

TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL: IMPACT OF PRACTICAL

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ABSTRACT

In this article the investigator would like to share some of the findings which the learner feels difficult to learn English language in all stages of the academic career and the probable remedies in teaching English language right from the school entry level of the learner up to Undergraduate level. With about twenty long years of experience in teaching English language to young students especially from rural areas of Andhra Pradesh up to Undergraduate level, the investigator would like to express some of his confrontations and the probable suggestions in teaching English language through practical system. The main aim of introducing practical in teaching English language at Undergraduate level is to dispel the illusion of English language learning even at that level. It tells that English can be learnt comfortably even by the people who were born and bred up in adverse conditions.

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INTRODUCTION

English is the most important international language and is spoken and understood all over the world. It has been gaining greater importance for global communication. We are all aware that the English language is the window through which we can see the whole world. Therefore, to learn and speak English is inevitable for almost all the literates in the world. At present, we all feel the importance of the English language is to express and convey our thoughts to others not only by gestures or signs, but also a verbal message to make our thoughts more clearly in all situations. But because of the influence of our mother languages, most of us are facing difficulty in pronunciation, accent and understanding English language spoken in different parts of the world. English has become not just a library language, but a language of opportunities. We require a fairly high degree of standardization of pronunciation, proficiency in English and excellent communication skills to enable us to attain the quality of employability in the highly competitive world.

Factors and Problems of Teaching English:

Most of the students accomplish their schooling in their mother tongue. Though they have attained heaps of marks in their respective core subjects, they remain very poor at English still. The students have an unknown fear and fever over English language all these years. Now, let us examine some of the various factors which make English language a souring grape for rural students even today.

To begin with, the first of the foremost factors is the socio-cultural and financial background of the family. As most of the parents are illiterates, they cannot directly take part in the daily routine of their children though they aspire for their children's future prospect. Hence, the students' performance lacks parental supervision and guidance which is very necessary at all levels of their education. The illiterate parents cannot realize what their children pursuing neither they do afford time to consult the teacher about the progression in

studies of their children. Every minute during the daytime is valuable for them as they have to struggle to get their livelihood. The boy or girl is also sent to work on wages at the specified time of the year which affects their education very dearly.

The majority of students in our country come from rural background; they are bound to have some limitations: there is an inbuilt resistance to English among these students. The reason behind this could be the fact that English is the second language or even the third and can never be equal to the first language. It is always easier to communicate in our mother tongue than to struggle with an alien language. With this fear complex, students from rural background, never try to focus on this language though they know that it is indispensable. By the time the students reach the UG level and realize the importance of this language, it becomes too late for them to cover the gap.

An interesting observation studies that the performance in English of the students whose parents are employees and belong to a higher middle class is better than that of the students whose parents are illiterates and belong to lower middle class. The probable reason perhaps is that the parents in the first case can spare time to consult the teacher about the progress of their children once a while and can guide them if necessary. Thus, there has emerged an undesirable difference between the two classes. Consequently, it is established in rural areas as a proven fact to say that English is tough to study and understand despite the fact that English is the easiest language in the world to learn.

But it was also proved every now and then that the students from the second group also showed greater interest and expertise in the English Language Learning. The credit goes to the student and his teacher who was successful in inculcating curiosity among the students in spite of their financial irregularities and improper brought up. So, mere poverty cannot create a gulf between students and their English language efficiency.

The second major problem is the influence of mother tongue. Most of the students generally pursue their studies in their respective regional language. Because of lack of English learning atmosphere at their place of study and surrounding company, the learners develop poor skill in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English language. Even though the learner gets promoted to higher classes his standard in English is not being improved. Thus, a kind of phobia develops from the school level. Gradually, a gap between the learner and the class standard is being increased which effects his/her progress. Ultimately, the learner is deprived of his best opportunities.

Another important fact is that the methodology of English Language Teaching is bilingual or translation method. Because of poor knowledge of English language and to enable the student understand English properly, the teachers simply translate everything into their mother tongue and explain them in bilingual or translation method. Though this method offers them a sound knowledge in the content, it prevents them in acquiring communication abilities in English which has become the norm of the day. The teacher here plays more as a translator than a genuine English teacher. Hence, virtually, there is no much difference between a regional language teacher and an English teacher.

