehension of learners. At the other end, are teachers who carry a strong mother-tongue influence in their English. While a slight mother-tongue accent is an assertion of the teacher's ethnic identity and should be respected (UR 1996:52), care should be taken to ensure that the accent remains as close to being neutral as possible. Maintaining a strong foreign or native accent often leaves tertiary learners confused and they begin to believe that it is the "accent" of the speaker that matters rather than the content (structure, grammar or vocabulary). Hence, such teaching ends up giving students a narrow view of the language. Possessing a neutral accent, along with a slight tinge of mother-tongue accent gives hope to the students that they too can master the language in spite of their non-native backgrounds. Thus it is important for teachers to be conscious of their accents, dialect, diction and vocabulary at all times to ensure the best possible learning outcomes. Teachers at the tertiary can take cognizance of the fact that their own non-nativeness (or nativeness) has very little influence on their teaching skills. This realization will enable teachers gain confidence over their own ability to teach the language with greater proficiency.

**B. Teacher's Attitudes and Assumptions:**

There is a perception among teachers that only "*Native*" speakers can be good English teachers and that non-natives are only the "Next Best" alternative. But this is a myth. As explained by Marek Kiczkowiak, winner of the British Council's Teaching English Blog award in his online article dated 18th July'14, "many in the profession assume language proficiency to be tantamount to a good teacher, trivializing many other important factors such as experience, qualifications and personality". Fluency in the language is also often mistaken to be an indicator of good teaching abilities. This is again a myth. As David Crystal, a renowned linguist and currently the patron of IATEFL put it in an interview given to TEFL Equity Advocates (Teachers of English as a Foreign Language), "All sorts of people are fluent, but only a tiny proportion of them are sufficiently aware of the structure of the language that they know how to teach it." This demystifies the assumption that a mere fluency or nativeness refers to better teaching abilities.

Another aspect of teacher's belief system is that Language teachers are placed at a relatively lower status when compared to those teaching core subjects such as Mathematics, Science or Technology. This feeling is more profound among tertiary level teachers involved in teaching students from the technology stream (Engineering).

For instance, in India, a four-year Engineering Degree (Bachelor of Engineering and/or Bachelor of Technology) comprises of English as a subject only in the First Semester. In most Indian universities, a three-year commerce or science degree (commonly referred to as Bachelor of Science or Bachelor of Commerce) comprises of English as a paper for a maximum of two years.

Most students don't see English as an important attribute to their skill-set, but just as another subject which they need to pass in order to successfully graduate. Though many studies in the past have shown a direct link between English language skills and employability, a majority of the students are ignorant of this fact and continue to believe that competency in their core subjects would be adequate enough for them to succeed. Students with such mind set are unlikely to be attentive or look at attending English classes seriously. This lack of interest among students has a significant effect on teachers as well, who see the act of teaching English to graduates as a mere formality as required by the curriculum. Hence there is a consequent drop in the teaching effectiveness which further aggravates the already dismal quality of English language skills that students possess.

**C. Teacher's Own Competency levels**

Another essential parameter to consider is the teacher's competency levels in the language. These deficiencies can be categories as follows

1.  A limited range of vocabulary
2.  Inadequate expertise in using relevant learning materials/methods
3.  Teacher's lack of preparedness

**DHANYA.M**

1.  **A limited Range of Vocabulary:**

The Cambridge-Oxford dictionary defines Vocabulary as "all the words known and used by a particular person". However, a broader understanding of the term is provided in the book by TESOL christened "Vocabulary and its importance in Language Learning" which defines vocabulary as "the words of a language, including single items and phrases or chunks of several words which convey a particular meaning, the way individual words do". This broader definition changes the way in which vocabulary is being viewed as even phrases like "Good Morning" and "Nice to Meet You" become an essential part of learning vocabulary rather than just stand alone "words".

