

Teaching-Learning Theories, Classroom Practices and Learning Outcomes: The Case of English Teaching in India

Simon G. Bernabas

Associate Professor, PG Department of English, Ahmednagar College, Ahmednagar, Maharashtra

E-mail : s_barnabas@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

India was 'fortunate' enough to introduce English teaching almost at the same time as the language began to be taught in England. Since then, our country has never lagged behind in importing the teaching-learning theories developed abroad. While the argument for and against the introduction and teaching of English is still raging, India has consistently produced, for nearly two centuries, a very large number of English-literate people with highly-varying degrees of proficiency in the language. The vast differences in proficiency is really alarming, according to serious educationists, researchers, academics and surveys. It appears that for most centers of education in our country, the teaching of this language has become a ritual. This is not to underestimate the commendable progress that some educational institutions, far away from metropolitan areas, are making in imparting the four basic skills of English, especially through a judicious use of multimedia technology, to the students. Some of the issues that the present paper raises are: Does the main cause of the decline of English teaching in India rest on poor teaching-learning methodology? Why do we find vast differences in the classroom practices of teaching English? Do we need to blame the teaching-learning theories adopted in our country from time to time or do we have to blame the shifting language planning processes that clearly suggest political inclinations and partisanship? And, lastly, should we focus entirely on the teaching of skills or should we also consider English as a means for students' empowerment?

Introduction

The subject of English teaching in India has always been mired in controversies. Broadly speaking, there have been two factions continuously engaging in debates concerning the teaching of English in India.

Thus the first group of scholars has favoured the teaching of literature for its own sake or for cultural empowerment. This group has consistently challenged the efforts of the second group of academics and researchers who have advocated a more language-

oriented theory, known as the language through literature theory. This conflict of ideas does not seem to have affected a large number of students in India; for them, what is being taught is of primary importance.

The current argument about learning English has been that the privileged have always used English effectively for their own advantage while a very large number of students, even after studying the language for 10-15 years, gain neither linguistic proficiency nor cultural empowerment. One question is likely to arise here: Haven't they become more conscious of their rights and spaces on the campus? The answer is that that awareness is mostly an outcome of the interventions of media and their correspondents and, to some extent, of political parties rather than the result of teaching English texts. Let me also add that other disciplines like Sociology, History and Political Science also aim at empowerment.

Beneficiaries of English

While a privileged minority uses English as a weapon for wielding power and grabbing employment opportunities, a majority, in spite of a university degree, is not employable. One of the impacts of globalization is the job opportunities it brought for graduates in the IT-BPO sector. Because of the opportunities available in the service sector many countries across the world insist that their school leavers' proficiency in English should be gradable at B1 on the Common European Frame of Reference. Candidates with this grade can make themselves understood in everyday

situations but will make mistakes which sometimes cause misunderstanding. A typical BPO company will accept such a candidate but Indian school leavers lack this proficiency. David Graddol argues: "Achieving this in India will be a challenge, since compulsory schooling is completed by age 14 [or 15]." Ten years of study in schools and 5 years study in colleges do not provide enough knowledge of English to rural students to take up jobs in the service sector. Consequently, there is a talent pool crisis in India.

There are at least two reasons for this crisis: one, a fast-growing economy like India needs larger number of skilled workforce with greater skills. To meet this need the education system should help upgrade the skills levels of its students. The second reason is based on the question whether schools and colleges should train people for specific jobs or for a broad spectrum of jobs. Either way, the means and methods of teaching English should undergo serious adaptations.

Adoption of foreign methods:

This raises yet another question: Have we ever been reluctant to adopt new methods of teaching in India? According to some, the teaching methodology, techniques and approaches we have adopted in our country from time to time have had colonial origins. For instance, Alok Mukherjee, in his monumental work *The Gift of English*, argues that only "marginal changes have occurred in the curriculum and teaching of undergraduate English in a few places...."

Let us also recall here Meenakshi Mukherjee's essay "Macaulay's Imperishable Empire" in which she argues that "the system of education conducted upon English models obscured the models by which the students might relate themselves to their actual environmental and cultural contexts." (35)

Legacy of the Structural Approach

In a book-length historical essay, entitled *50 Years of English Studies at the EFL University: An Essay in Understanding*, the renowned ELT expert ML Tickoo states that there was colonial interference in adopting one of the earliest and long-lasting approaches adopted in Independent India, the Structural Approach, at the then Central Institute of English (CIE) way back in the 1960s: "This applied linguistic approach had originated in the form of the audio-lingual method in the USA ... and was brought into this country by a group of enthusiastic U.K.-trained practitioners most of whom, as committed 'middle men' representatives of the British Council, forcefully and with considerable success promoted it as the revealed truth." (18) The first Director of the CIE, Dr. VK Gokak, was more than happy to accept the Structural Approach now that the traditional approaches in his view were a failure. Tickoo continues: "From his earliest days at the CIE, Gokak ... had welcomed the introduction of the structural syllabus and praised the work done on it, including the 'good work ... done in this direction by the English Language Teaching Institute at Allahabad.'" (Ibid 25)