As an example, previously in the state of A.P.especially at Upper primary and Secondary levels which are very crucial to the learners to learn other than mother tongue, English was taught by any subject teacher except Telugu and Hindi irrespective of the specialization of the teacher in English language teaching. The English teachers at these levels are untrained and moreover, they are unaware of the current trends and techniques of ELT. The case with many of the private English medium schools in rural areas is no better than this. The situation is even worse with them. The teachers who teach English are those who persuaded their schooling in English medium and failed in Intermediate and so. The investigator doesn't consider this is the case with every organization, but with most of them. Definitely, these kinds of teachers make English as a nightmare for students and they instigate students to habituate by-heart method which deprives students' communication abilities in English. Thus, English appeared or was rather made as a dreadful demon or a dangerous monster for long years in Andhra Pradesh.

Another factor that aggravates this problem is students' lack of language exposure. The more we expose a student to a language the more he feels comfortable with it. Teachers teach English in their regional languages for the sake of convenience. In their preoccupation with covering the syllabus, the teachers rarely set apart any time for listening practice in the classroom. In this way students are confined to their syllabus only. A language can be learned only when one is willing to learn it with full involvement and practice, not mechanically. For this purpose the teachers should perfect their own speech by listening to standard spoken English. Constant practice and deliberate cultivation of good English is necessary for all teachers of English.

Consequently, English was taught ineffectively without following the specified rules and regulations about syntax, grammar, phonetics, etc., owing to lack of specialized and trained teachers of English to mould the students in the proper way and to make learners phobia free in English language. The reason for these unskilled English teachers may be the result of the Government new policy to strengthen English language teaching by a specialized teacher keeping in view the global requirements. Realizing the fact, so late, the Government of Andhra Pradesh introduced a special post called English Assistant on par with other Language Pundits and School Assistant posts in High Schools to teach exclusively English language up to X standard.

Further, most of the Indian languages are phonetic whereas English is a semi-phonetic language. To explain it, if we examine a regional language Telugu, it is spoken as it is written, and it is written as it is spoken. We speak Telugu stressing on each and every letter equally without leaving any letter silent or unstressed and without following any rising or falling tone. Because of the mother tongue influence, the learners at primary and secondary levels usually pronounce some English words like subtle, debris, giraffe, island, condemn, etc wrongly by stressing all the letters of the words. Similarly, they write spellings for some English words like tsunami, depot, lieutenant, knock, psychology, etc. wrongly as sunami, depo, leftnant, nock, sychology. There are number of words of the same kind which we come across in English language. This may be the main reason for not able to understand the pronunciation of Standard English speakers and also the accent of the foreigners.

Another probable reason is that the model of the final English examination paper. It has not been designed in a manner that it helps students to have an authority over English language; rather it makes the students to take it for granted. The examinations used to be mostly content oriented where the students were supposed to get by-heart the material supplied as it is without reading the textbook and preparing notes on their own. Thus, students were forced to adopt by-heart method. Their memory helps more than their intelligence and language skill during the time of examination. They simply reproduce the content which they get by-heart in the examination and soon after the exams are over the learners forget everything they get from by-heart. However, a little bit aspiration towards communication component is seen in the learners now.

It is the foremost duty of a language teacher at the school level to make the students aware of the importance of English for career-making and also help students to overcome the phobia of English developed with them over the years. If this is not done at the school level, it makes the task of the language teacher at the UG level more difficult.

There are primarily four skills involved in English language learning i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). The aim of teaching English should be to focus on the four language skills of a student: listening to and understanding spoken English: reading; and writing. Understanding their relative importance to the second language learner is the first step.

