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Problems in Teaching/Learning English as a Second Language in India

P. Sreenivasulu Reddy, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Abstract

This article gives an account of how English has spread and gained the status of a global language. It examines the present status of English as a second language in India. The domineering position of English in the modern world is identified. The paper shows how English will continue to hold a secure position even in future. This article lists different features of language, defines language and identifies the factors that affect second language learning. It also asserts that it is essential for a language teacher to understand the different theories involved in the process of teaching and learning to make teaching effective. This understanding forms the basis for a teacher to select a proper approach, method and technique that would be useful to her/his students. This article also discusses different problems faced by teachers of English in India. It also explains the need for a teacher to be resourceful and knowledgeable to meet the grave situation and promote better standards of achievement.

The Spread of English

Today's world considers English as a global language because there has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English. It makes news daily in many countries and is adopted by many countries. It has a special role to play in the countries where it has been accepted as the official language and is being used as a medium of communication. The

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statistics collected by David Crystal (1997: 61) shows that nearly 670 million people use English with fluency and competency. This figure is steadily growing ever since 1990. English now holds a dominant position in every sphere of human activity. It is a very significant input in all the developments in the world. It has reached the present day status primarily because of two main factors the expansion of British Empire in the 19th century and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the 20th century.

Growing demand for English in the context of modern day development

The demand for English has been sweeping almost all the fields of national life like politics, international relations, and media, Communication, travel and education. Most of the earlier scientific innovations were made in Britain and are now continued in America. The advancements in Science and Technology and their use of new terminology have been showing an immediate impact on the language, adding tens of thousands of words to the English lexicon. As these innovations come down from the English-speaking countries, those who wish to update their knowledge and learn about new inventions need to learn English well. This need has resulted in a dramatic increase of the expository material in the English language. Besides all the dictionaries, encyclopedias and books of knowledge are written and printed in English. Hence, the access to new knowledge is only through the English language

The English language has been an important medium of the press for nearly 400 years. Right from the Weekly News (1622) and the London Gazette (1666), there has been a continuous rise of newspapers and Journals in English. With the introduction of new printing technology and new methods of mass production and transportation, by the end of 19th century, there were nearly 2000 newspapers in the English language According to the data compiled by the Encyclopedia Britannica (1994), about a third of the world's newspapers are being published in the countries where the English language has a special status. A review of the influence of the individual newspapers (as reported in the Book of Lists, 1977) says that the top five papers are in English: the first is New York Times, followed by The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and the two British papers, The Times and The Sunday Times.

The importance of the English language in educational field is clear from the fact that many countries have made English as an official language. Consequently, the English language teaching (ELT) has become one of the major growth industries around the world in the recent years. For instance, by 1998, the British Council had a network of offices in 109 countries promoting cultural, educational and technical cooperation. In 1995-96, over 4, 00,000 candidates worldwide took English language examination administered by the Council. There are thousands of students learning English and other skills through the medium of English in the teaching centers of the Council.

Another widely quoted statistics is: about 80 percent of the world's electronically stored information is currently in English. This includes two kinds of data: information stored by the individual firms, organizations and libraries etc., and the information made available through the

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internet. This is so because the first protocols devised to carry data on the Net were developed from the English alphabet. It is an accepted truth that if one wants to take a full advantage of the internet and World Wide Web, it is possible only by learning English; because most of the browsers are still unable to handle multilingual data presentation. Thus, the English language provides the chief means of access to high-tech communication and information. This makes us conclude that English will retain its role as the dominant language in the modern world. Further, it continues to remain as the world's language for international communication as the whole world is heading towards the formation of a global village.

English as a Second Language in India

English in India is a question of linguistic centralism while the other Indian languages lead to linguistic regionalism.. A foreign language existing so firmly and distinctly has posed a problem to the country. From Macaulay to Manmohan Singh, we have seen many reports and commissions; but these have been only exhortations and attempts to improve the position of regional languages. Yet, the language problem became more Complicated without any practical solution. It developed into a very serious problem as no solution has been offered. The growing modernization and internationalism in the world prevented us from doing away with the English language. Besides, Indian languages are often associated with tradition and are understood to be anti-modern. Therefore, a complete switchover to the Indian languages would lead to educational chaos and total isolation from the developments on the international arena. We could not risk this because of the cultural, social, political and economic reasons. Hence, this situation needed an urgent solution.

