

# The English Advantage

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Various schools of thought have emerged worldwide which explore how languages are learned. Language teaching methodologies have evolved from being teacher-centered to learner-centered in recent years. One of the parameters of effective language learning and teaching is how effectively the learner is able to use and apply the language in real world.

To explore the use and functionality of the English language beyond the boundaries of the classroom vis-a-vis India, it is vital to review why it was introduced to India. In 1835, Thomas Macaulay's 'Minutes' proposed the introduction of the English language as an instructional medium. Subsequently, the *English Education Act* was passed under Governor General Lord Bentinck. This was carried out to introduce a class of Indians who would be trained to perform subordinate duties in administration while acting as cultural conduits of the English ideology and culture to the larger "vernacular" Indian populace.

The textbooks, curricula, and teaching of the English Language thus laid overt stress on the form of the language, grammar drills, reading and writing, and as deemed necessary during those times, the neat handwritten presentation of the same. Seventy-three years since our Independence in 1947, we have moved rather slowly towards major educational reforms. By and large, we continue to hold on to the way the English language was taught, learnt, and assessed two centuries ago.

Globalization has opened the doors to many multinational industries to our shores. Cross-country trade and services provide new avenues of employment to our youth, and careers that no one imagined before are now a reality. India of the 21st century is young, vibrant, and raring to go.

In such a context, communication in the English language holds the key to conduct business and reach out to the world around us. Industry leaders and companies recruiting Indian candidates have repeatedly lamented the lack of soft skills even in the most meritorious employees. Many are forced to employ soft skills trainers to bridge the gap.

As pursuing higher education in traditional careers or professional ones is now more of a norm than an exception, a need to understand, interact in and externalize English is imperative. Every year scores of Indian students study in overseas universities and discover the hard way that they are ill-equipped to deal with the academic rigour and language requirements needed for higher education.

It is not difficult to deduce the missing pieces of this puzzle to see the big picture. So, while maintaining the status quo with what is demanded from us by the authorities, school administration and exam boards, and the pressure of completing the syllabus before the deadline, how can we translate our classroom time into an experiential one?

An average Indian classroom consists of fifty

to seventy learners depending on where we are geographically located. Some of us may be lucky to teach smaller numbers but that is only a very minuscule percentage.

Recently, many course books emphasize group activities, and teachers sometimes find it challenging to conduct these due to the large numbers of students and the layout of the classroom. As our entire teaching is exam-oriented and coursebook-dependent, there is little or no time to practise the language through conversations and interactions. It is no denying the fact that examination is an essential part of student life but so is using the language beyond the boundaries of the classroom. It is an equally essential life skill in today's world.

Let us go through some of the suggestions given by experts in the field of English language education:

1. Start with questioning if we are engaging the full potential of the students in the class.
2. Engage and fuel the natural curiosity of children to learn and explore.
3. Practise by giving a lot of examples of language beyond those mentioned in the coursebooks and workbooks.
4. Encourage the practice of learnt grammar items and vocabulary in situations beyond the classroom and draw attention to it – for example, on the playground, during lunchtime, or in the library.
5. Spend five minutes with the quiet ones in a one-on-one session after class to check if they 'got it'.

6. Demand more from students in terms of participation in class interaction.

7. Provide tasks like interviewing and recording short videos as language practice activities rather than writing drills. It is important that the task has a **communicative** purpose.

Some of us might be practising these and many more exciting ideas. The field of English language learning and teaching has seen many theories and methodologies propagated, popularized, and debunked over the years. Each has its merits and demerits, and it is only when we start practising them that we realize that a smart teacher needs to combine many methods to reach out to all the students and not only to the handful few who shout out all the answers.

At the heart of language acquisition is figuring out the functionality of the language, understanding that grammar is intrinsic to the language, and that without the adequate lexis delivered with attention to phonology, communication will not be meaningful. This focus on the functionality of language is vital in the real world. This skill transference in language will count in higher education and in the professional field. The English language and its mastery is often touted as the passport to success and strangely is linked to societal acceptance in our country.

As our 21st century world becomes increasingly competitive, interconnected, and challenging, the opportunities for people who can communicate effectively in English for study and employment are growing. The world around us is changing rapidly and we have no choice but to adapt and align. This

was never truer than it is now when the world is cornered by the Corona virus and we as teachers are going through a steep learning curve ourselves.

As English language teachers, we can make a difference and be a part of nation-building for India of the 21st century.

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