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**Higher Education and Practice of English in India**

**K. Thiyagarajan, M.A., M.Phil.**

# Higher Education and Practice of English in India

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## **Skills in English Enhance Employment Potential**

English is offered at all the levels of education in India either as a language to be learned or (in addition) as a medium of instruction to master other subjects of study. Quality of instruction in English varies from school to school and from region to region. Several factors contribute to this situation: parents' knowledge of English, teachers' competence in English, teaching and testing methods, use of English outside the classroom, reading and writing habits of the students and their families, etc. The College and University level is the last milestone at which the students receive formal and conscious instruction on how to use English effectively. The skills attained at the end of this final opportunity to hone their skills in English, help students gain employment decide the kinds of entry level jobs for them. Many private and publicly owned corporations tend to place high value on the competence in English the graduates demonstrate at the interviews.

## **Quality of English Teaching and Learning in Government and Private Institutions**

There is a general impression that the institutions directly run by the governments of various states are not able to equip their students with excellent and saleable skills in English. There is a conflict often noticed in the postures and policies of various governments. Electoral politics pressurizes various political parties to take a stand in favor of non-English Indian languages or mother tongues to be the media of instruction. However, parents from all social strata seem to be in favor of equipping their children with excellent and saleable English skills. The chasm between parental aspirations and political positions has grown over the decades since Indian Independence in 1947.

## **Change in Government Policies Relating to the Teaching of English**

We notice a definite change in governmental policies in recent years, though. And yet it is obvious that damage has already been done through an overemphasis on mother tongue instruction, with teachers ill trained to handle instruction through English in various levels of education. Government supported educational institutions run by private trusts seem to do better in this area. However, regional imbalances in teachers' skills continue to be a problem.

Meanwhile state governments are rushing to introduce English at least as one of the courses of studies right from Standard I, or even from the kindergarten classes. Once again teachers' preparation and their own competence in English is not adequate to teach English effectively.

## **The Role of Government and Private Educational Institutions in Society**

Though their main aim is to give education for all, different conditions prevail among institutions run by government and private managements.

<b>Government institutions</b>	<b>Private institutions</b>
Aim to provide education for all.	Education for all is only at the policy level. But actually they provide education mostly for those who can afford.
Old buildings and poor maintenance of the institution fail to motivate both the teachers and students.	Modern facilities, proper maintenance, quality and dedicated teaching and the high fee structure generally mark this category of institutions.
The traditional policies, traditional courses, conventional teaching methods and the failure to adopt new technologies in education don't inspire students.	Private colleges seek autonomy to make provisions to introduce latest courses with advanced teaching methods, which ultimately bring in more students and provide them better placements soon.
Continuation of old syllabus patterns for years together, instruction through regional language, inadequate enforcement of discipline and lack of incentive to excel and teachers' lack of interest in students' development result in unemployment of students after they leave their colleges. Self-confidence is not built in any impressive manner. Usually counseling is conspicuous by its absence.	Autonomy in updating and upgrading syllabus, instruction through English, disciplined atmosphere of the institution, the need for higher qualifications for the teachers and enforced keen monitoring over students' performance help students to get good placement not only in India but also in other countries.
The problems faced by the students of these institutions emanate mainly from their social and economic backward conditions. These institutions and their staff and teachers should become proactive and help their students to perform well. However, such motivation on the part of the students and staff is not found in any abundant measure. Students also spend their time in unproductive ways that are far removed from the goals of excellence in education.	Continuous introduction of latest job oriented degree and diploma courses and professional courses attract not only the elite but also some poor students as these courses provide good employment opportunities immediately.

### **The Aim and Practice of English in India**

During the major part of the British period, almost all the subjects were taught through English at school as well as at the college level. When the British came to India as traders, they opened some institutions of classical learning. Soon the demand that English be taught using government funds was raised. Leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy argued in favor of education through English, while not decrying traditional education. After the Macaulay Minutes, western learning through the medium of English became popular.

There was a general consensus in favor of English in India at that time:

- English language united all the different regions of India into one country and helped to connect India with the rest of the world.
- It is the language of trade.
- It is the vehicle of the culture of the modern world.
- The advancement of science and technology and its latest research and findings in various countries come to light through English only.
- International relations are strengthened and maintained by it.
- It is an effective medium for interstate rulers and officers.

### **The Present Role of English at the College Level**

The following may be cited as the reasons, which make English an important player at the college level.

