



WHAT AILS ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDIA?

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ABSTRACT

The English language is today considered by all as a 'window on the world'. Ever since the famous Macaulay Minute in 1835, the English language teaching has never taken a back seat in India. In spite of opposition from some quarters, support for English language teaching has never waned. India produces some of the best known English poets and scholars, and in the non-English speaking world, perhaps India produces the best quality English education. Yet, educationists realize that many of our students are struggling with English and put up a dismal performance in the examinations. In spite of the best kind of text books written, well trained teachers, our students in rural areas still have problems with English. In this paper, we attempt to explore what ails our English language teaching.

Key words: English language teaching, syllabus, education

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1. INTRODUCTION

The English language plays an unparalleled role in the educational system, mass media, courts, administration, commerce and industry in India. English has formed a deep psychological association with most Indians. It is firmly believed that a thorough knowledge of English is indispensable if one wants to come up in life. But the same kind of English cannot be taught to students belonging to different streams, in other words, the English that we teach our young students must suit their tastes and serve their needs.

With the diversification of the activities and professions comes the need to teach English differently to different groups to suit their different objectives. A medical practitioner does not require what a lawyer requires, and what an engineer requires a film maker does not require. Naturally, as the goal and objectives are different, the teaching methods, materials and curriculum are also to be different. What is more, the same curriculum and teaching methods will not suit pupils from rural India and pupils in urban India.

Today English is taught and is used as a medium of education in many schools and colleges across India. Each state in India has its own State board of education which may be different from the other states. In addition there are two central boards namely viz. ICSE (Indian Council for Secondary Education), CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education). The state of Andhra Pradesh has its own state board of education which looks

after all the educational programmes in the state. Though English is taught in different syllabi by all these different boards, many students still are lagging behind in learning English and sometimes fail to get a job on account of this. Recruitment agencies are complaining about the dismal standards of the English language abilities of the students, the governments are unhappy about the performance of the teachers, the teachers, in turn, are blaming the students, and finally, the students are at a loss to understand what they are learning and why they should learn it.

In view of this vicious circle, it is important to understand, in spite of the best and sincere efforts on the part of everyone concerned, whether something is wrong, and if so what. In this paper, we would try to make a modest attempt at identifying certain factors that may need scholarly attention and objective revision. Some of these factors are not unknown to the scholars in the field, and some other factors are already in practice, but we sincerely believe that an objective look at these factors may help to improve the situation.

Unlike in the past, the English language teaching now has acquired new dimensions in order to fit itself in all the domains in which it is used. Communicative skills in English what are expected today and one's progressing life in practical every domain require at least a basic knowledge of English. This changing scenario of English in India makes it necessary for us to take a closer look at the English language teaching in India, the methods the syllabi to see whether it meets all these demands.

In spite of our best efforts to promote Indian languages in all spheres of knowledge, it is still not feasible for us to replace English with Indian languages in every field. On the other hand, the importance of English and the use of English have increased manifold, if anything. With the increasing global importance of English, we cannot shut our eyes to the reality, and hence, naturally we continue to use English and teach English evermore in various fields. Today we use English in courts, in education, in mass media, in advertisements, in science and technology, in administration, and even in entertainment and in public life. Naturally, English is more ubiquitous and more diversified than before.

Keeping in view the diverse uses of English, now let us take a look at the kind of syllabi and teaching practices in India. Even with the change of focus, and change of approach, our English syllabi still attach great importance to poetry. In a number of schools the methodology used to teach English is still, largely, Grammar Translation Method. The examination is still conducted at the end of the course with some set questions to be answered in three hours. It is true that in cities and in well established private schools, the teaching methodology and the very approach have modernized, but in villages this has not happened. It is these children who come from these ill equipped schools that are at the receiving end and face a lot of trouble when they come for higher education. In what follows we will discuss some of these problems.