Listening Skill:

As we all aware, Listening is the first of four basic skills. A concentrated listener can be a good speaker. While listening, we have to pay attention to structure of the language, pronunciation, usage of vocabulary, tone and stress. There are different types of listening such as active listening, attentive listening, appreciative listening, biased listening, casual listening, comprehension listening, critical listening, content listening, etc., To improve listening skills the student should be exposed to standard English speakers. They are also trained to listen to spoken English coming to them directly from the teacher or from a pre-recorded audio/video source. Debates and discussions on channels like BBC, NDTV and CNN-IBN can be recorded and shown to the students. Many English learning websites have a plethora of such materials that can be used in classrooms. Considering the above, it can be understood that Listening is not just physically and mechanically recording data but it is an intricate process of interpretation.

The following points help to improve our listening skills:

- Listening is not a passive activity!
- Listening to unspoken fears, concerns moods and aspirations.
- Good listening requires great wisdom.
- Listen to others with respect and validation.
- Listen without thinking about we're going to respond.
- Be objectively critical.

Speaking Skill:

Speaking is a productive skill. It is a difficult skill to acquire and calls for intensive practice in favourable classroom conditions. Speaking is a scientific process. When we speak, different organs of our body get involved in the process. English is an aggressive language because air is blown out when English is spoken.

There are some fundamental elements which have a bearing on our spoken English. Just as in any other language, in English language also the sounds are fundamentally classified into two varieties, namely Vowels and Consonants. Vowels are those sounds that are articulated (produced) without any friction in mouth. Consonants are those that are articulated with some friction in the mouth. As has already been presented, 26 letters represent 44 sounds. The five letters- a, e, i, o, u represent 20 sounds and the rest of the letters (21) represent 24 sounds. This phenomenon gives rise to the spelling-pronunciation mismatch. Vowels and consonants are articulated in different ways. The way the sounds are articulated and the way the communication is processed are two sides of the same coin. Of course, both the aspects have their own significance.

The place of articulation and the manner of articulation for the Consonants and the level of the tongue and the lip structure for vowels are the most significant aspects of the speech sounds in any language. Since we are second language learners of English, an insight into those aspects makes us better users of the language. English language has a beauty in getting pronounced. The music is experienced particularly with the correct accentuation and intonation patterns.

Speech skills require correct pronunciation, stress and intonation. They also require use of word and sentence forms in meaningful contexts. Fluency and accuracy are the key aspects of spoken English. As the students from rural background have a very limited or no exposure to English, it becomes extremely difficult to acquire the speech skills at the UG level. Students are also not motivated to learn to speak English as it does not fetch marks for them in the examination; as a result, breaking the wall of resistance becomes a Herculean task for the UG teachers. The students are expected to acquire an insight into the phenomena discussed above in order to perceive the process of spoken expression in a scientific manner.

Reading Skill:

As *Sir Francis Bacon* says, "Reading makes a full man, Conference a ready man and Writing an exact man". People cannot become truly knowledgeable without being excellent readers. Reading is the most researched one and the least understood skill of all the skills. Many researchers made umpteen efforts to understand the intricacies involved in the process. Following are some of the points that one has to ponder over in order to improve one's ability to read faster and better:

- The current average speed
- Variance scale in the reading speed with different levels of familiarity with the given piece of writing.
- The number of spells of reading per day/per week/per month in the target language
- The average time frame for the spells of reading
- Problems being encountered
- The strategies of reading

There are many theories and postulations regarding the reading skill. Generally people read for various purposes. We can broadly classify them into two categories i.e. reading for pleasure and reading for information. When we read for pleasure, we may employ strategies that naturally suit us and even if we lose track of what is told in the presentation, we may not forego.

Reading habit is an indispensable tool in acquiring sound English. But unfortunately, students are withdrawing from this habit. Reading time has been substituted by internet, television, mobile phones and other visual distractions in vogue among students. Students are unaware of the pleasures of reading. Reading requires time, patience and perseverance. Reading develops concentration. Knowledge, absorbed through reading lasts forever in the memory as compared to other inputs. Through reading, a student grasps the intricacies of language in a natural way. Knowledge gained through reading sinks deep into the subconscious mind and is reflected naturally when we write and speak. Reading aloud in the classroom provides scope for improvement of oral skills. A teacher can develop reading habits among the students at the UG level. This can be done by motivating the students to read literature, carefully selected by the teacher in order to maintain their interest.

