

Problems of Teaching English in Rural and Semi-urban Areas

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Introduction

In our country with a population of more than 1.25 billion and with 18 official regional languages, English enjoys the status of associate official language at the national level. Moreover, with the advent of globalization, there has been a big increase in ELT in colleges, universities and other institutes all over the country. Today, proficiency in English is being increasingly seen as a sine qua non for upward social mobility and lucrative job prospects. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the number of students aspiring to attain proficiency in

English is growing exponentially. But whether our colleges and institutes are really well equipped to teach English to such teeming millions, specially to those hailing from semi-urban and rural backgrounds and whether appropriate methodologies have been developed by our pedagogues in this regard, is a moot question.

Problems and Challenges

In such a scenario, teaching English as a second language to non-native speakers poses a peculiar set of challenges to the teacher of English because these students

come from diverse backgrounds, they have different levels of comprehension, different levels of attention span, different psychological needs and different economic and socio-cultural backgrounds. This challenge acquires an added dimension when we take into account the teaching of English to students hailing from rural and semi-urban areas. Teaching English to these students is quite a daunting task for the teacher, as most of these students are first generation English language learners; their socio-cultural milieu is totally different; they face the impediment of L1 interference which acts as a barrier to their attaining fluency in English. The rural students particularly suffer from 'experiential deficiencies' (Cope et al., 2014) which gradually results in what is known as 'involvement gap': gap between what a rural student perceives as his life experiences and what is taught in the class room. This paper, while discussing all these problems, would also suggest some strategies, tools and methodologies useful for teaching English in rural and semi-urban areas.

One of the biggest hurdles in teaching English as a second language to non-native speakers, as stated above, is what is known as L1 interference, that is, the interference of the learner's mother tongue. We all know that when a child learns his mother tongue, his mind is a clean slate. He learns his mother tongue in a very natural, spontaneous way. But when he has to learn a second language in school or college, the influence of his mother

tongue is so deeply embedded in his consciousness that he cannot shake it off. So far as learning English as a second language is concerned, the problem is further complicated for the learner because the English language is very different from most of the Indian languages in sentence pattern. In English, the sentence pattern is SVO 'that is, subject-verb objects, whereas in most of Indian languages, it is SOV, that is, subject-object-verb. Moreover, the Indian languages are phonetic, that is, the words are pronounced as they are spelt but in English there is no one to one correspondence between written and spoken words, such as in words like *budget, psychology, listen* etc. In Indian languages, the verb changes according to gender/ number but in English it is not so. In Indian languages, the adjective is modified according to gender but in English it is not so. Since almost all rural students learn English (as compared to their urban counterparts) at a comparatively late stage in their schooling, they find it more difficult to adapt to the different pattern of English language.

Another major problem faced by English teachers in teaching English to students coming from semi urban and rural backgrounds is that their socio-cultural milieu is totally different from the one they find in the class room and the college. They feel alienated in this different environment. So far they have not had any opportunity to interact with individuals fluent in English language; their verbal interaction has been in their

regional/ native language only. They are familiar with their regional ethos and culture. Hence when they are exposed to English culture through their reading of English text books wherein 80% content is that of non- Indian authors, they feel that these texts do not reflect their own experiences, hence they are unable to connect with the same. This disconnect is caused by their 'experiential deficiency.' Moreover, a vast majority of these students come from poor families. Due to poverty they have not had access to good schooling; they are by and large unaware of the value and significance of a good English education as a gateway to a bright future. This factor also adds to their general apathy in trying to acquire mastery of English language. These students are also saddled with one more handicap, that is, their psychological inhibition in speaking English. It has been generally observed that a good number of such students are quite good in comprehending the meaning of an English text but when it comes to speaking English, they are tongue-tied. They are afraid that if they speak wrong English, they would be jeered at. This fear of a possible failure inhibits them so much that they usually talk in monosyllables. Such students suffer from low self esteem. Naturally they pose a big challenge to the teacher who has to cover an extra mile in raising the confidence and motivation level of such students.

