

Decolonizing English Teaching and Studies in India: Need to Review Classroom Practices and Teaching Material

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ABSTRACT

Decolonization implies the need of the emancipation of the colonized countries like India from the subservient psychology and mindset subjugated by the fabricated colonial ideologies imposed on them due to the long-term rule of the colonial powers. Even after independence, these countries used the colonial content and methodology for teaching the English language. Imposition of stereotyped and homogeneous methods and materials in a pluralistic country like India proved to be a hurdle in the way of learning English and have even been looked upon with fear by the student community. Hence the need to decolonize ELT in India by contextualizing teaching methods and materials with respect to Indian socio-cultural setting and classroom situation has been strongly felt. The present paper emphasizes on the need to review ELT methods and materials in order to decolonize English studies and language teaching to improve the communicative competence of the learners to meet the requirements of the age of globalization and information and communication technology.

KEYWORDS

Decolonization; Contextualization; Localization; Individualizing; ELT.

Decolonization is a political process in which the world experienced in the 20th century. From a historian's perspective, decolonization was one of the most important political developments of the twentieth century because it turned the world into a stage of history. (Duara 2004: 1). In the countries outside Europe "the process of decolonization, which began towards the end of World War I, was accompanied by the appearance of national historical consciousness." (Duara 2004: 1).

Decolonization movement, as it appears, is a global phenomenon and aims at emancipating the people of the colonial countries from the political, economic, social as well as mental bondage developed due to long colonial rule. Jawaharlal Nehru (1946), in his famous book *The Discovery of India*, has propagated his idea about the changes necessary for the growth of the nation being free from all sorts of dependence on the foreign colonial forces. For this purpose, he stresses the importance not

only on the political freedom but also the creation of opportunities for economic, educational and cultural growth of all the sections of the nation/state.

It is evident that decolonizing, in the context of education in general and English Language Teaching (ELT) in particular, refers to demythologizing and decentering the age-old colonial stereotyped methods and materials which were general and universal in nature. It refers to contextualization of the teaching methodology and material development and their use according to the needs of the Indian students. It is an idea raised against the colonial mindset which “looks at the impact of the west as a civilizational development and considers it as a means of modernization” (Gundur 2009: 36) and thereby aims at projecting a path towards the development of the postcolonial mindset and gives importance to the revival of native culture.

Now the aim of English studies in India does not remain merely to develop an aesthetic sense and the creative and critical faculty of the students. In this globalized world English (Crystal 2005) has no longer remained a colonial language but a language which various countries and people are using for communicative and commercial purposes. It is now no longer a colonial language of oppression meant to subjugate people but has become a medium of transporting of knowledge between countries and people rather than to fulfil colonial design of imparting particular colonial ideologies and colonial values through it. At the beginning of the 21st century, we have realized that English studies and teaching, particularly in India and other Asian countries, is to be reoriented to suit the communicative needs of the globalized world to disseminate information through communication technology for scientific, commercial and other purposes. Hence using old methods and materials of teaching English language and literature

particularly lecture method to explain and elucidate classical texts does not serve our purpose. Therefore need to review classroom material and practices in order to decolonize English studies and teaching to improve the communicative competence of the students has been very urgently felt.

Need for Contextualization of English Studies in India

In the present world, English studies do not merely mean the study of the texts written by British and American authors. Many writers from Africa and Asian countries enriched English Literature through their writings. Their works have become very popular in their countries due to their proximity to the cultural ethos of the native population. To decolonize English studies it has to be contextualized by using native regional as well as local cultural, occupational and experiential resources for generating content for teaching the English language. In order to make English studies children friendly and pedagogically more viable; it has to be contextualized by relating it to the material of the children’s mother tongue. Earlier common textbooks were adopted for all the children irrespective of the vast cultural and linguistic diversities prevalent in our country. This has made children look at English literature and language as an alien imposition on them. Non-contextual textbooks also created a wide gap between the cultural content of the home language and English. In order to decolonize English studies, therefore, local, cultural, occupational and experiential knowledge can be exploited for classroom teaching. Use of texts written by Indian English writers hailing from different Indian regions can be fruitfully used as a learner-friendly material in English studies as it reflects Indian ethos and experience. Similarly, English translations of rich folk literature popular among rural and tribal communities can be exploited judiciously

to make the learning of English suitable to the local context. Various community resources can also be used for pedagogical purposes.