Writing Skill:

Writing is the most difficult skill to master. Writing serves as a mental discipline with attention to detail. Even students with constant listening and imitation speak English reasonably well; when it comes to writing they are helpless. The reason is that, at school level writing is not given as much importance as is bestowed on other language skills. It is the job of a teacher at the UG level to engage the students in writing assignments and chisel their writing skill through constant practice. Checking scripts and discussing mistakes individually can be an overtaxing job for a teacher but there is no other way to improve writing skills of a student. The job becomes easy if a teacher is able to generate interest in the student in creative writing.

As *Samuel Johnson* says, "The mental disease of the present generation is impatience of study". But unfortunately, because of adverse impact of electronic gadgets in modern days, the present generation is a little bit reluctant especially on the skills of reading and writing. The students are almost impatient of writing skill which leads them to be imperfect on spelling, punctuation, syntax and grammar.

All these four language skills should go hand in hand as all the skills are equally important. It is the job of a teacher to formulate his teaching strategy in order to teach all the four language skills in a balanced way. All the four language skills are dealt in a balanced way. The first requirement of our students after entering the portals of our university is oral communication. As they have to interact with other students, they need a common language to converse in. English becomes a necessity here. Students are encouraged to talk in English in their out of college hours also. Thus, the environment becomes conducive to learning English. Medium of instruction being English may cause some difficulty for students from rural background in the beginning but this direct and constant exposure makes them comfortable with this language after in due course.

Diffidence is the biggest hurdle in learning spoken English. It cannot be learned through books. It demands constant practice. Public speaking is the best tool to remove this weakness and infuse confidence among the students. For this end, the teachers give oral assignments to the students, such as speaking in the class on any topic of their choice for 3-4 minutes. We have found noticeable improvement in their confidence level and oral communication skills.

Oral communication is an integral part of the UG the prescribed syllabi. We have a variety of speaking activities in the UG syllabus like group discussion, facing interviews, pair work, public speaking and research paper writing and presentation skills. These activities not only improve language skills of students but also give them an incentive in the form of marks. We have a foyer talk forum in the university where students can volunteer to speak for 10-12 minutes in front of the entire assembly. A group of teachers train the students for these talks by conducting special coaching classes; they are also shown videos of great speeches by prominent world leaders; their gestures and mannerisms are also chiseled through practice. The well established Language labs have become instrumental in catering to the needs of the learners.

It has been observed that even those students, who can speak English well, commit mistakes while writing. The only reason is improper language training at the school level. To improve the skills, the department of English conducts remedial classes for needy students. These classes aim at improving their communication skills. To improve the writing skills, the students are given a topic to write a paragraph in about 250 words. The teacher checks the scripts and underlines the errors and gives them back to the student. Students spend time with their own scripts and try to identify and correct the mistakes themselves. Finally, the script is discussed by the teacher individually with the student in a group. As a result, students develop the habit of revision even those students who have a tendency to ignore revising their own composition. Handwriting is also an important component of writing skills which is completely ignored at all levels; students with bad handwriting are given cursive handwriting practice books to write and their progress is regularly monitored by the teachers. Individual attention is a must for the purpose.

This is an age of technology. This new generation of students likes a variety of electronic and digital gadgets at their disposal. They are not content with mere books and blackboard. They want change. To break the monotony of language learning through lecture method and to get their attention towards English language, audio-visual aids have been introduced in the classrooms. To encourage the students to improve their vocabulary, we make them play some interesting vocabulary games in the classroom using LCD projector. We also conduct vocabulary and grammar quizzes in the classroom.

Literature is another means to learn language. It can provide a perfect blend of pleasure and learning. The young and fertile minds of students are full of innovative ideas. Language skills give them the opportunity to give expression in their creativity in the form of poetry and prose. We encourage our students to write poetry and short stories. It not only gives them an opportunity to express themselves but also gives them a healthy writing practice.