Most of the schools located in the rural and semi urban areas have quite poor

infrastructure in terms of school building, class rooms, library, reading room, auditorium etc. Many schools don't even have class rooms: classes are held under open sky. Students who receive education in schools having such poor infrastructure naturally fail to come up with the level of those students who have had access to a very good school education in urban areas. A student studying in a very good public school having latest ICT gadgets is naturally at a higher level when he enters college than a rural student with no exposure to these learning tools. Teaching English to such 'disadvantaged' students is really an uphill task for a teacher.

Another challenge before a teacher of English is lack of proper teaching aids such as computers, LCD, OHP, smart boards, well equipped language lab where students can hone their listening and speaking skills. Language labs have different modules where students can practice context based conversation, such as how to answer a telephone call, how to greet one's friends/ seniors, how to apologize for any inconvenience caused to others, how to make enquiries in a bank, post office or railway station, how to make a request, so on and so forth. In the absence of such useful teaching aids, the teacher is left with only the traditional method of teaching, i. e. lecture method. Naturally, such a methodology fails to enthuse or motivate the learner. Moreover, in English language teaching in our country, there is more emphasis on conceptual content as compared to stylistic

content which is another reason for students' poor command over English. "English language teaching in India... has suffered a lot, so much so that our students who pass intermediate or degree examinations with English...can neither speak nor write correct English, may be because the emphasis in our schools and colleges has always been on the conceptual content and the stylistic content has been neglected so far" (Sharma 1999, p. 91). As regards the issue whether English should be taught through emphasis on language only, or literature is a better medium to teach English: no clear cut approach has been finalized by the pedagogues. The result is that it is each teacher is to his/her own.

It is evident from the above analysis that there are problems galore in teaching English to students in rural and semi-urban areas, or to students hailing from semi-urban or rural areas. There is no denying the fact that identifying the problems is always easier than providing the solutions: still the fact remains that these problems can be reduced, if not eliminated altogether, if the following methodologies and strategies are adopted by the teachers of English.

Solutions

Adopting the dialogic approach

Instead of using only the lecture method wherein the teacher does all the talking and the students are merely passive listeners, if a teacher adopts a dialogic

approach, it will generate more interest among students and they would feel more involved, more eager to learn.

Encouraging students

In response to the teacher's question, if a student ventures an answer, even if it is in wrong English, such a student should be encouraged, so that he feels motivated. Negative comments by the teacher like "Don't you know even this?", "Your English pronunciation is horrible!" etc could be the biggest demotivators for such disadvantaged learners who already suffer from a very low self esteem due to their poor background.

Giving them more time to answer

Generally, it is seen that the teachers do not give sufficient time to slow learners to reply. As they start framing their answer in slow, incoherent English, the teacher's patience is exhausted and he moves on, either supplying the answer himself or okaying the answer provided by the smarter students. The teacher too is hard pressed to complete the syllabus, hence such fine psychological points are usually missed.

Giving primacy to oral work in the classroom

A teacher should act more as a facilitator, rather than as a stern teacher, an omniscient authority. He should facilitate a substantial amount of co operative work, including peer editing among students.

Empowering students

If the teacher sits down with the students and encourages them to speak, the students would feel empowered, they would consider themselves to be a part of the decision making process. Making students speak among themselves maximizes student's participation in the learning process and minimizes the teacher's role.

Contextualizing and localizing the content and style

Contextualizing and localizing the content as well as style of ELT is very important for a teacher of English. Teaching is a very dynamic activity wherein the teacher has to constantly adapt his approach to the specific requirements of the students. If the teacher can create local contexts while teaching English, the students would feel the texts as alive, as part of their daily experiences.

Conclusion

To sum up, teaching English in semi-urban and rural areas or to students of rural background is undoubtedly a daunting task for the teacher. The real

challenge for him/ her is to bring such students from a state of alienation, frustration and resignation to that of involvement and motivation. For this a teacher has to be really full of perseverance and patience. Moreover, instead of adopting the run of the mill, clichéd approach to teaching, a teacher should adopt a dynamic approach; he should innovate and improvise, make teaching a collaborative activity in which students are equal partners in the teaching-learning process. Coupled with this shift in teaching methodology, if the teacher can effectively use the other resources such as multimedia and CALL, teaching English as a second language would certainly yield rich dividends, both to the teacher and to the student.

References

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ELTAI ESP SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP (SIG)

Those who are interested in joining this Special Interest Group of ours are requested to contact

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