

Everyday Problems in Teaching English Language to Young Learners

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Abstract

Teaching any second language, particularly English has always been a strenuous task, especially while dealing with the students who come from different cultures and backgrounds, as it involves some complexities which can be overcome through the application of appropriate strategies. English language has put down firm roots in India from the inception of the British rule. Initially English was taught to the people by the missionaries, and slowly it developed as an official language. People treat English as a tool for social advancement even after the British rule; no other vernacular language has tried to replace this foreign language.

English has become the *lingua franca* of international transactions in the globalized world. Young learners require an ever-increasing range of skills to maintain relevance with the global environment of the new millennium. For students whose mother tongue is not English, mastering English is very important, not only for their academic life, but also for their prospective career. English is a matron nurse who makes delivery of ideas easy, but as a medium of instruction it poses many challenges both for learners and teachers. Mother tongue influence is one of the serious threats to the advancement of learning, which should be dealt dexterously. Pronunciation is one of the language traits which is seriously affected by mother tongue. The socio-cultural background of an individual helps propel forward a very strong impact of mother tongue on English teaching and learning.

This paper includes an analysis of the problems in teaching English Language to young learners and strategies to meet these challenges.

Keywords: English Language, mother tongue influence, mother-tongue and pronunciation, Young Learners, teaching language, learning second language, language teaching strategies

English – Essential Part of Modern Communication

Communication has become the prime necessity of man, the days before the birth of the language have nothing worth recording, and this unique speech trait has made him stand above the rest of creation. Though there are different languages, the feelings of the human beings are same, the base feelings of anger, happiness, gloominess, have been described in different ways. After the basic emotion man had thought of moving beyond this to speak his heart which had given scope for abundant literature. Every idea which takes birth in the heart of an individual

needs to be delivered at the proper time through a channel called language. It may be any language like English, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi or any other.

English Language plays an important role in the development of any country; just as in other countries English occupies a place of prestige in our country. English Knowledge helps us establish cultural, economic commercial and political relations with the rest of the World. English language has laid its firm roots in India from the inception of the British rule; initially English was taught to the people by the missionaries, and slowly it developed as an official language. People treat English as a tool for social advancement even after the British rule; no other vernacular language has been able to replace this foreign language. English is a matron nurse who makes delivery of ideas easy, but as a medium of instruction it poses many challenges both for learners and teachers.

Appropriate Strategies Required

Teaching English Language has always been a strenuous task, while dealing with the students who come from different cultures and backgrounds, since it involves some complexities, but they can be overcome through the application of appropriate strategies.

Mother tongue influence is one of the issues which could hamper the advancement of English learning, which should be dealt carefully and intelligently. Mother tongue influence is the most difficult thing to avoid in the speech process of foreign or target language. However, English has different aspects like grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and a few phrases, that move easily on the tongue, and these intrude and make their way into other languages.

Role of Comparison

Comparison is natural in human beings. It is also the accepted way of learning. Identifying the new things, comparing them with the old, is the best way to understand the new things; the same phenomena is also found in learning a target language. Learners compare new language with their native language, trying to find the accessibility of the new language; this is not always a wrong approach to learn language, but there is a danger of limiting the scope of the target language with the frontiers of the mother tongue.

The Role of Translation

The idea of translation makes the teacher and the learner to ignore the beauty of the target language, making it a laboratory process, a mere memorization of letters; the idiomatic expressions, which are peculiar to the target language, lose their sanctity if they are understood separately, inferring the meanings of individual words. The literal meaning of the expression cannot justify the actual sense of expression, but if the student is habituated for such a procedure, he cannot appreciate the actual sense of the expression; even the teacher becomes helpless at such instances. Examples: cake walk, bed of roses, far gone, bear the cross, etc. which sound differently from their individual words. Mother tongue which is always ready to provide the learner with its own assistance might mislead him, by giving altogether a different sense of the expression.

Problems of Pronunciation

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Pronunciation of words, sentences, etc., in another language is one of the language traits which is affected by mother tongue influence. Certain sounds may be unique to a particular language one is learning which may not be mimicked thoroughly by finding their equivalents in the mother tongue. Our performance in the target language English is usually affected and perfect matching is usually hard. The sounds like /æ// w // n // Ø / which are peculiar to English language, could only be pronounced correctly by a native speaker. The non-native speaker who tries to find substitutes for them in his/her language could probably corrupt the original sound, which makes his English pronunciation incorrect. The teacher is of course in no way exempt from this. We cannot afford to employ native speakers of English to teach English all over the world. Hence, these lapses in pronunciation are natural, even in the teacher, and they are thoroughly impressed upon the minds of the learners. Therefore students tend to acquire the wrong pronunciation from their teacher. A non-native teacher of the target language should get proper training in the skill of pronunciation and try her/his best in helping students understand how English sounds are uttered, read and explain the basic functions of English intonation for the proper usage of sounds. We can learn to pronounce English words and sentences in such a way that the speakers of other languages including native speakers of English are able to comprehend what we say.

Socio-cultural and Educational Background

The socio-cultural background of an individual makes a very strong impact of mother tongue influences on English language teaching and learning. A teacher from rural background explains everything to a student keeping the result-oriented objective in the mind through which students can secure a good percentage of marks in the exam, but their target language enhancement cannot be improved. The other factor which affects English language teaching and learning is the teacher's inefficiency in making students aware of the basic skills of the language LSRW. Many teachers prefer their students to practice more the reading and writing skills, leaving aside two important skills listening and speaking.