The students of Andhra Pradesh have been tutored and trained well enough in reading and writing for long ages. But Listening and Speaking skills, which play a greater role in communication, have been neglected and ignored. Thus, our educational system lacks an important dimension. It enables the students to concentrate on reading and writing only. The final examination does also test them mainly on how good their memory is. The examinations are not language-oriented. Even parents are craving for marks than knowledge.

Consequently, result oriented teaching has been adopted in schools and colleges. Students are guided and specially trained to concentrate only on the areas where they can score better. Hence, they neglect the other two basic skills.

Listening is the one basic skill which makes speaking possible. Nobody can speak a language without listening to it. Even an infant starts speaking in a particular language after listening to it for many months. It is why an infant who is deaf by birth remains dumb too. Since he is not able to listen to, he cannot speak in it. Unless he listens to the standard and neutralized pronunciation with correct accent, he cannot speak properly. So, it is the first and foremost skill of all which are interlinked.

Thus, our young students are deprived of speaking abilities because they have not been properly guided in listening skill. This may be the proper reason why they have not been able to speak in English in a proper manner. They have become adept only at writing and reading of English. With the advent of Information Revolution or software booming in Andhra Pradesh a few years back and its impacts like highly perked opportunities in Multi Nation Companies, people came to recognize the importance of English language especially communication and soft skills. Communication in English has been playing a major role in business world too. Despite the marks and percentage, the communicative abilities fetched them opportunities. The people who were poor at their speaking skills were deprived of their wonderful chances of making their life beautiful. This is high time that the Government of Andhra Pradesh adopted this kind of curriculum to English language and communication skills effectively.

Impact of Practical system:

Keeping in view the increasing importance of English for existential and career purposes, the Andhra Pradesh State Council of Higher Education has introduced practical in teaching English language along with theory for the learners at undergraduate level stressing on Listening and Speaking skills in order to improve their communication skills and efficiency in English. The prescribed syllabus was well designed and entitled "*A Course in Listening and Speaking I & II*" for first and second year degree courses respectively. The syllabus for Degree students in all universities has been changed entirely where students are tested both on paper and in person. Their speaking and listening skills are nurtured with the help of audio and video devices. The paper has two parts as Theory and Practical. A proportionate syllabus is being taught through Practical for the first time at this level. The concept of Language Labs has also been introduced. The main objective of introducing this system is to make the learner speak freely and confidently with accurate pronunciation, stress and intonation by shedding inhibitions like phobia, shy feeling, inferiority complex, etc.,

The entire course of practical is divided into three parts i.e. Accuracy, Fluency and Listening Comprehension. Each part has a good mixture of listening and speaking activities.

- The first part familiarizes the learners with Phonemic symbols and their sounds. It also introduces the concepts of word stress, sentence stress and intonation. In this part, the learner is stressed on how accurately he/she is speaking. A neutralization of pronunciation is habituated. So that the learner is exposed to speak with accurate stress and intonation in return he/she understands others' pronunciation easily.
- The second part aims at how fluently and accurately the learner is speaking. In this part the importance is given to grammar and vocabulary. The learner is instructed how to use English for performing some of the basic communicative functions such as requesting, asking for information and seeking permission in academic, social and professional situations.

- The third part examines the comprehensive understanding ability of the learner. It stresses on how much information the learner assimilates by paying concentration and reproduces the same which he/she understands. It tests the ability of listening and assimilation of the learner.

The **significance of the study** can be detailed as follows:

- The study makes the learner confident in speaking fluently and accurately without any fear or inhibitions.
- The learner is exposed to standardized /neutralized pronunciation, stress & intonation and accent so that he can easily understand the pronunciation of any person from all over the world.
- As it is completely related to learner-centered method, the student pays much more attention towards the contents and gets attracted by indulging actively in it.
- The learner is motivated to confront boldly in conversation with persons of different mother tongue which in turn leads to develop his/her own personality and the level of self confidence.
- The learner is enthusiastic to learn English so that the overall attendance of the class is gradually improved.
- He/she gets enhanced his/her comprehensive ability by listening much concentrated and ready to respond queries posed by his/her counterpart.
- The learner is not reluctant to confront any foreigner so that he/she is exposed to novel carrier opportunities.
- The modified practical system increases the competency of the learner to exchange his/her ideas and developments in the respective fields.
- The system makes the learner participate in group discussions, debates, elocution competitions/quizzes, presentation at seminars, question and answer sessions, interaction classes etc.

