

The English Teacher's Role of Permanence

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As I pen this article, my mind wafts back to all my English teachers who I can see so vividly in my mind's eye. Today, several decades later, I have the unique privilege as a parent and teacher to regard the role of the English teacher in a whole new light – a role which has a lasting impression on a young learner's mind, and a stamp on a lot of life skills required to succeed.

In India, the term 'English teacher' is limiting and yet the role is so encompassing. Going back to my mind's eye, I have ever since come to realise that teachers, and many English teachers in particular, were our *de facto* parents in school who looked out for you, above and beyond the call of just teaching the subject. In fact, many English teachers to this day continue to be class teachers. And that very role makes them 'the mother hen' and the facilitator of a life long journey of skills acquisition.

For a lot of children where English is the second or third language, the English teacher's window of teaching exposes a child to the world outside. As the teacher regales her students with stories from faraway lands while at the same time teaching grammar, phonology and prosody, she also takes care of whatever else is happening in the co-curricular and extracurricular activities. She (and I use the term to be interchangeable in gender) is the go-to person if you need your bow straightened or face made-up for the Annual Day; she has to develop a script for your science fair, and yes, for all the

preparatory work for Debates, Dramatics and Elocution competitions.

Reams of paper have been devoted to the spread of English and the need for English speakers in global and international contexts has been discussed in linguistic, educational, economic and social forums. However, the impact of English on learners' wider lives is seldom researched.

That trend is changing. A study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) in 2011 (USA) and authored by Raj Chetty, Harvard University and others, amplifies some key findings on the role of English teachers.

Omana Antony's paper, 'The Role of the English Teacher: An Overview', in the *International Journal of Social Science & Interdisciplinary Research* (October 2012), discusses at length the transition of the teacher's role from that of a 'house of knowledge' or 'Guru' to that of a 'Facilitator/Mentor/Guide' in a learner's journey to developing a personality with humanitarian values.

The British Council's *Teaching English Report* (2014), states, "as interest in the affective domain of second language acquisition grew, literature in this area increasingly reported on the role of self-concept and related concepts. Two papers from psychology seem to be the keys to bringing these constructs to the attention of researchers in second language acquisition

(SLA): Self-concept: The inter-play of theory and methods by Shavelson and Bolus (1982) and Possible Selves by Markus and Nurius (1986). Various terms are used to refer to this set of factors in SLA: self-confidence, self-efficacy, the L2 self, and self-esteem, to name a few.”

A more recent report authored by Susanna Loeb of the Brookings Institution, 2017, and referencing in part, the study conducted by the NBER, sought to measure the ‘Impact of Instruction on Student Achievement’ wherein 2.5 million students were part of the study in the United States. The research highlighted two key findings:

? An English teacher who raises students’ reading test scores by the same amount as a math teacher raises students’ math test scores has an impact on long-term life outcomes approximately 1.7 times that of the math teacher.

? The benefits of good English teachers are seen in students’ achievement in future years, not only in English, but in other subjects as well.

Closer to home, at Trinity College. London, we have worked closely, hand-in-hand, with English teachers over the years – through CBSE’s ASL project, educational institutions directly and so many teachers that send up their students for assessments. We see first-hand the ever present and growing role and influence of the English teacher. We see learners developing proficiency not only in

the subjects but also in the development of key skills like critical thinking, decision making, presentation, negotiation, and conflict resolution. While working with students in LSRW, we have seen the positive correlation in the development of a learner’s life skills. These skills include summarising, speed reading, deducing meaning, self-correction and reflection, researching and synthesising, discourse and socio-linguistic skills.

As I end this article and tip my hat at all our English teachers, I think it is befitting to quote the late Maya Angelou, who describes the role of her teacher in helping her regain her voice after going mute for five years on account of a traumatic experience:

This is the value of the teacher, who looks at a face and says there’s something behind that and I want to reach that person, I want to influence that person, I want to encourage that person, I want to enrich, I want to call out that person who is behind that face, behind that color, behind that language, behind that tradition, behind that culture. I believe you can do it. I know what was done for me.

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