



CHANGING PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to discuss the change of perspectives in English Language Teaching in India. In the age of Globalization, English has earned the status of International Language. At the same time, the countries world over have accepted its role as an International Language and making necessary modifications in their education system to develop English Competency. The discussion of ELT in India examines the challenges of dealing with uncertain policies, improper pedagogy, multi-lingual backgrounds of learners, teacher empowerment. It also presents the kind of changes to be brought about in terms of method, teaching materials and teacher training to make ELT more effective and successful.

INTRODUCTION

English Language Teaching has been an area of potential challenges and it has only become more complex in the 21st Century. With the spread of English Language across the world, Globalization, Information and Technology, as well as Communication being the key words in the path of progress, the language projected to be the medium of the same enjoys great importance. The English Language Teaching situation in India too has been a testimony to the transition that English language has gone through in the past few decades.

As Braj B. Kachru in his work, 'The Indianization of English', points out through the image of Three Concentric Circles of Englishes, the use of English language has been varied in the countries that belong to the

1. Inner Circle (USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand)
2. Outer circle (India, Nigeria, Singapore, Kenya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Zambia, etc.) and the
3. Expanding circle (China, Egypt, Japan, Nepal, South Africa, South America etc.)

Kachru's Concentric Circles of English



The issue of World Englishes was first raised in 1978 to examine concepts of regional Englishes globally. Pragmatic factors such as appropriateness, comprehensibility and interpretability justified the use of English as an international and intra-national language. In 1988, at a Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, the International Committee of the Study of World Englishes (ICWE) was formed. In 1992, the ICWE formally launched the International Association for World Englishes (IAWE) at a conference of "World Englishes Today", at the University of Illinois, USA. There is now an academic journal devoted to the study of this topic, titled *World Englishes*. Globalization has changed the perspectives of English Language Teaching in different countries.

The Indian sub-continent houses many states and diversity of cultures making it a pot powry of languages. After Independence, the Indian government has recognized fourteen major languages as official languages, (to mention a few, Hindi, considered the national language, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Gujrathi, Bengali, Kashmiri etc). In each of the thirty states of India, English is the second language and the lingua franca in India. Therefore, even within the country, English operates in multiple variants with the influence of the local mother tongues.



The focus of this paper is on the changing perspectives of teaching English in India. The Teaching of English in India began as one of the components of the Three Language Formula in the post -independent Indian Education system. The Primary and the Secondary Education system consider English, a second language. The medium of Higher Education is predominantly English and it is set in the multi-lingual and pluri-cultural context of India, compounding the challenges. This paper converges on the English learning scenario at the under-graduate level.

The status of English is that of a second language in India, making it the most used language across the country, bridging the multi-lingual states. But the average competence of a learner at the under graduate level is extremely diverse and different. It is also due to the fact that the democratized education system in India comprises of Government/State run, Aided institutions where English is taught as a second language and Private institutions, which offer it as the first language. The heterogeneity becomes the norm in all aspects of learning situation.

When the trajectory of English Language Education in India is traced, one discovers the multiplicity present in it. It is also evident that, with conflicting factors of policy and pedagogy, i.e. controversy of the medium of education, plethora of methods, multi-lingual backgrounds, different approaches and methods as well as divergent teaching materials, ELT situation in India is the most complex one.

The teaching of English at the graduate and post graduate levels focuses on literature in most of the colleges and Universities. In the recent years, there appears to be a paradigm shift from literature to language learning owing to status of English as an 'International' language and the need of the 'awakened' learner.

Although, nationality and cultural identity issues resist the growth of English in India for socio-cultural and political reasons, its role as an International Language is more than accepted and celebrated too. The growing importance of English for international communication and its status as an additional language within the country getting strengthened in the age of ICT, have created an unprecedented demand for English language learning. The demand is such that innumerable English Language training centres have come up in major cities of the country, offering programs starting from 3months to 3 years.

To further understand the phenomenon, the use of English language for the purposes of education, commerce, science and technology, social dialogues and more than ever in the field of Information Technology has only magnified the picture. International dialogues do necessitate cross cultural understanding, thereby making English an intercultural language as well.



As English has to be considered as an ‘International’ and ‘Intercultural’ language, the dynamics of teaching it also undergoes a change. The change in terms of the model of English to be taught, the study material to be designed, the method adopted for teaching—every aspect for that matter deserves serious consideration.

To start with, which English is the right model of English for learning? Is it British, American, Australian, Indian or None! As Randolph Quirk (1995) says, ‘Nuclear English’ would be an artificial variety and even the native speakers will have to learn it afresh. With the multiplicity of mother tongues and plurality of cultures, the ‘Nuclear Norm’ may also get distorted. In the context of India, existing number of languages can only add to the complexity. Given the status and prestige of the standard native-speakers’ variety of English, it can be accepted as the target form. In the production of the discourse, spoken mode holds more challenges compared to the written mode as well, with the inherent problems of accent and intonation.