Learning Process

Listening is the first step in learning any language; a teacher should train his students to be active listeners, which makes them concentrate on the pronunciation, vocabulary, of the target language in an appropriate way. The teacher can play any motivating speeches and dialogues of the characters from the reputed dramas and allow students to repeat them in the form of role play activities. Teachers can also ask students to listen to readings of short stories and help them to tell back the story with their own improvisations. With this practice they can modify their errors and later involve themselves in good speaking sessions.

Attitude

Attitude of the students can also become a hindrance in English language teaching. A rural student can find English a difficult language to learn, though he has the desire to learn it, but the fear of committing mistakes may make him/her develop a negative attitude towards speaking and learning the language. If the teacher takes an active part by conducting speaking sessions like debates, discussions, role plays, where there will be more scope for students to interact with other students and teachers, by taking the assistance of audio-visual aids in class rooms and in labs, by providing listening and reading comprehension to improve the competency

of students in speaking and listening skills simultaneously. The thinking of all human beings may not be the same, there may be students who are exceptionally talented in the academics, but not interested in competing well in studies, getting skilled well in the target language, English. For such students the teacher should counsel them, telling them about the importance of English language for their future lives and motivate them to take part in practicing the language skills.

Theories of Learning

Linguists all over the world have become alert to such issues and postulated certain theories to set right this problem. Methods like grammar translation method, bilingual method, direct method and so on. The grammar translation method, also known as the classical method, is one of the oldest or traditional methods of teaching English. It is introduced in India by the Britishers in the words of M. L. Tickoo this method “came to English Language Teaching in most of Asia in general and India in particular with support in the long- established tradition of teaching classical languages in the United Kingdom. The system of education in the country served as a model for schools in most of its colonies. The psychological beliefs that prevailed then were (a) that classical languages with their intricate systems of grammar were capable of training human faculties including memory, and (b) that learning these languages was part of a truly liberal education. Teaching and learning primarily aimed at the ability to read full texts rather than to communicate orally in everyday situations”. (Tickoo, 2003: p. 349)

As this method deals with memorizing of words and rules which are taught with the support of mother tongue, learners cannot come out of the influence of their mother tongue. This method did not help students to communicate freely, since this method deals with memorizing and not practicing.

Direct Method

The Direct Method: The direct method, sometimes also called as the ‘reform’ method, ‘natural’ method, ‘psychological’ method, ‘phonetic’ method and ‘anti- grammatical’ method, was established in France and Germany around 1900, and introduced in India in the early 20th century as a reform which was needed in the methods of teaching English. The major assumptions of this method were in opposition to the grammar-translation method.

According to Bhatia and Bhatia, the main aim of teaching English by this method is to enable the learner: “to think in English and to discourage the practice of inwardly thinking in one’s vernacular and then overtly translating the thought into the foreign language. He should be able to grasp what he hears or reads in English and should be able to express his thoughts and wishes directly and fluently so that in due course of time he obtains a real command over the language”. (Bhatia 1972; p315)

Bilingual Method

This method was developed by Dr. C.J. Dodson. As the name suggests, the method makes use of two languages- the mother tongue and the target language. Hence, this can be considered as a combination of the direct method and the grammar-translation method. ‘Selection’, ‘Gradation’, ‘Presentation’, and ‘Repetition’ are the four cardinal principles of all language teaching methodology.

So, many theories have been postulated to teach English language to young learners. Though many methods have emerged, the success of all the methods depends on the integrity of teacher and students who are the actual practitioners.

No Best Method

The following observation by Ms V. Saraswathi is very important to quote in this connection. She says: “There is no best method. The history of language teaching presents a fascinating variety of methods. If there are such a variety of methods, which one are we to choose? There is no definite answer to this question, what works with one learner may not work with another. One may be a wizard in grammar, but another may just hate it. Others might enjoy memorizing sentences”. (Saraswathi, 2004: p. 63) She further adds: “Different methods may be appropriate to different contexts. If we start searching for the perfect method or the ideal single solution to the problem of language learning, we are bound to fail”. (Saraswathi, 2004: p. 63) Like V. Saraswathi, Diane-Larsen-Freeman’s remark on language teaching methodology sums up a major trend away from unity to diversity in the following words. They comment: “There is no single acceptable way to go about teaching language today.” (DL Freeman, 1986: p. 86) The statements quoted above make it clear that no single approach or method is appropriate for all learning styles. But a teacher should identify variety of sources to make a young learner interested in listening in the class by planning different activities and techniques.

Motivation

Lack of motivation among the learners, insufficient provision of audio-visual aids, and lack of strict supervision are the challenges to overcome, to make a student effective in English language learning and speaking. All these challenges can be overcome if the teachers take an active part in building rapport with class and by laying down a firm rule that there will be no other language spoken in the class other than English. Motivating students not by teaching, but by always speaking with them and correcting their mistakes with care, and organizing interactive sessions like debate, role plays etc., all of which in turn help the students in learning the target language effectively. The teacher should become a good role model to the students by using spoken and written English confidently and adapting language usage in different situations, helping students improve their interpersonal skills. The teacher should make the students to become capable in listening, speaking, reading, and writing as well as in interaction skills which help students to be competent in the present world of teams.

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