

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 7 : 12 December 2007

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ELT in Higher Education in Iran and India

A Critical Review

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ELT in Higher Education in Iran and India – A Critical View

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Abstract

This paper seeks to mirror the present contexts of learning in Education in general, and in ELT sphere in particular – from a critical point of view -- in countries like Iran and India. It deals with statement of facts and tries to profile the deficiencies of language learning classes occasioned by the traditional lecture method. The destructive impacts of the present traditional modes of instruction have been spotlighted, both at class level and social/global level. Against this backdrop, the author endeavours to recalibrate educational policy makers and language specialists' attention from the traditional approach and even Communicative Approach, which is whimsically promulgated in recent years, towards some more pragmatic solutions to our present socio-educational problems.

Introduction

Cross-border higher education has been on the increase since the last two decades. To a number of Iranians, India has been one of the preferred destinations for cross-border higher education. Ongoing cultural exchange programmes and collaborative ventures in different fields between Iran and India are fine ways of promoting international mobility, cross-cultural interaction, mutual understanding and capacity building in the context of emerging global scenario on different counts. They also help Iranians identify the main drivers of change in higher education in terms of policy and future influence for the benefit of Iran's present and future generations. At present, more than 50000 Iranian students are pursuing their studies outside Iran on different disciplines. And India has been one of the host countries for many students from Iran to enrol themselves for Ph.D level advance research programmes in varied disciplines, particularly in social sciences and humanities. A considerable number of Iranian research scholars are pursuing their research programmes in English language teaching and learning, linguistics, and such other related fields in different institutes of higher learning in India.

This researcher's classroom interactions and experience of teaching involvements with university students, discussions with teachers and subject specialists, participation in national and international conferences, both in Iran and India, and his findings of similarities and differences in the context of English language teaching and learning in

the two countries inspired him to spotlight the deficiencies of ELT in both the countries for the advantage of researchers and educational policy makers.

Common Indicators

The common indicator is that both Iranian and Indian students at the collegiate level are in the category of mixed ability – combinations, with exceptions here and there. Bilingualism, multiculturalism, multi-ethnicity, and rural-urban divide have been part of the characteristics of class combinations in both the countries.

Eye-Openers

It is unfortunate but the truth that ELT in most of the academic situations in Iran and India seems to be ineffective and impractical. English language proficiency and communicative competencies of a majority of students are open to question. At the collegiate level, most of the students, who have passed university entrance exams by their cramming skills and survival stratagems, are not able to communicate either orally or in written form even their basic intentions effectively. This is the reality in spite of the fact that they have had nearly 1000 hours of formal language instruction in their language classes before their entry into the collegiate level during nearly seven years of schooling. Most of them have a very poor command of English.

Language Classes Are Still Suffering from the Lockstep Teaching

In fact, Iranian/Indian education system is suffering from an out-of-date pedagogy and teacher dominated mode of presentation for more than a century. In this type of chalk-and-talk exam-oriented system of instruction, as Paulo Freire (1970), a Brazilian radical educationist powerfully described, the teacher acts as a narrator who infuses knowledge into ‘receptacles’ (students) through a parrot-like imitative process. This process in language classes, which are mostly run through a hybrid of grammar-translation method and audio-lingual methods, entails translation, repetition, memorization, recitation, and reproduction.

The Washback Effect

In Iran, such an instructional system is based on individualistic competition among students. And testing sets up this competitive atmosphere, in which students strongly compete against one another. Their main task is to jot down as the teacher dictates and copy the answers from the black board in order to prepare their packages for the ‘make-or-break, year-end exam nights’. Their focus is on cramming the packages so as to get ready to regurgitate them whenever they are called upon, or disgorge them in their exam papers, which usually test nothing but their short-term memory power and their knack of working rapidly under extreme pressure.

To put it another way, the manifestation of competitive ethics in education system has, in effect, made teaching subordinated to testing. This washback effect, in turn, has had pernicious impacts on learning process and consequently students' abilities for language use.

Magic Key to the Dream Future!

Students' performance and grading in such exams, however, in reality, play the role of a gold key to their future success. Those who get the highest ranks enter first-class universities and pave the way towards their dream future, and as a matter of fact deprive others from their rights.