Nativization and Localization of the Content used in English Studies and Language Teaching

To decolonize English studies in India the common curriculum and texts used for all the children irrespective of the cultural, linguistic, and regional and occupational diversities should be replaced by native texts dealing with the cultural values and experiential backgrounds of the students. The colonial content that is homogeneous and elitist in nature do not have any bearing on the local, regional and native ethos and experience of the students. It retards the learning process and sometimes even stops it. As students are not familiar and friendly with the alien textual material, it distances them from learning English. Content pertaining to the local, native, cultural, experiential and personal interest of the students is easily comprehensible, intelligible and readable. The alien references used in a text put impediments in the way of its comprehension and a teacher has to gloss a large number of references in order to assist the learners in understanding a text. This diverts a teacher's attention from teaching and providing practice to the students in the use of language and engrosses most of his time in the explanation of a text. Even in a country like India where there is a lot of diversity at the regional, ethnic, cultural and occupational levels, the common teaching material never remains relevant and effective for students in urban centres and in villages. The material chosen for teaching English in the cosmopolitan cities do not prove relevant and viable for semi-urban and rural areas where students hail from a totally different background and the colonial and the elitist material

imposed on them create distaste and fear in their minds for learning English.

Innovative and Creative Use of Methods and Materials

Decolonizing English studies require the innovative and creative use of teaching methods and materials to suit the needs of the native students. Decolonizing means rejection of the old imported stereotyped methods of teaching English which were used alike irrespective of the heterogeneity prevalent in the Indian classrooms. Stereotyped grand teaching methods were not able to produce good results due to their general applicability and not able to respond to typical local situations and problems. It requires empowering individuality of the teachers to make decisions about selection of the teaching material and adopt flexibility in their teaching methodology. A teacher should be provided full autonomy to select his teaching material according to the background, interests and needs of the students so that the selected material would not seem alien and hostile to the learners. Similarly, a teacher should be flexible in his approach to teaching. Decolonizing ELT methodology implies flexibility in approach rather than rigidity of the old colonial methods. Flexibility refers to the change of methods according to the demands, standard and available resources for the learners. To decolonize English studies, the approach of a teacher should not be inclined towards imparting a particular ideology. Instead of content centred, the approach should be aimed at teaching language to the students in order to make them proficient in the use of language. A teacher, therefore, has to select his method of teaching according to the language standard of his students, the size of his class and the location of the school – in rural or urban regions. Task-based, situation-oriented, communication-centred and culture-sensitive methods and materials may be employed as per the demands of the teaching and learning

purposes. Even content to be used for teaching can be selected and created by interacting with the students about their locale, occupations and cultural preferences, “individual and social constraints and resources” (Van Lier 1996). This is supported by the following statement made by Deep (2009: 6):

Our (Indian) students come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. To meet this challenge, we need to revise our course-contents to incorporate our native cultural legacy. Or I should say, we need a socio-cultural view of teaching and learning. It will not only help to solve the problem of an identity crisis to a certain extent, but it will also facilitate the process of learning ESL in a congenial environment.

In addition to the prescribed syllabus based materials, teachers should try to judiciously use authentic materials such as newspaper, advertisements, local radio and programmes, invitation cards, local (non)government / notices, etc, keeping in mind his/her learner’s ability, social backgrounds. This attempt to incorporate thematically local and national contents for ESL teaching will develop learners’ interest and motivation in learning English. The effective use of all such selected materials will make the learning of English amusing and lively which is so much necessary for its successful teaching.

