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English Language Teaching in Rural India - Issues and Suggestions

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Mixed Ability Class – A Regular and Normal Feature in Rural Areas

In a multilingual and multicultural country like India, classes of mixed ability groups are a feature of every small town and village. ELT experts have suggested ways for teachers to teach English meaningfully to such classes, normally comprising *very able*, *able*, *less able* and *unable* students.

Grouping of students of different ability levels is one of the most frequently suggested ways. There are different ways of grouping. As Peter Hubbard and others say, “the teacher’s first task is to organise groups that are either representative of different ability levels, or mixed so that each is a small cross-section of the class as a whole” (Peter Hubbard, et al.1983).

However, these experts, like many others, admit that doing justice to a mixed ability class involves cost, both in terms of money and time. They say: “Teacher-produced material is very demanding on time and energy and it will not be possible to cater in this way for

each lesson. It is necessary to have a wide choice of books and visuals, especially graded readers and it is very necessary for the teacher in this situation to be given adequate time for preparation and good facilities for duplication” (Peter Hubbard, et al.1983: 311-12).

Contrasting Indian Classrooms with Those in Western Nations

Hubbard and others might be talking about a classroom of the west, where the strength of a typical class could be much smaller than that of an Indian classroom. In our country we come across classrooms overflowing with students, especially in schools and colleges which have a name.

Good teachers of English might try group work, pair work, etc., with the limited resources and time available to them. However, a large number of college teachers do not do so because of their apprehension that they won't be able to complete the syllabus on time.

I wonder if we can blame teachers for this because they are answerable to the society and institutional authorities and hence their aim is to teach in such a way that a good number of students pass examinations. Thus, testing and evaluation designed by boards of education and universities have a negative washback effect on her teaching in the classroom.

My Experience and the Lessons I learned

I teach in a college located in a small city and the student population there differs considerably in their abilities. In a compulsory English class there are not less than 150 students and they come from different socio-cultural, linguistic and economic backgrounds. Even in an English special class, generally comprising 30 to 50 students, this diversity is visible.

With the minimum knowledge I have about dealing with mixed ability classes I try to do what I can. However, over the years, I have failed to understand the specific reason why I witness such diversity of competence in English classrooms. Of late, I even tend to think that this unmanageable difference in the students' competence in the language is our own creation.

It often surprises me when I hear that many of the *less able* and *unable* students have scored first class marks in their qualifying examinations, although spellings of simple words are like a puzzle for them.

For obvious reasons, let us not discuss their failure in constructing simple sentences. Such weak knowledge of English underscores the fact that there is something awfully wrong in the way the typical Indian student is 'brought up' to do his graduation in colleges where all efforts of teachers to reform their English language skills prove futile.

Our Own Creation

I have already suggested that the vast difference in the competence of students seems to be our own creation. The socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students do play an important role in their linguistic skills. However, the general feeling is that such things are beyond the teachers' control. For example, Ramadevi (2002:234-35), in an article entitled "Inside the Classroom", says: "We need not dwell too much on the home and socio-economic background of the learners. Likewise, we need not dwell too much on factors like aptitude, age, previous world experience, etc. These are clearly not under the teacher's control and nothing much can be done about them." The question is, aren't these factors important and shouldn't they be addressed by the State, if not by the teachers alone?

Importance of Primary Education in Nation Building

The importance of primary education has been frequently highlighted by individuals and by the education commissions of the colonial and postcolonial periods. For instance, as early as 1910, emphasizing the importance of compulsory and free primary education, Gopal Krishna Gokhale informed the British government that "the whole of our future as a nation is inextricably bound up with it" (Aggarwal, 1992:34).

In the *Revised National Policy on Education* (Aggarwal, 1992:403) we read: "It shall be ensured that free and compulsory education of satisfactory quality is provided to all children upto 14 years of age before we enter the twenty-first century."

Similarly, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, aims to provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6 to 14 years. The Act certainly envisages an ambitious project. Its fifth chapter, for instance, states that the curriculum and the evaluation procedure should aim at the all round development of the child; that learning should be through activities, discovery and exploration in a child friendly and child centered manner; and that the medium of instruction should, as far as practicable, be in the child's mother tongue. (These details of the Act are taken from *The Gazette of India*, No. 39, 27 August, 2009, displayed on the website

http://www.indg.in/primary-education/policies, p. 9.) Indeed, these clauses, if implemented strictly, can bring about change.

The Position of English in the Curriculum – Inadequate and Improper Models

However, the fact of the moment is that primary education is fraught with problems. The position of English in the curriculum does not seem to have received any serious attention. In some states English is taught from Class I onwards, while in some other states it is taught at a later stage.

ELT experts like Perren, as quoted by Hans R. Dua, (1994:109) tells us that the earlier a child is exposed to a language the quicker it learns to use it: “Since all must use English, it is best for children to begin at an age when it is easiest, when there is no pronounced language-learning differential.”

Similarly, the better the language model the child hears, the better the language it uses. However, barring a few cosmopolitan and metropolitan schools, most children in our primary schools are exposed to a very limited amount of English and over a period of five or six years irreparable damage is done to the students’ ability to acquire English.