Among the teaching community, a narrower definition of vocabulary is preferred (merely a collection of words) as many teachers believe that they have a limited range of vocabulary. But this is not true, as even simple phrases and chunks (as described earlier) also add to a teacher's vocabulary. The regular use of such phrasal vocabulary can be part of the overall teaching arsenal and used effectively with students. Teachers also attempt to add to their vocabulary strengths by merely memorizing new words. But, these efforts do not add value to the teacher unless he or she actually uses them in their routine conversations.

The enhancement of vocabulary is a daunting task for any teacher especially in a scenario where vocabulary is continuously changing and evolving. In the words of Ur (2012), "Unlike Grammar, lexical items are an open set, constantly being added to, and lost as archaic words go out of use". The methods to improve vocabulary of a teacher are no different from those of a student. "Reading" has been found to be the single most effective way of building ones vocabulary. Researchers have found that students who read just 10 minutes a day outside of school demonstrate higher rates of vocabulary growth than those who do almost no reading outside of school (Nagy and Anderson 1984). At the tertiary levels, teachers are expected to have a wider vocabulary range by virtue of their experience and qualification. However, teachers with lower vocabulary strengths can always use the classroom platform to improve this deficit as they go about improving the vocabulary of their students. Simple tips such as extensive reading, thoughtful classroom discourse, using a dictionary, word walls, journals, context clues etc. can go a long way in improving a teacher's vocabulary and consequently his/her confidence in teaching the language to others.

2.  **Inadequate expertise in developing learning materials/methods relevant to Learners:**

Any language instruction has five important components – students, teachers, materials, teaching methods and evaluation. Materials could refer to text books, audio visual aids, story -telling, flash cards, online learning etc. In India, teachers usually restrict themselves to text books which are prescribed by the respective universities. Though text books have been the traditional favorite of teachers, there are some inherent drawbacks in solely relying on them for language training at tertiary levels.

Firstly, they restrict learning to the text book and the way the textbook present's material is the way students learn it. Secondly, text books are slow to adapt to change and their content is often outdated. Lastly, text books do not cater to the interests of the student community who have moved on to a more advanced form of learning viz. Digital learning where Videos, blogs and social media take a center stage. Student preferences have seen a tremendous change over the last three decades especially after the invention of the Internet. The current generation of learners in tertiary levels, (also known as GEN Z) live most of their hours in the digital world. Teachers have to equip themselves with new skills to cater to the requirements of these learners. An essential strategy for teachers is to prepare learning materials and methods which are more suited to Gen Z.

However, this transition from traditional to modern methods for teachers was easily said than done. According to Sanders and Morrison (2007) in (Reilly), the main barrier to implementing such teaching is likely not the learners but the educators; there seems reluctance among many educators to move away from conventional teaching methods. English teachers and administrators should work on combining the value of personal interaction with the shimmering attraction of the digital world.

### 3.    Teacher's lack of classroom preparedness/ Lesson Plan

A teacher's extent of preparation is a key success factor for a learner's success. Many times, teachers undermine the importance of classroom preparation as it is time consuming and requires extensive effort. Sometimes, teachers also believe that their work experience would help them manage their classes with very little or no preparation.

A research study by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) titled "What makes a teacher effective", found that high quality teacher preparation does make a difference in Student achievement. The research also mentions that unprepared teachers often end up blaming students for their own lack of skills. In fact, as Stevick(1988, 7-8) notes, proper classroom preparation or lesson planning helps students relax in class as it gives them a sense that the teacher knows what he or she is doing. An overall sense of direction and structure provides the teacher much needed confidence in weathering days when students are not very responsive or an intended activity doesn't go as planned.

Among, tertiary students the lack of planning or preparation can be detrimental to student's learning outcomes. For instance, on a day when idioms and phrases are to be taught, if the teacher fails to prepare the "origins" of these terms or cannot provide a sufficient number of examples (beyond the text book), then a majority of the students would not end up learning these effectively. The enrichment of vocabulary would also suffer, if the teacher is unable to introduce new words without etymological reference (i.e the story behind the words). In such circumstances, learning becomes rote and retention levels are low. Another essential benefit of classroom preparedness is the predictability that students can expect. A well detailed lesson plan can help the students better prepare for future classes and many of them would be willing to study in advance before the classes actually commence. This is dual benefit for both the teachers and the students.