Basing on the study of the practical syllabi of undergraduate colleges in Andhra Pradesh, a questionnaire has been prepared and a pilot survey has been conducted to assimilate the impact of the system. As part of the study of the problem, the following are some of my investigations regarding the introduction of practical at undergraduate level.

Findings:

- As the syllabi are designed based on practical orientation, well equipped language laboratories with competent trainers are required.
- Because of the influence of the mother tongue, the learners need to get accustomed to the new system.
- In order to habituate the neutralization of pronunciation, the learner takes time to expose him/ her to the new one and he/she requires that kind of environment around him.
- As the practical system is new to the learners and they are from rural and poor background, the learner requires similar instruction at the previous levels also.
- As limited number of undergraduate colleges have well-equipped language labs, the rest of the colleges are required to establish the labs.
- The undergraduates of distance education and private study are not extended the facility.
- All the four language skills are simultaneously practiced and enhanced.
- Through the new system, student talk time (STT) is increased than teacher talk time (TTT).
- Competitive spirit to speak fluently and accurately is developed among the learners.
- Those who acquire proficiency of English languages are twice blessed in the present days of communication and globalization.
 - The system does not make its impact on learners where necessary and adequate facilities are not available.
- Special training should be offered to the lecturers who take up these practical classes.
- Through the impact of practical system, the learners could improve their communication skills.

- As their confidence levels are increased by indulging thoroughly in activities, the learners shed their inhibitions such as fear of public speaking, stage fear, inferiority complex, shivering, fumbling, phobia etc.
- The traditional method of getting by heart has been transformed so that the student could easily read and understand contents in turn able to transform the same in his/ her original style of language.
- Previously, due to lack of interest over the lesson or low understanding capabilities, the student attendance to the regular classes was inadequate.
- This system, being student centered increased interest among them, has improved their enthusiasm and zeal to learn English language. Gradually, they started coming to classes regularly.
- Having involved in oral practice mostly, the learners are in a position to speak in English fluently and accurately.
- As they are confident enough, they are very much interested to participate in competitions like debate, elocution, essay writing in English version.
- Above all, the pass percentage in English subject has been increased particularly in B.A; & B.Com; courses.
- It is closely observed that this system encouraged the students to develop English language environment in most of the colleges.

CONCLUSION

This new way of teaching has been appreciated and welcomed by every teacher, student and parent. The students are more enthusiastic and exciting to learn things in this new way. Instruction has been changed from teacher-centric to student-centric. We cannot manage language teaching at the UG level in isolation from language teaching at school. A lot depends on the kind of language training a student receives from his school. Today, the UG teachers are only doing remedial English and trying to make up for faulty school education. Though the job is more difficult and challenging; it is at the same time creative. A doctor cannot give the same medicine to all the patients; he has to treat every patient according to his ailment. Similarly the UG language teacher teaches the students with multiple methods according to their levels. He has to treat everyone, as a separate case to be treated differently. We need patience, time and necessary skill to guide every student. There is urgent need to formulate an integrated language course from the primary to the Undergraduate level. The School Boards, the APSCE and the HRD have to work together in this mission. These bodies, in collaboration with English and Foreign Languages University, can organize healthy state-wide competitions such as spell-bee and essay writing competitions to promote language skills among the students. This coordination can help the students and equip them with all the skills required to face the world with courage and confidence.

This concept encouraged and helped student to talk in the class. He can actively participate in the class room activities with his/her peer group. The teacher's role is mostly as facilitator. The lecture method has been replaced. Fortunately, it started working positively. The students' level of understanding English enhanced slowly with this mammoth effort. The students are gradually picking up the ability of speaking in English within a less time. Year by year a drastic change is seen in learners attracting the new system. They are coming forward to indulge actively in it. The learners are bold to express their thoughts without any hesitation. This method of learning English is suitable and more appropriate even to the average rural students of Andhra Pradesh.

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