- English has become the medium of instruction in a good number of educational institutions from the primary level to higher education.
- Fluency in English helps students acquire good knowledge from other countries and other languages.
- Universities and colleges in India follow English as a medium of instruction in order to receive knowledge and learn useful skills from various countries.
- In spite of various categories of reservations of seats for various courses in schools and colleges, based on various factors, students in large numbers have begun to apply for admission to various courses and this compels students to compete for admission and employment not only in India but also at the international level. So, in this competition, students with good English communication skills are able to get good employment offers easily.
- Globalization or Internationalization requires students to have sufficient knowledge in English with which one could easily transfer and receive ideas from various fields.
- English is a prerequisite even for ordinary jobs.
- English is very important for getting admission to degree programs in higher and prestigious educational institutions and foreign universities as these institutions conduct group discussion and interviews before selection.

### **English is Deeply Rooted in India**

From the aforesaid points one could easily understand that English is now deeply rooted in India. Moreover, the Constitution of India provides for the continuation of English should be allowed as an associate official language. Even the Hindi-only politicians have begun to recognize the importance of English and are in the forefront to introducing English as a subject right from elementary level of education.

This heavy demand for English in India, even when it could lead to the death of some of the major Indian languages in due course, makes it urgent for us to develop different approaches and conditions for successful acquisition of English in schools, colleges and universities. In a country like India, English is also needed for social purposes, administrative purposes, cultural purposes, and military and defense purposes, etc.

### **Role of the English Language Teachers at the College Level**

The demand for college education has been growing day by day. As the last chance to improve performance in an instructional atmosphere is provided at the college level for the student, English language teachers have a greater responsibility to teach English more effectively at this level.

- Students of various abilities from different social and economic status, environment form part of their class. For many, success in English will settle their future course of employment and their future earnings.
- While teaching English in the classroom, special attention must be given to the students who hail from the regional language media of instruction, especially for those who are from rural areas, as they are first generation learners of English. While these students may have even been negligent on their own part to learn English, most of them at this level are willing and able to see the importance of better skills in English and thus teachers should review their focus and strategies. Often lack of parental support, help and supervision in learning English and inadequate teaching of English in their previous schools has led to their poor standards in English.
- As English is the only medium at the higher levels of education, sufficient care must be taken to make it available to all classes of people. This means that the disparities in the delivery of English instruction that exist between rural and urban schools, government and non-government schools, etc. should be remedied.
- For the benefit of weaker students, institutions may organize additional coaching classes in English, or special diploma courses may be introduced to strengthen their fluency.
- Students must be motivated citing various job opportunities available for those who have fluency in English.
- Students should receive relevant explanations at their own pace so that they can learn the four language skills easily and effectively.
- Evaluation should be done periodically to check the performance and language acquisition level of the students.

### **Problems Faced by English Language Teachers at the College and University Levels**

In India, teaching of English is riddled with problems. The teacher of English who faces these problems should know how best to organize his or her teaching at various levels in order to minimize the effect of these problems. Some of the problems faced by the second language teachers of English are listed below:

- Overcrowded classes with differing abilities in English hinder pace and quality of teaching.

- The increasing trend of students' coming to classes without textbooks affects teaching adversely.
- Poor attendance and performance during weekly or monthly tests in a large class discourages the teachers and sincere students.
- Shortage of experienced teachers and insufficient classroom facilities cause boredom.
- Students' tendency to use the mother-tongue structure and sounds in their English communication affects the entire classroom.
- Non-cooperation of vernacular students in the classroom affects the entire teaching and learning system.
- The motivation level in mixed ability groups is divergent.
- Unwillingness to take the language marks into account for admission to higher courses of study does not motivate students to perform well in English.
- Casual assessments performed by English teachers at the +2 level (Pre-University class) enable the students who do not have a good mastery of English appropriate to their level of education to enter into higher education where they struggle to cope with English.
- Students with limited academic abilities and limited objectives do not involve themselves in the learning activities.
- The method of teaching, i.e. the traditional method of teaching how to write essays is yet another demotivating factor.
- Lack of a function-oriented syllabus and the prohibition of advanced facilities like language laboratory and computers.
- As the currently dominant literature-oriented syllabus does not help students to become good communicators, language-oriented syllabus must be introduced to help them achieve fluency.

### **Avoid the Following!**

Though the above-mentioned problems exist everywhere at the college level, teachers can help eliminate some of the problems if they avoid the following.

- They adopt traditional methods of teaching. So, students are demotivated.
- They don't follow any innovative method in material selection, gradation and presentation.
- Some teachers don't have a concern for students' development or improvement.
- Some teachers fail to recognize their own limitations and fail to take remedial steps.
- Some teachers handle classes without adequate preparation, thus making the language class a dull and uninteresting one.

Teachers of English must have a strong commitment to their profession, suitably graded study materials, adopt relevant advance level teaching methodologies and introduce in their classrooms a congenial atmosphere for learning to take place. They should teach and perform in such a way that their students not only use the language within the classroom but also outside of it in an efficient manner.

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