The only resolution that could be thought of was a need for coexistence of English with Indian languages. As a result, we had to define the role of English in India and its relationship with Indian languages. This gave rise to language planning. Consequently, the major Indian languages became the Regional Languages.' Hindi was given the status of Official Language and English was accepted as the other Official Language. It was considered that English would promote integration as it cannot be identified with any region. Further, the role of English was strengthened and consolidated as English was recognized and perceived as:

- The language of knowledge (Science and Technology)
- The language of liberal, modern thinking
- A window on the world
- The language of library, reason

Thus, the three language formula came into existence. This policy was proposed in 1956 by the Central Advisory Board on Education and was adopted at the Chief Minister's conference in 1961. The policy aimed at making English an integral part of the school education in India. This naturally restricted the learning and use of Hindi and the students started learning English as a second language. Accordingly, the classical languages, particularly Sanskrit, suffered a decline

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and English became the second language in education both in Hindi and non-Hindi speaking areas.

The Education Commission 1964-66 has identified English as a 'library language' and felt that it would continue essentially in higher education. Therefore, the Commission recommended that English should begin from class V.

When we look at the language study situation in the school curriculum, the students study three languages:

- The first language, L_1 is introduced in the school from grade I to X. This would be usually the mother tongue of the students and, in general, the medium of expression and social communication.
- The second language, L_2 is introduced either at grade V or VI. L_2 would be either the state official language or national language.
- The third language, L_3 is generally introduced simultaneously or immediately after the introduction of second language. The main objective of the study of L_3 is mainly to prepare the students for all India mobility.

From the point of view of language policy, English is defined as L_3 the third language, and it cannot be L_2 . But, English is introduced and studied as the second language. Here is the Report of the Working Group on the Study of Languages (NCERT, 1986) which suggests the beginning of the study of the three languages in the school curriculum in the Context of three-language formula.

- Primary stage—only Mother Tongue/Regional Languages, both as a subject and medium, from class I to V.
- Post-Primary/Secondary — English and Modern Indian Language. Three languages to be taught - State Language, one Modern Indian Language (including Hindi) and English.
- Secondary stage — the same pattern as in post primary.
- Senior Secondary — State Language and optionally, English for Specific Purposes.

The picture is like this:

Stage	Class	Languages
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Lower Primary	1 to V	Mother Tongue/State Language
Upper Primary	VI to VIII	State Language + Modern Indian Language + English
Secondary	IX to X	State Language + Modern Indian Language + English
Senior Secondary	XI to XII	State Language (+ ESP Optional)

(The Working Group Report, 1986:21)

Table above: Showing the Study of languages in the school curriculum

From the above description, we can observe the relative ‘constancy’ of English and also how the concept of ‘second language’ becomes diffused. Again, the same report speaks on the importance of English, since-knowledge is growing at a breath-taking pace. English should primarily be taught, so that, at the end of a four/five year course:

- i. It can be used as a ‘library language’ to enable the learner to keep abreast of the latest assertions to different fields of knowledge.
- ii. It can enable the learner to pursue higher/professional education The basic competencies in the first four years should be in that of reading, writing, listening and speaking (and) these should be developed with reference to a specific corpus of language material and communication needs.

Further, the National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education (NCERT, 1989) recommends a free alteration of English either as a second language or as a third language. These provisions made English the second language. The functions of English are only ancillary; because, nowhere in the country English is used to maintain personal relations or carry on social and cultural activities or business.

To quote Kapoor , “Now the failure in teaching English as a second language stems not from the theory, training and mechanics of language teaching, but from the intrinsic conceptual inappropriateness in accepting English as a second language, L2, pedagogically and linguistically. Analyzing the issue further, he says that English certainly is not useful in our day to day life. This, in fact, is the main problem of teaching English in India. Being a foreign language it cannot function as a second language; but it has been uniformly imposed as L2 all over the country. What is more, when one looks at the functions, goals and instructional

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objectives, it is evident that English is to be taught as L2. To agree with Kapoor, all the Indian students study English as one of the Indian languages; and therefore, are not able to achieve any competence. All the remedial courses, U.G.C sponsored institutes, use of technology, audio cassettes, the language laboratory, radio, TV, reviews of syllabi, testing, error analysis have not helped in improving students' standards in any way. The standard of English has always fallen short of even the minimum level, except in certain cases.

A review of the problem will reinforce the following facts:

- Teaching practices are to be improved
- Objectives and needs of teaching are to be matched
- Clarity about basic concepts is to be brought
- Principles and methods of teaching are to be coordinated

Hence, there is an urgent need to re-examine the problem and do the needful.

Aims of Teaching English in India

As the English language is getting consolidated as a global language, **it** is indispensable for all the countries to teach and learn English. Otherwise, it is difficult to keep pace with the development in the world. In particular, it is very essential for a multilingual and developing country like India to learn this global language. Hence, to make the learning of English effective and successful a teacher should consider the following aims and objectives. They are to enable our students:

- listen and understand English when someone speaks it at a normal conversational speed
- use English for communication
- read English and understand the content
- write English for communication
- enjoy Simple poems
- develop interest in library reading and listening

There are a number of sub-skills under these broad skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, which have to be carefully cultivated in the process of teaching.