Some other Main Problems with ELT in Iran

That English is taught through students' mother tongues aggravates the context in Iran because, in contrast to India, in Iran, English is taught as a FL, and therefore, students do not have ample opportunities for more natural acquisition of the language. The other big quandary with ELT in Iran is that it focuses on merely 'reading', irrespective of the huge ripple the dawn of the third millennium has brought with it in the arena of education in general, and in ELT sphere in particular. That is, in the present world context, English, as the international *lingua franca*, is considered as the language of economics, politics, survival, mobility, and prosperity rather than the language of libraries, and hence the need for the development of all aspects of communicative competence of students. The situation becomes worse when one notices that Western culture is sought to be eliminated from English textbooks lest its hegemonic influence intrude upon the dominance of our Islamic culture. The merits and disadvantages of this policy – teaching English through Persian culture -- should be discussed in detail, with reference to the inevitable spreading global culture, which is beyond the scope of this paper, albeit it implicitly introduces a far more pragmatic and realistic solution to the phenomenon of 'invasion of cultures'.

No Genuine Learning in Present Language Classes

Some prominent Iranian language specialists like Farhady, Jafarpoor, and Birjandi (1994) have confirmed the idea that Iranian university students do not have competence in 'language use and in its components' as they are expected to. No genuine learning occurs in the present language classes if students' ability after a long interval to apply the language to new tasks and situations is considered as the criterion for real learning. The claim may be supported by the fact that a large number of Iranian students who are pursuing their studies outside Iran on different disciplines are mostly struggling to communicate effectively. Inability of even university teachers to share their knowledge in different subject areas of their expertise through, for instance, reading, and specifically writing, may also be deemed as another reason to justify the claim that language learning is not effective enough in the present traditional language classes.

The Call for a Shift

The call of some renowned Iranian language teaching professionals like Mirhassani, Ghafar Samar, and Fattahipour (2006) and researchers like Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004) for shifting towards learner-centred approaches, which focus upon the process of learning, rather than the product of teaching, and accommodate the learners' needs and 'the socio-cultural context of English in the Iranian EFL setting', attest to the claim that ELT has not been a success in Iran hitherto.

The Situation in India Is Not that Different Either

The situation in India is not that different either. A field visit to school or collegiate level institutions, particularly in government run or rural schools or colleges, and a careful observation would make one state that many teachers do not have the required training or proficiency to handle ELT classes. Traditional approaches are used where the classes are dominated with the lecturing of teachers with students listening and working individually on assignments.

What worsens the situation is that language is taught through literature rather than every day discourse. With exceptions here and there, English is usually taught in the vernacular for the benefit of students who are not capable of comprehending or communicating in English even at the collegiate level. Even when teachers wish to teach English through English, they speak English with a concoction of regional words and local slants as if there were a lot of scope for Englishes and Hinglishes.

No Engagement in the Learning Process

Consequently, teachers are not able to sustain students' attention and interest throughout class time in such classes. Shortly after the commencement of the class, students' attention starts to waft, and by the end of the class, boredom is generally rampant. SMS-ing, chatting, emailing, listening to music, playing darts, yawning, dreaming, or even sleeping are common activities in the class. The teacher tries to engage students in the process of learning through, for example, raising some questions, but nothing much usually happens except evasion of eye contact.

Some other Causes for the Fiasco

As Gupta (2005) has asserted, one main problem is that learners' needs are constantly being ignored. The fact that students are coming from different rural and urban areas complicates the situation in the so-called language-learning classes because their sociocultural backgrounds create huge gaps in their communicative competencies.

Regarding the fate of students at the collegiate level, Prashar (2001) has averred that lack of proficiency of learners in English that starts at school level continues at the undergraduate level, where students have English as a compulsory subject for two years

in most of the universities. As a result of this situation in language classes, a number of learners either fail and try to get through as repeaters or pass with grace marks, mostly gained through cheating. These are part of the consequences of the defective educational system and traditional pedagogic approach to teaching English.

Such a context, as Sudhakar Marathe (2000) critiqued, may be considered in consequence of phoney politics, confused ideology, and dishonest pedagogic policy in the entire system of English education in India.

The Call of the Think Tank

These realities have stirred the National Council of Educational Research and Training, NCERT, (2006) in India to propose the integration of more effective innovations like those of ‘Vygotskian, Piagetian, and Chomskian approaches’ for the advantage of Indian English language classes. And educators like Pandian (2007) and Agashe have called for further research on the effectiveness of context-focused approaches.

