



## TEACHING / LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN INDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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### ABSTRACT

*The teaching of English in India dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and was initially associated with the energetical spirit of the missionaries. English is the Elite class language, but learning and teaching, language is faced with many problems ranging from rural and underdeveloped areas to mother tongue interference, psychological fear, etc.. The purpose of this paper is to explore and describe the problems, prospects and future of learning and teaching of English in India. The paper highlights the challenges which English Language learners and teachers face and equally offers solutions. Essentially, effective teaching and learning of English will be realistic only when both the learned and learner demonstrate readiness to pay the sacrifices for its attainment*

**Key words-** teaching , learning, English Language

### INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English in India dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and was initially associated with the energetical spirit of the missionaries. The European languages arrived in India with the discovery of the sea route to the subcontinents by Vasco da Gama 11-1-1498. The influx began with the Portuguese and the French, who later surrendered political power to the British. Through the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries the British quietly devoted themselves to the gathering of information about India, and once that was done, they arrived in India with full vengeance and drove out all European competition very soon. Where the British were qualitatively different from the Portuguese is that while the latter language became a *lingua franca* wherever the Portuguese set-up shop, English never interacted with the Indian languages in the same way, did not go through the process of creolization and decreolisation and remained more or less an elite phenomenon..

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The East India Company entered the picture when the Charter Act of 1813 made the Company responsible for the education of the Indians. It was at this stage that the issue of the medium of education took center stage. These early attempts at English language teaching in India were overshadowed by political compulsions. The efforts of the pro English lobby culminated in Macaulay's *Minutes* of 1853. Macaulay's *Minutes* of 1835 advocating English education in India reflects this limited perception of the rulers and their imperial design. Despite protests from vernacularists and orkntalists, .Lord Bentick accepted this proposal and directed all finds to be employed in imparting to the native population knowledge of English literature and science in the English language. Lord Auckland resolved the issue once and for all in- favour of the English .(1839). Lord Hardinge contributed his bit to the controversy by promising jobs only to those trained in English.

English became the most popular medium of instruction but existing facilities for oriental and vernacular education also continued. But obviously they did not enjoy the same status as English man, while Persian continued in the Lower Courts, in the Higher Courts English continued. Language thus became a marker of social differentiation and the British rulers consciously tried to promote English to a position of prestige. This led to sharp divisions in the population between the English educated elite, the vernacular educated and the illiterate masses. The elite by virtue of their closer links with the rulers became absolutely alienated from the masses. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has pointed out, the consolidation of the English language in India coincided with the consolidation of the colonial power in India. Learners were introduced to a literary cannon comprising Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats, and the likes that were presented as the finest in literature. A shelf of these books was said to be worth all the literatures of the orient. So the net result of this brain washing was that, irrespective of whether Indians had knowledge of their vernacular literature or not, every educated Indian swore by this cannon, a fallacy which continued till very recently. To take care of its elite nature a series of reforms were introduced by the Morley-Minto Reforms (1909), the Montague-Chelmsford Report (1917) and the Calcutta University Commission recommendations (1919), but neither the English language nor the English model of education reached the masses.

Although, English Language has been adopted as an official language in India, the learners still face difficulties learning it for many reasons. A chief reason is the fact that every Indian is endowed with his or her mother tongue but compelled to learn in second language or English .The teaching of English in the world today has become very challenging with the boom in information technology and the attendant fast pace with which pieces of knowledge are transferred from one place to another. From my daily experience as a practicing teacher of English in the university, I can say that I have serious apprehensions as to the emergent

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trends of the English language teaching and use in my country. To speak and write presentable English one needs to cultivate the skills such as (a) listening (b) speaking (c) reading and (d) writing.