Specifications under listening

- distinguish the characteristics of English sounds
- understand the tone of the speaker who may express feelings of politeness, fear, anger etc.

Specifications under Speaking

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- produce the correct sounds and clusters of sounds
- use the correct stress patterns, pauses and intonation
- use the appropriate words and sentence patterns

Specifications under Reading

- read the passage silently and fast
- understand the central idea of the passage
- locate key words, key phrases and key sentences present in the passage
- guess the meaning of new words in context
- give a suitable title to the passage

Specifications under Writing

- write grammatically correct sentences
- use appropriate words, phrases and sentence patterns
- follow a logical sequence
- organize writing in paragraphs
- avoid unnecessary repetition
- write with correct spelling and use marks of punctuation its unique features.

Problems in Teaching/Learning English as a Second Language in India

The teaching of English in India has always been in difficult circumstances. This is so because of the large population of the country, bleak economic conditions, the cultural and social diversities, insufficient men and material, etc. Let us discuss some of these here.

Lack of Clear-cut Policy

One of the main reasons for the poor standard of English is the lack of a clear-cut policy. There have been frequent changes in the policy of the government towards the teaching and learning of English. Though English is taught as a compulsory subject, only the pass mark is taken into consideration. As the percentage of low achievers has been ever increasing, the Government has decided not to consider marks in English as essential for admission into a university course. The educationists and politicians differ on the role and status of English in India. If we are to aim at good standards in English, it is high time that the Government takes a strong decision to formulate and implement appropriate policies that promote students' learning of English.

Lack of Exposure to the Language

Most of the Indian students are exposed to their mother tongues. They do not get adequate opportunities either to listen to or speak in English. They listen to English only in the 'English-

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class. The teaching of the other subjects is mostly in their regional languages as the medium of instruction is in their vernacular languages. It is only language in the cities and urban areas that we find English medium schools. Because of the poor social and economic backgrounds, they neither get enough exposure to English outside the classroom nor enough opportunities to improve themselves in speaking it. This naturally reduces their use of English and results in a poor competence in the language.

Non-availability of Suitable Teaching/Learning Material

Many teaching/ learning materials like — good textbooks, workbooks, and handbooks for teachers, TV, radio, charts or other useful visual material — are essential for effective teaching. Unfortunately many teachers and students are not provided with these materials. Hence, sometimes the teaching and learning becomes more imaginative than practical.

Lack of Good Teachers of English

Good teachers of English are found in very small number in India. Hence, not having a good teacher of English is a common experience of all the students of English. The teachers of English are either not trained properly or they are the teachers of other subjects. Even if they are trained, they are trained by the teachers of English in India but not by the native speakers. Even the materials and methodology used in these training programmes are outdated. As such, it is the same limited experience that is shared. There is hardly any scope to improve intuitive and spontaneous knowledge of the language. Though there are institutes like CIEFL, RIEs and, ELTCs to train teachers of English, they are hardly enough for the large demands of the Indian teacher population.

Defective Methods

The methodology which is practiced to teach English in schools is not appropriate. The oral work which is the soul of any method is totally neglected. Writing which is an advanced skill to be learnt is taught right from the beginning. Students are not given exposure to the use of language. Language is taught by the rules and learnt by rote memory. As a result, students fail to achieve any compel the use of language.

Lack of Motivation

As students do not find any immediate need for English, their interest naturally slackens. Similarly, as there is no immediate reward for their achievement, the interest decreases. The poverty and the insecure sociological conditions also force them to neglect the language. In addition, learning a foreign language is not an easy task and the much needed exposure and practice are not available to achieve fluency in the use of the language.

Large Classes

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With our large population we do not find any class where student's number is less than 60. As the students in the class are always heterogeneous, there is hardly any time to pay attention to the weak or creative child. Even the average students do not get enough experience in the use of language. There is no scope for individual attention. This, certainly, hinders the intellectual growth.

Faulty Examination System

Generally, the methodology of teaching is fashioned on the type of evaluation, though it should be happening the other way. Our examinations of English encourage the students for rote memory because many times the questions are based on summarizing either a poem or a narration. The language skills are not tested to any appreciable degree. Speech skills are totally neglected. Teachers also find it very difficult to motivate the students in the class because the students always aim at memorizing the notes from low-standard guides and reproducing them in the examination.

With all the problems, discussed above, the standard of English in our country is deplorably low. Hence, a lot of responsibility is thrown on the shoulders of the teachers to make their classes interesting and learning of English fruitful. They have to gear up to meet the demands of the situation and successfully perform their duties.

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