Some More Deficiencies in Traditional Language Classes in both the Countries

Another problem in language classes, in both the countries – in Iran and India – is that all students are treated the same way. The differences between their skills, learning styles, learning strategies, and abilities are ignored. Likewise, active students’ participation in the learning process is, knowingly or unknowingly, discouraged. Even if students are given chances to illustrate their understanding, it is the high-level minority and the extroverts who dominate the class and thus deprive the majority from actual practice and real learning experiences. In fact, low performers and introverted students, who are almost always the majority, are overlooked and marginalized. Accordingly, they lose their interest and lack motivation for learning, and thereby get poorer and poorer day by day.

The other Consequences of the Teacher-Dominated Approaches to Teaching

The other destructive impact of the traditional teacher-centred approaches, which are being applied from primary to college level, is that they continue to keep students passive. Under such circumstances, there is very little scope for genuine and meaningful interaction and effective language learning. In effect, the magnificent role of mutual interaction as the most influential critical factor, specifically in SLA, is greatly ignored.

To be optimistic, the best result of this type of instructional system can be nothing but short-term mastery of the course material by students. Negation of negotiation among learners per se, for instance, as the immediate result of this system of education, lowers the opportunities for transference of academic strategies and social skills, and most notably, contributes to the elimination of creativity and critical thinking, which according to scholars like Birjandi and Naeini (2007) plays a significant role in effective language learning. It also affects students’ retention of information and eventually their attitudes towards the curriculum in negative ways. Prashar’s idea that, as a result of traditional

methods of teaching, Indian undergraduate learners have an 'aversion' to English may well justify this last claim for the language learning contexts in India. The same has been expressed by a number of researchers like Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004) for the language learning situations in Iran.

This is how the present traditional education system wreaks havoc on the process and accordingly effectiveness of learning. Consequently, students are the losers.

The 'Banking' Concept of Traditional System of Teaching

This context reminds this researcher of Freire's critique of the 'banking' concept of such traditional systems of education. Freire has excoriated this system of education in the following eloquent words:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and parrot back. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is men themselves who are filled away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, men cannot be truly human. *Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other* [italics added]. (Ibid. p. 53)

Why Sticking to It?

Despite all the deficiencies attributed to the present traditional system of education, a number of teachers and students have a penchant for it. Teachers prefer it due to some reasons. Hesitation about the feasibility of application or level of effectiveness of new innovations may be among these reasons. Most of them believe that in addition to the energy some kind of new innovations demand, they are not practical in real classroom settings. Reality, however, seems to be the fact that they lack the knack to open up their minds for the new emerging trends in the field. A considerable number of teachers, especially in India, lack the methodological savvy. This is because most of them hold a degree in Literature in lieu of Teaching. There are also teachers who lack the panache for applying innovative approaches in their classes by virtue of the fact that they are not gifted for their profession. These may be part of the reasons that have stirred some Indian specialists like Marathe to aver that a considerable number of Indian English language teachers are 'unmakers' of Indian English, trapping many learners of English often in aversion mood and mode.

Students also like this product-oriented approach inasmuch as it dispenses the information they need for securing their marks in minimum time and, of course, with no demands. When mastering some survival skills suffices them to make their dreams come

true, why bother wasting time on the so-called real learning, they may reason. Another reason for students' tendency towards the spoon-fed methods of teaching may be the fact that they have been kept away from experiencing the taste of learning in classes which are taught through world-class approaches. They are also not cognizant of the different results they are likely to reap out of such innovative approaches in the course of time.

Society: The Ultimate Victim

In the long run, it is the society that is the victim of such a system of education because it fails to empower its citizens with the required academic skills and adequate social competencies, thereby facilitating the development of maimed societies. Students' true abilities, aptitudes, potentials, and capacities come to light after they occupy positions they do not deserve. Lack of proficiency, and mediocrity become more or less routine norms. Performance suffers because a large number of people who occupy positions of authority and service to society lack proficiency. They have also been filled away with lack of creativity, to use a term from Freire.

What of That?

In brief, the present instructional system which implies the idea of 'burn the midnight oil, pass the course, and forget after the exams' appears to be no more helpful in problem solving -- real world -- situation. The need of the hour is a thorough overhauling of the educational system, which has already failed to bring effective learning, values, morals, and skills, at all graded levels.