Implications of Indian Writings in English for Decolonizing English Studies

Earlier English studies and language teaching depended solely on texts written by British writers. Many archaic, allusive and highly poetical texts were introduced in the curriculum. The thrust was on the teaching of content and not on the learning of language. Writers like Shakespeare, Lamb, Shelley, T.S. Eliot

etc. were taught at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. However, in spite of reading these great writers, students failed miserably in acquiring proficiency in the use of English. In order to decolonize English studies and to make it learner-friendly, the need is felt to introduce Indian writers writing in English whose works represent the native Indian experience and ethos. The Indian English writers not only produced many readable plays, poems, novels and stories but also contributed to the emergence and growth of Indian English. Their literary and linguistic contributions have provided native Indian colours to English language and writing. Therefore, need is felt to introduce Indian English writers rather than British so that students who read about their own culture, experience, problems, joys and sorrows will find themselves more homely and comfortable in the learning environment. The teacher’s precious time will also be saved from searching for alien historical, geographical, cultural, religious and other references and explaining them to the students who generally find them unpalatable due to their alien associations. It is believed that uses of Indian English texts will not only decolonize English studies and language teaching in India but will also make teaching and learning of English easier, faster and teacher and student friendly.

Use of Translations of Regional and Local Texts for Decolonizing English Studies

In order to decolonize English studies in India, it has become necessary to bridge the gap between the culture of English and home language. Generally, a common curriculum is used for teaching English for all the children irrespective of the cultural, experiential and linguistic diversities. The common curriculum failed to relate the home and local experience of the students to the content used in teaching English in their classrooms. In

India, a lot of literature is produced in various regional and local languages every year representing the wide variety of rich cultural patterns spread in all over the country. Rich folk literature of the rural and tribal communities is available in books, magazines and newspapers. Sahitya Academi's bi-monthly journal *Indian Literature* regularly publishes translations of poems, plays and stories of various regional writers in English. Use of the English translations of the popular regional and local texts will extend the culture and experience of the students to the English classrooms and will create a congenial learning environment. Use of cultural and experiential community resources will contribute to the production of learner-friendly teaching material. Moreover, this attempt will inevitably honour the socio-cultural rights of individual learners and thereby will not only make English teaching-learning lively and attractive among its beneficiaries but also arouse awareness about their respective cultures among them and consequently motivate them to sustain their cultures and traditions.

Humanizing and Individualizing English Studies and Language Learning

It can be claimed that decolonization in the broader perspective means deconstructing and discarding all the grand narratives fabricated in the name of nation, class, society and gender etc. Since grand narratives are general in nature, they have proved to be anti-individual. Therefore decolonizing English studies and teaching in India also implies individualizing and humanizing language learning. As learners differ in their backgrounds, interests, aptitude, intelligence and so many other factors, the same material and methods can not be applied alike on all the learners. Therefore humanizing and individualizing learning becomes very important. Language learning also requires individual participation of the learners in the

learning process. Therefore, respecting the autonomy of the learners become very important. Since a teacher is an agent who initiates, regulates and monitors the learning process of an individual, he should also be given freedom to choose material and methods according to the needs of the situation. Adopting activity based and child-centred methodology by using tales, songs, plays, cartoons, pictures, clips of the interesting, readable and enjoyable material from the internet, a teacher can individualize the learning experience.

Conclusion

The movement in the name of decolonization as a whole is an attempt to come out of colonial rulers' expectation relating to English teaching in India as evidenced in Macaulay's (1834) statement. According to Macaulay, the purpose of English teaching in India was to:

form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions that we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect.

Our aim through decolonization of ELT is to cater to the needs of English education of all the sects of the society irrespective of their castes, creed, religions, etc., and to produce true Indians not only in blood and colour but also in spirit, morals, opinion and intellect. Techniques like role-playing, self-directed learning, language games, self-evaluation, pair work, group work, cooperative learning, etc., can be utilized keeping in conformity with the teaching materials already selected and available. The teacher being an Indian is expected not only to be learned and well conversant with pedagogy but also to be acquainted with the learners' background and the local and national customs, culture, climate and natural settings. Thus, by

capitalizing on the available native teaching-learning situation and can reap resources and using them innovatively better results by decolonizing and and creatively, a teacher can create native Indianising ESL teaching-learning.

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