The material design for learning English as an International language has to be broad based, accommodate a variety of texts and from different parts of the world. It has to follow the inclusive approach rather than euro-centric approach. Inclusion of different Genres, forms and mediums, like classical texts, contemporary texts, popular culture books, films, documentaries, television shows, journals and magazines could make it both educative and entertaining.

The Methodology or the method of teaching also deserves a debate here, because of the divergent contexts in which English teaching exists. No single method may be considered the ‘magical’ or successful method for teaching English. Even though scholars and researchers believe that the complexity and diversity of language learning contexts have led to, a ‘Post-Method’ condition or a ‘beyond methods’- situation. Identifying the practices and strategies employed by teachers in their divergent contexts are said to reflect the local needs and demands on the language. The use of learners’ mother tongue or regional language with English for teaching can become the norm making it ‘Inter-lingual Method’. On the other hand, it is also an act of acknowledging the realistic ELT situations in non-native contexts. Having been in the field of ELT for over two and a half decades, watching the upheavals in the status of English language, I do feel it is now that we are able to arrive at the right approach towards it, with the contextualization of the issue.

The Russian Scholar Victoria V. Safonova (1996) has introduced a Socio-cultural approach to teaching modern languages, which she describes as ‘teaching for intercultural L2 communication in a spirit of peace and dialogue of Cultures’. (p.62) She also advocates intercultural communicative education as a part of language education.



The Statement of Philosophy of the project 'Goals 2000' in the United States representing the five different goal areas known as the 'Five Cs'—Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities. 'Language and Communication are at the heart of human experience', the United States must educate students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American Society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which all students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical. Children who come from non-English backgrounds should also have opportunities to develop proficiencies in their first language'.

This statement represents the holistic and communicative approach to language learning defying the notion of language competence consisting of only four skills of language—Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. At the same time it also upholds the importance of mother tongue of the learner. It emphasizes the socio-cultural features of language and views culture as an integral part of a language.

Further, the transition in the role and functions of English do carry implications for ELT syllabus and material design. To predict the future of English, mother tongues will have a great influence, 'New Englishes' could be adopted as models of learning, knowledge of different cultures may become more important. Realistic approach to language learning may make it less prescriptive and more academic and occupational in its ends, making it a language used for a specific purpose.

To cope with the transition of the status of English, certain changes and modifications are warranted in the ELT situation, in the country. At present, there is a gap between the teacher education/training and the reality in the classroom. The essential objective in teaching English at under graduate or post graduate levels, seems to be appreciation of literature, (drawing mainly from the British and American writers) which in no way equips a teacher to teach the language based on the needs of the learner. When a teacher is taught literature, very little of ELT methodology and no applied linguistics, he/she becomes an ambitious teacher who finds it hard to break the norm. Insufficient training and education in the aspects of language make him/her nervous of studying a language topic. This creates a situation where a literature specialist teaches aspiring language learners, teaching more of literary appreciation skills rather than language skills required, completes the vicious circle. This development also defies all sense and logic, because as we all know, when a learner is equipped with language skills, appreciation of literature can be a natural consequence of his/her learning. Like Speech preceding Writing in the evolution of language, competence in the language certainly is a pre-requisite to the appreciation of literature. Moreover, literary appreciation cannot be forced on learners who are piteously unable to construct even simple sentences in the language.



Secondly, inclusion of technology in language education, to some extent, is also seen as an unnecessary and superficial component. It is also viewed from the apprehensive point of view of the machines replacing teachers. The teacher's inadequacy of computer skills may deprive the learners of the online resources of learning. This general outline of the ELT situation in India and may apply to many other countries as well. Therefore the objectives of the teacher education in language have to be reviewed, to make the language education more relevant to the needs of the learners, in keeping with the demands of the age of Information, Communication and Technology.

To quote, Sandra Savignon, Professor Emerita of Applied Linguistics, Penn State University, USA 'The empowerment of language teachers as both Practitioners and theory builders is essential in addressing the language needs of the next generation learners'.

The future of ELT is seriously linked with the use of English as a global language and other languages in any country across the world. There has to be a connection between the role and function of English in society, needs of the specific learners, the language policy and implementation of the modified norms in language teaching.

In a society where both knowledge and skills become extremely important, language skills become predominant to exact any academic or non-academic interaction. With the status of English as the International or Global language, it is necessary that the policy makers, pedagogical experts and the professional teachers join hands to revamp the system to deliver goods.

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What's Ahead?