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The Communicative Approach

What we saw in the succeeding years, too, was a continuation of Gokak's stance, i.e., accepting the methods developed and implemented in countries of native speakers of English. Thus the 1990s saw the slow but widespread adoption of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method in India. The blind acceptance of methods, are often criticized by experts. Juup Stelma, for instance, argues: "... CLT is something clearly defined with a fixed set of techniques. This means that when the fixed techniques of CLT are 'exported' to non-Western contexts they simply will not 'fit'. On this view it would indeed be inadvisable to use CLT in anything else than Western contexts." (57) He endorses Sandra McKay's view that because of its Western peculiarities, CLT "fails to respond to local teachers and students' needs and backgrounds" and adds that "an uncritical adoption of CLT in non-Western contexts may ... be inappropriate." (57).

A concrete instance to substantiate these ideas may be cited here. In the early 1990s, the then Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL) undertook, jointly with the British Council, India, and the CBSE, a curriculum implementation study in order to evaluate the CBSE English syllabus in schools. Regarding the methods and materials used for the compilation of the syllabus, ML Tickoo says: "I believe, however, that a lot more would have been gained if the materials had come not from an institute in the UK and the purely monolingual approach they advocated, but

from the CIEFL itself which had by then gained enough expertise in the field of materials development and also in what a communicative course suited to Indian teaching-learning environments should attempt and produce.” (93) The implication is clear: we need to indigenize foreign methods and materials according to the situations of each academic environment. This, unfortunately, is not being done. If at all attempts at indigenization are being made they are not popularized or acknowledged. Much of the ELT research done at Language Institutes and Universities is hardly tried or tested.

Learner-centeredness, teacher talk and form-focused teaching

Considering the reality that a majority of our students have very poor proficiency in English even when they enter the tertiary level, we need to think whether we can really underplay the vital importance of teacher talk at that stage. For learning any language exposure to the target language is a must. If learner-centeredness is emphasized in a class with extremely diverse language proficiency, then the outcome of such an approach can be frustrating. It is in this context that we need to look back to the positive aspects of the Structural Approach. Let me state it emphatically that I am not making a plea for the reintroduction of the Approach. My point is that the Approach has given due emphasis on the selection, gradation and reinforcement of language items/forms and the teacher’s direct interventions while introducing them. I would also not like to deny the fact that

complementing teacher talk with ICT-based teaching would reinforce students’ understanding and practice of language skills.

A question may be raised here: Haven’t we done away with language-focused instruction and moved on to the Communicative Approach? Yes, we have. But let us also not forget that there are arguments in favour of the former kind of instruction as well. Consider, for example, these words of Paul Nation, spoken in relation to the teaching of vocabulary:

Language-focused instruction occurs when learners direct their attention to language items not for producing or comprehending a particular message, but for gaining knowledge about the item as a part of the language system. . . . it can raise learners’ consciousness or awareness of particular items so that they are then more readily noticed when they occur in meaning-focused input. (270-71)

Gaining knowledge about language, thus, has significance for the learners and the teacher’s role in providing that cannot be overlooked.

The dangers of policy shifts

One last point needs to be noted, although that might give a sad note to the closing of this paper. The fact that stares at our face is the unjust practices that have seeped through the heart of our education system. Government policies regarding learning gets periodically changed according to the whims

of a party or coalition that comes to power. Maintaining standards of education does not always seem to be its primary concern. This is evident from the no detention policy practised till class VIII or so. The policy, I feel, has at least two or three disturbing implications: one, it tampers with learners' attainment of basic skills and knowledge during the formative years of their lives; secondly, assessing learning outcomes and students' levels of language proficiency through strict evaluation procedures becomes less important; thirdly, the seriousness of teaching gets affected and, finally, promoting a student till class VIII and then failing her after that stage becomes unjust. There are also undesirable institutional practices, like appointing ill-qualified teachers overruling merit, failing to provide proper infrastructure or learning environment, or discouraging the use of effective language teaching methodology and techniques applicable to specific classroom situations. If we are serious about producing employable youths through English teaching, then we need to be honest about the existence of such evils and work together with determination to provide quality education to a large number of

underprivileged learners in our country.

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