Listening is often ignored but yet a very important in learning English. Active learner requires the listener to understand, interpret and evaluate what is being said. Listening is different from hearing. One has to make a conscious effort to become an effective listener. One must listen without any biases and prejudices and be open to the views of other people. The reason for poor listening includes unavailability of listening training, mismatch between the speed of thought and speech and inefficient listening. Speaking is an important requirement not only in our academic and professional career, but also in our personal life. Our confidence, clarity and fluency are vital for the effectiveness in our speaking. As our paralinguistic features such as our voice quality, pitch, rate and volume, pauses, modulation etc. play a important role in speaking. Thus, listening and speaking complement each other. It is important to learn and practice how to start conversation, how to carry it on effectively and efficiently and how to end it smoothly.

Reading is one of the most academic tasks faced by students. Just the purpose of active listening is to make sense what you hear, the purpose of reading is to make sense out of what you read. Interpretation of what one reads is a very subjective matter. Again, this depends on one's own perception of concepts, background and reading ability and experience.

Learning to read and write is a process of experiencing language Harold Rosen (1981), writing about a school curriculum project on writing in Britain, explained it in this way:

The writer is a lonely figure cut off from the stimulus and corrective pressure of listeners. He must be a predictor of reactions and act on his predictions. He writes with one hand tied behind **his** back, being robbed of gesture. He is robbed too of the tone of his voice and the aid of clues the environment provides. He is condemned the monologue; there is no one to help out, to fill the silences, put words in his mouth, or *make encouraging noises*.

It is these demands which present particular problems to foreign writers of English. Even those who are proficient writers in their first language have to acquire a wide language base from which to make these choices. They may also find that confusing difference exist between the conventions of writing in their first language and English. For example, the level of formality or patterns of presenting information in letters may differ, or the accepted method of setting out arguments in discursive writing may vary. A teacher needs to be sensitive to all these factors when our learners attempt their writing tasks.



However, the figure oversimplifies matters because, although writing in general involves these stages, the process of composition is not a linear one, moving from planning to composing to revising and to editing. It would be more accurate to characterize writing as a *recursive activity* in which the writer moves backwards and forwards between drafting and revising, with stages of replanning in between. If the writing process is to develop naturally, then it is important to allow some mother tongue usages until such time as when a child has enough mastery over the second language to not require the mother tongue. The policy of "speak in English only" is not found to be conducive to learning naturally. The transition is Gradual, and if we do not allow children to use the mother tongue we might completely block the children from being able to express themselves. We need to facilitate the transition by providing suitable vocabulary or structures, as well as motivating children by creating a real need to communicate in the second language. This can be done by providing a secure and stimulating natural environment for language learning.

The major challenges are faced by students coming from:

- i. Rural and Underdeveloped areas
- ii. Tribal background
- iii. Economically backward society
- iv. Uneducated families

Learning a foreign language may not be butter and bread experience due to languages peculiarities and distinctiveness. No matter the similarities, two languages are not utterly the same thing. Learners of English as a second language find its learning difficult because the sudden break from a familiar language to a non –familiar one can be difficult, thus various errors ranging from phonetical error to syntactic, morphological to semantic errors etc. are committed. Some of the problems are highlighted below:

First of all, students learn basic grammar at school level for the purpose of passing only in the tests and in the examinations and not to face any real life situations. Application-oriented advanced grammar is not taught in schools. Furthermore, adequate practice is not given to students to learn a language. It is obvious that students only read to pass English language but are not totally committed to its mastery; probably because learners are only taught and expect to regurgitate the experience rather than allowing them to self -discover the intricacies involved in English Language.

Second English language learners experience a mother tongue interference phenomenon which deals with the problems a learner encounters when he transfers the acquired skills in his native or indigenous language (L1) to his second language (L2). The problems can be