1. One of the major difficulties in English for the rural students is English poetry, especially that of the classical poets and the romantic poets. Neither the themes, nor the language are easy to understand for the rural students. Even many teachers are not at ease while teaching a poem like 'To Daffodils' by Robert Herrick. For one thing, Daffodils are exotic flowers to us in India, and secondly, it is not easy for many students to follow the meaning of the poem, leave alone the rhythm and rhyme of poetry in general. In the end, the teachers and the students manage to complete the poem and move on to the next lesson. The question is whether the students are motivated to learn English with this kind of uncomfortable exposure to English during their formative years. In his book 'ELT in India', Iyer (1981: 34) says thus: 'The poems provide an opportunity for college teachers to exercise their rhetorical gifts, but it is very doubtful whether the students develop a taste for English poetry.'
2. Another short coming of our syllabus is that it does not have much scope to improve the spoken skills of our rural students. There are several reasons for this woeful situation. The text book does not give much scope for the development of these skills. For example, poetry, which is not meant for the improvement of spoken skills in the first place, must be excluded from this task. Contrary to enabling the students to learn English better, classical poems in English, in fact, prove to be a demotivating factor for the rural students. Even the prose lessons may provide reading skills and writing skills but not much of the spoken ability can be expected from these lessons.

3. The teachers themselves are loaded with the heavy task of completing the syllabus within the stipulated time and naturally, they cannot devote much time to improving the spoken skills of the students.
4. There is not much training for the teachers in the teaching of these skills apart from the text book. Not many schools are provided with the facilities to teach spoken skills.
5. Teachers may, from time to time, be given intensive training in the teaching of language skills by experts in the field. This requires some generous funding from the governments. One cannot keep the eggs and have the omelette too!
6. Most schools have large numbers of students and the teachers are helpless in having to complete the text book and the exercises within the working days. On any given day, an English teacher loses at least fifteen minutes of time in marking attendance for the students. Within the remaining time, he is in a haste to complete the lesson rather than focusing on the language skills. In the end, it becomes a ritual rather than an enjoyable experience.
7. Another important factor is that in every classroom, students have varying degrees of ability, competence and interest in English. The same medicine in the same dose will not work for all the students. It is true that there is no easy solution for this problem. But the situation in rural schools turns so ritualistic that, in the end, even the bright students have to manage on their own rather than hoping to benefit from the classroom experience.
8. The text books of English are designed with the expectation of providing various types of skills, and hence, the number of exercises that the students are required to do far exceed the time allotted for English.
9. In rural areas the students cannot afford to buy English dictionaries, without which learning is truncated.
10. Often the themes and plots are far removed from the students' daily experience, and the in the rural areas it is really difficult to drive home such things to the students.

There are umpteen number of problems plaguing the English Language Teaching programme, especially in the rural areas. The situation requires a concerted action rather than cosmetic changes, which do not address the deeper malady. In fact, in the doctoral thesis of the first author, we examined the English language syllabi and found that a very committed and scholarly work has been done by the writers of the text books and the editors. Yet, the problems in the rural areas are not remedied by a well-executed text book alone. We would like to offer some humble suggestions to address these problems in the following way.

1. The schools in rural areas need urgent attention and generous funding. This has to be viewed not as expenditure, but as an investment for the future.
2. The teachers must be provided good training on a continuous basis so as to keep them updated and well-trained.
3. Instead of allotting a forty-five minute period for the English class on a daily basis, it may be a good idea to allot a two-hour period three days a week, so that the English teacher not only manages the lessons but also provides meaningful and purposeful training in language skills to the students.
4. In order to allow the teacher to be involved in skill-training rather than syllabus-finishing, the number of lessons may be reduced. This creates an environment of more work with less load, rather than being bogged down with a heavy load.
5. The emphasis must be more on the students' ability to speak and their ability to write rather than their accurate imitation of British pronunciation.
6. It may be better to plan the English Syllabus in a spiral manner, with the previous year's syllabus leading to the next year's syllabus, thus producing a continuity and at the same time lessening the burden in a single year.
7. Instead of expecting the rural students to be able to understand the alien themes and plots, a judicious presentation of native themes and environment probably achieves better results.

8. Speaking skills must be practiced separately, at least once in week, and this ability must be demonstrated every week, rather than in the final examination.

We realize that the gulf between the rural students and the urban students is quite vast, but we advocate that both the teachers and the students need special attention and encouragement and unless this is done, we are certain that the performance of students in the rural areas continues to be dismal. The Nation-building starts in the villages!

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