### Conclusion

Teaching English to non-native speakers at tertiary levels is a challenging task for anyone. The complex cultures, student diversity and university guidelines in India only add to the list of challenges. However, these challenges have to be seen as opportunities in disguise as facing them would only add to a teacher's repertoire of skills. A teacher's degree of self-realization in terms of his/her strengths and weaknesses is the first step to be taken in this direction. A deep knowledge of learner psyche (expectations and consequent behavior) and a willingness to personalize teaching styles accordingly can largely help in successful teaching. Most importantly, however it is the open-mindedness of a teacher to accept students as they are (a student's right to self-determination), acceptance to change (adopting Tech-related teaching tools for instance) and the courage to experiment that will make a difference between a "good teacher" and a "great teacher".

### References

[1].    Buford Shannon and Casey B Laura,(2012). `Delta journal of Education'; Vol 2;`Attitudes of Teachers Regarding Their Preparedness to Teach Students with Special Needs'.

[2].    Basu Amarnath 'Education in Modern India' Calcutta': Orient Book Company cited in Ram Kumar Sharma (ed.) 'Problems and Solutions of Teaching English'. Commonwealth Publishers, India: New Delhi, 1989, Pp.3-4.

[3].    Camerron, Lyne.( 2001). `Teaching Language to Young Learners. Cambridge'. Cambridge University Press.

[4].    Desai .B.sonald., Dubey. Amaresh. , Joshi .Brij Lal., sen, mitali ., Shariff, Abusaleh and Vanneman Reeve (2010).Human Development In India   Challenges for a Society In Transition, New Delhi, Oxford University press.

[5].    Hockly, Nicky. (2010). `Five things you always wanted to know about Generation Y' (but were too afraid to ask). The Language Teacher: JALT 2010 34.4 • July /August 2010 (p.3-4).

[6].    Kun Huei wu,(2011). `Teaching and Learning English at Tertiary Level: Revisiting Communicative Approach' published in `theory and practice in language studies'Finland,,Academy Publisher.

**DHANYA.M**

[7].   Kiczkowiak, Marek (2014), *"Native English-speaking teachers: always the right choice?"* the British Council.org-https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/native-english-speaking-teachers-always-right-choice.

[8].   Lesson Planning and Classroom Survival – www.tesol.org/docs/books/bk_morethannative_325.

[9].   Llurda , Enric, (2006)  "Non- Native Language Teachers: Perceptions, Challenges and Contributions to the Profession" https://teflequityadvocates.com/2014/07/06/interview-with-david-crystal/.

[10].  Meganathan Ramanujan, 'Language Policy in Education and the Role of English in India: From Library Language to language of Empowerment' cited in Hywel Coleman (ed.) 'Teaching English Dreams and Realities: Developing Countries and English Language', 2011, P.59 WWW.britishcouncil.org.

[11].  National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2015), a review on `what makes a teacher effective'.

[12].  Pande,Vijay Baburao.,(2013).in the  journal "confluence", `Problems and remedies of teaching English as a second language' issn:2250-138X.

[13].  Peri Bhaskarrao (2002), 'English in Contemporary India', a paper published in ABD, Vol.33 No. 2, P.5.

[14].  Ram Kumar, Sharma ,, Report of the Calcutta University, in, Vol V (ed.) 'Problems and Solutions of Teaching English', India, New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 1989, P.8.McCloskey, Mary Lou. (2003).` Principles and Best Practices for Teaching English to Elementary Learners'. Arkansas TESOL. April 25 (2003); pp 1- 9.

[15].  Simpson, Adam*. (2013). The Young Learners Issue.* Retrieved April 17, 2013 from http://itdi.pro/blog/2013/01/28/the-young-learners-issue-1-adam/.

[16].  Teacher Quality: A Report on The Preparation and Qualifications of Public School Teachers https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/1999080/index.asp?sectionid=6-

[17].  Teaching  and Learning English at tertiary level :Revisiting communicative Approach.

[18].  `What makes a teacher effective' – by NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education)