Lack of Collective Awareness: The Main Impediment for a Thorough Renovation

The real problem in revamping the educational system of teaching and learning English so as to ensure that students excel in proficiency for communication, creative expression, employability, and mutual understanding is the lack of collective awareness. Government agencies, policy makers, educators, teachers, and student-representatives need to sit together, deliberate, and arrive at concrete solutions. Positive thinking, commitment to capacity building of students, and openness to new and innovative approaches and methods of teaching and learning are to be encouraged and supported with a concrete plan of action at several levels. Teachers and students need to be enlightened and motivated so that they are open to new ideas and approaches and become better aware of the greater benefits likely to be reaped when new approaches and methods are adopted and followed.

Is Communicative Language Teaching Pragmatic Enough?

It is in such a context that the tendency of language teaching specialists has recently shifted towards Communicative Approach. But the fact is that the results facilitated by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are falling short of expectations in the real world context in most parts of the world including Iran and India. The truth is that CLT

does not have the potential to develop all aspects of communicative competencies of students for the development of which it has evolved. That is, in practice, it fails to develop grammatical competence, strategic competence, sociolinguistic competence, sociocultural competence, and discourse competence of students in parallel. This is a big problem because successful living in the present real world settings and being able to face the realities of this dynamic, complicated, and competitive world demands something more than the use of the language.

The other big drawback of CLT is that it fails to appreciate the local economic, political, historical, and cultural factors of countries like Iran and India. As Harmer' (2003) pointed out, it is negligent of the fact that "the very act of teaching pre-supposes some kind of moral position about the way knowledge and skill are passed on and acquired, and about the relationships that should exist in such an environment" (p. 290). In addition, in its theory of learning, CLT does not convey crystal-clear views regarding learning process and the mechanisms under which effective language learning occurs. Being limited to a particular view of language learning and particular type of syllabi may also be considered as another quandary with this approach. Furthermore, it fails to realise the significant role of effective variables such as context of learning, students' attitudes, and cultural expectations in the learning process which are as important as the teaching method (Bax 2003). And finally, CLT fails to systematically cater to learners with different ability ranges and learning styles.

Structured Cooperative Learning: A Suggestion

It is against such a backdrop that this researcher has tried to recalibrate ELT specialists' attention from conventional unrealistic methods of instruction towards more flexible, practical, and of course effective context-focused approaches like Collaborative Learning, Interactive Learning, and Cooperative Learning (Hosseini 2006). The significance of CL, for example, is that it puts the emphasis on learner, learning process, learning environment, and other effective variables in language learning such as students' attitudes and sociocultural expectations. Also, it has the potential to address all aspects of communicative competence of students more systematically.

In CL settings, the stress is not on translation, repetition, memorization, recitation, and reproduction of factual or descriptive statements in contrived circumstances which are negligent of the majority. Rather the emphasis is on higher order of incisive and analytical thinking skills such as clarification, evaluation of causes and effects, analysis, prediction, comparison, synthesis, elaboration, generalization, and application of concepts during problem solving activities via, for example, paraphrasing, summarising, and negotiating. These activities are scaffold by authentic, relaxing, and motivating interactive environments, which ensure the involvement of all learners in the process of shared language learning. Such environments are most likely to contribute to the development of not only leaning strategies and language skills, but also some crucial habits of mind such as objectivity and critical and creative thinking.

Therefore, CL, which takes its roots from fields of science like anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, and philosophy could be one of the most effective approaches that could provide contextual and concrete solutions, especially in the present scenario of ongoing globalisation. Iranian/Indian classrooms at all levels, all the more at the collegiate level, by virtue of their mixed-ability combinations, and variety and diversity, could serve as the ideal matrix for practising CL methods. As such, the infusion of such pragmatic innovations, which have the potential to address the deficiencies of the conventional methods of teaching, into the field is essential. The important thing that the respective visionaries and policy makers may need to keep in mind is that the inclusion of such innovations merely in methodology box, syllabi, and textbooks would not be sufficient if the problems afflicting the field are to be addressed in a holistic and appropriate manner.

To Sum Up

The illocutionary force of this paper is an overall reconstruction of the entire educational mechanism if we want to go side by side with paradigm shifts and face the challenges of globalisation. This renovation, which has to include online technologies also, should encompass the whole skeleton of Education in general, and ELT sphere in particular, from the traditional definitions of educational terms and notions to evaluation systems and criteria for teacher recruitment. But for the perlocutionary effect of this paper to come true, there is a need for a fundamental shift in attitudes of all involved stakes first— a wider and more holistic and realistic outlook.

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