

Setting the record straight

K. Elango

National Secretary, ELTAI



Unless many long-held myths are rooted out, learner of English and become proficient users of the language.

That spoken English should be taught as a separate subject in all Tamil medium sections in schools, a plea made recently in the Madras High Court by a former MLA, Appau, led the judges to seek details on the functioning of the English-Medium sections in the State's government-run schools. This initiative has triggered a flurry of questions, such as the following, among the stakeholders.

- *Should spoken English be mandated as an independent subject?*
- *Why are millions of learners unable to acquire even the basic level of competence, although they have been taught English from the first standard?*
- *Are schools equipped to facilitate students' acquisition of oral fluency in English?*

What has been the impact of the many training programmes undertaken by various agencies such as the ones through state partnership with the British Council, attempts of DIET, SSA and RSA to transform the pedagogical practices through the years? Nothing seems to explain why despite such well-intentioned efforts, speaking English fluently still remains "an unachievable goal".

Not too positive

When asked to describe the images that come to their minds whenever they think of English. Tamil-medium students in Anna University (which gets a huge chunk of students from rural areas who are high scorers in English in their class XII exams – not less than 90%) describe English as a 'ghost'. 'Pitch black' red colour' 'wild beast chasing', and so on – obviously only negative ones dominating their psyche. And the teachers in Tamil-medium schools are at a loss to teach English effectively due to their lack of sufficient exposure to the second language, lack of role models (for example, their own teachers), lack of genuine need to employ the language in their day-to-day communication, and the ineffective and insufficient training programmes, making them diffident and undoubtedly scared. Besides this vicious circle, there are certain deep-rooted myths, which have distorted the focus of teaching English in our country over the years.

Myth 1: Centrality of Grammar

Learning one's mother tongue or any other tongue involves the same cognitive process. No mother teaches the initial words in Tamil, such as thatha, amma, or appa as nouns. So, in the case of English why is the approach skewed to teach it based on or through grammar? Strangely,

English grammar, to say the least, appears illogical and incoherent even to teachers. Besides certain rules, there are more exceptions than rules and the same linguistic item carries varied grammatical roles/labels depending on the context. Even a thorough familiarization does not ensure their automatized, accurate application.

Further, it has now been recognized (unfortunately not among the practising teachers) that the grammar of spoken English is different from that of the written language. In spoken form, a word, a phrase, an incomplete sentence, and even an ungrammatical construction can achieve the desired communicative effect, whereas the written form has to adhere strictly to the rules. Despite the leeway the spoken mode enjoys, the tragedy is that the grammar of the written language is thrust upon the spoken form, which impedes learning. Experts maintain that spoken language is not written language spoken out, and similarly, the written language is NOT spoken language written down. So, the shift should be towards the grammar of spoken language and not on dishing out grammar rules for the written mode.

Myth 2: Accurate Pronunciation

It is familiar to all of us that the pronunciation of our mother tongue varies from person to person, from community to community, and from place to place. David Crystal, a well-known British expert on pronunciation, states that there are many

accents in any language, which depend on the people we speak with. When we converse with children, we adopt one kind of pronunciation, which radically differs from the ones adopted when we talk with other family members, colleagues or strangers, determined by the context and purpose. He further observes that English pronunciation is not static or rigid as it is being influenced by other world languages. What matters most is intelligibility and not the so-called Received Pronunciation (RP). Instead of mimicking someone else's style, one has to speak in one's natural accent without sacrificing clarity.

Myth 3: High Volume of Vocabulary

No doubt, English is the richest language embracing more than one million words and each passing year adding more than 1,000 words to its stock. However, it is statistically proven that the spoken form requires only 3,000 high frequency words with “*the, be, to, of, and*” being the top five frequently used words. Against the traditional practice of learning individual words, the shift has moved towards chunks of language, otherwise called lexical chunks. Although learners have more than the required number of words, the real problem lies with how they string words together. Thus, the focus of teaching English should hinge upon enhancing the opportunity to practise the spoken skill.

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