syntactic (grammatical), phonological (mispronunciation), semantic or morphological and most of the students do not have the opportunity to undertake advanced reasoning tasks. Phonetically, learners of English as a second language find it difficult to pronounce certain English words because the sounds are absent from their native languages. Examples are dental sounds in thin, this and/ in them, that etc. ; and also palato-alveolar fricative sound /ʒ/ in measure, pleasure etc. Syntactically, the students employ plurality to honour elders. A very important challenge confronting learners of English as a second language is students' fearful attitude towards the use and usage of English especially in the presence of a competent user. Sometimes, it is humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that Language. They would naturally assume that ,one had no language of one's own. Speaking English requires a measure of confidence and readiness, however, if a speaker feels inadequate to speak it, it may lead to incoherence and incorrect expressions. To quote Kapoor, "Now the failure in teaching English as a second language stems not from the theory, training and mechanics of language teaching, but from the intrinsic conceptual inappropriateness in accepting English as a second language, L2, pedagogically and linguistically. Analyzing the issue further, he says that English certainly is not useful in our day to day life. This, in fact, is the main problem of teaching English in India. Being a foreign language, it cannot function as a second language; but it has been uniformly imposed as L2 all over the country. What is more, when one looks at the functions, goals and instructional objectives, it is evident that English is to be taught as L2. To agree with Kapoor, all the Indian students study English as one of the Indian languages; and therefore, are not able to achieve any competence. All the remedial courses, U.G.C sponsored institutes, use of technology, audio cassettes, the language laboratory, radio, TV, reviews of syllabi, testing, error analysis has not helped in improving students' standards in any way. The standard of English has always fallen short of even the minimum level, except in certain cases.

The teaching of English in India has always been in difficult circumstances. Firstly, many teaching/ learning materials like — good textbooks, workbooks, and handbooks for teachers, TV, radio, charts or other useful visual material — are essential for effective teaching. Unfortunately many teachers and students are not provided with these materials. Hence, sometimes the teaching and learning becomes more imaginative than practical Good teachers of English are found in very small number in India. Even if they are trained, they are trained by the teachers of English in India but not by the native speakers. Thirdly, Methods are not appropriate. The oral work which is the soul of any method is totally neglected. Lack of motivation, faulty examination system and large classes are other examples.

Because of these challenges, the standard of English in India is gracefully low. Hence, lot of responsibility is left for English teachers to make their classes interesting and learning



fruitful. Against this background, we need to find a solution to these challenges. If the solution are sought for, it is realized that they are not in the hands of the teachers. But theses challenges can be turned as opportunities and teachers can become resourceful. Open ended activities can improve the quality if the ESL classes. Open ended activities are suggested as a means to differentiate instruction by allowing

There is a general craze for 'convent education' and this type of education has remained the exclusive privilege of the rich. Again, without exception the standard of English teaching in Indian schools (with the exception of a few elite schools) has fallen dramatically, chiefly because infrastructure has not been able to keep up with the exploding number of students. But the role and importance of English in the Indian society continues to rise unhindered. Vernacular and mother tongue education continue to be neglected. Thus, while Hindi remains the 'official' language, English continues to rule the roost. Problems caused by this phenomenon are indeed difficult to resolve.

Because of these challenges, the standard of English in our country is disgracefully low. Hence, a lot of responsibility is left for English teachers to make their classes interesting and fruitful learning. Against this background, we need to find a solution to these challenges. If the solution are sought for, it is realized that they are not in the hands of the teachers.these challenges can be turned opportunities and teachers can become resourceful. Open ended activities certainly can improve the quality of ESL class.

Open ended activities are suggested as a means to differentiate instruction by allowing students to work at their own rules, use their preferring learning styles, investigate their own interest and produce work commensurate with their abilities. Teachers could give all students the same activity, and quality of instruction, with the differentiation occurring in the children's response, reflective of their abilities and interests. Differentiating learning experience through learner responses may be a powerful instructional strategy for maintaining both challenges and democratic principles in the class. The alignment of learner characteristics with features of their learning experience is fundamental principles of differentiated instruction.

To put the idea in nutshell, the role of activities is providing autonomy to learners which means making use of the capacity of being responsible for own learning process with the help of the available resources. In such situation, the syllabus is negotiated between learners and the teacher with –self instruction, self direction and individualization. It is therefore recommended that English learners must be extensive readers. Teachers must reward efforts of learners so as to motivate their struggle to acquire the language skills. Government as a matter of priority should make available necessary facilities that will empower teaching and

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learning of English. Parents should arouse the interest of their wards by providing needed materials and conducive learning and studying environment at homes.

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