At the high school level, too, the trend continues. The reasons for this deplorable tendency are obvious. The teachers themselves, in spite of their good intentions, are not good users of English. According to Seshadri (1997:206), “Most teachers of English in our schools are products of our university system. Obviously our departments of English do not equip them with the kind of skills needed to teach English.”

But teachers also have their complaints. Seshadri (1997) says: “The school teachers say that many of their students are not sufficiently motivated because not all of them go for higher education. Also, they do not see the usefulness or relevance of English in their immediate environment.”

Promotion to the Next Higher Class without Passing Exams with Adequate Performance

Similarly, since our country is involved in the national literacy mission, the general policy is to pass all, or nearly all, of the students up to Class VII or VIII. When this privilege exists, one does not bother much about the mixed abilities of our students. In some places, where there are too many schools, it is the teacher’s necessity to have the required number of students in their class. After bringing students to school with much

difficulty, the teachers cannot fail them because they have to get students in the coming year, too.

High School Education Is No Different

Whatever is said about our primary school education may also be applicable, in many respects, to the high school, and junior college education of our country. There, too, problems of various kinds exist. Sometimes teachers engage in tuition classes to supplement their income (Anjana Desai, (1993:39) or they have to teach in classrooms with inadequate infrastructure.

Collegiate Education

When students come to the senior college, where many of us are well-paid players, teachers have a lot of complaints. Here let us focus, for a while, on the students who specialize in English language and literature. Fortunately for many of us, these complaints have been articulated from time to time by the leading teacher-researchers of our country.

For example, at the second TELI Conference held in Hyderabad, Anjana Desai (1993:39) complained that there is “no opportunity to...work out integrative syllabi to link school, college and university curricula...” Desai (1993:38, 41) says: “The more sinister side to the school teaching situation is that quite often even those who have the required qualifications to be lecturers choose to become school teachers because they can then give tuitions for unwarranted income.” Teachers’ knowledge and their method of teaching are also subjected to scrutiny by her: “[Students] are lectured to by teachers who have very often not read anything more than the books allotted to them to teach, in the selection of which ... they may not have a say.”

According to Nagarajan (1978:170), there are two groups of students in our colleges in which one group comprises vernacular school students “who do not have enough English to read English literature with pleasure and discrimination.” The number of such students is very high in rural and small city colleges. Those, who use English fluently, almost like their mother tongue, are very few and yet they are powerful enough to create a sense of alienation among the students whose English is faulty. The latter looks at the fluent minority as models to imitate.

Compulsory English in College Studies

The preceding sections of this paper briefly highlighted the major problems of teaching English in Indian schools and colleges. Students who come to colleges from schools, and who specialize in humanities and social sciences, have to do a Compulsory English course till the end of their graduation. And the variety and number of students (sometimes more than 200) in this English class are beyond anybody's imagination.

I wonder how much can a teacher know about their varied abilities. If a sense of futility creeps into the mind of the teacher she cannot be blamed. How much pair work or group work can be given in such a class when the teacher has a textbook to finish in such a way that most of them pass the examination?

The real problem is the miserably inadequate language which they have learnt in the previous years. Even to work in pairs or groups, let us not forget, there is a minimum requirement of language proficiency. A teacher cannot spend her time first on the task of training for that proficiency and then teach what she is expected to. It is a special mixed ability group, I think, specially created for her by an essentially flawed system.

A Possible Resolution of Our Issues: Testing the Aptitude and Motivation

The gloomy picture is given in the preceding sections to enquire whether we can minimize the lamentable disparity in the abilities of the students to whom we impart English. At a time when we talk about the revamping of primary education, let us consider the prospect of introducing English at the primary stage to test the aptitude and inclination of the learner.

Let us ensure that we provide quality education in English to the little children who can learn a second language more easily than their adult counterparts. We are fully aware of the difficulties involved in the provision of such quality. It certainly requires technological and human resources. It requires enough infrastructures. But if our intention is not to reduce our graduate programmes to mass literacy programmes, then we should start from the beginning.

Let Us Train Our Primary School Teachers, et al.

We live in an age of multimedia products. The computer is no longer a rare commodity even in remote places. Let us first train our primary teachers to be efficient users of English with the assistance of modern multimedia facilities. Let them also be trained to use the media effectively in their classrooms. Let the same practice be continued through the high school and, if necessary through the college. This will definitely incur a lot of

expense. But now our governments are determined to spend enough on education and the determination should reflect in the innovative methods of teaching and learning. Consequently, by the time our students come to Class X they should be really able to use English for the basic skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

How About Making English an Optional Subject?

Another question that may be raised in this section of solutions is whether English can be made optional? While our attempt is to enable the school students to use the language for the four skills we also need to ask whether we should impose it at any stage. Can we have options for the students to drop English at certain levels, say, Class V, VIII or X, when they feel that they don't have the aptitude or use for it? This does not, however, mean that we should be casual about its teaching. The primary concern should be to avoid students quitting English courses at any level and for that, as suggested earlier, the subject should be taught intensively inculcating in them a sense of purpose and value of what they are doing in the class.

Vocationalisation – A Possible Solution

The next question to be considered in this regard pertains to the students who opt out of English in spite of all our earnest efforts to teach it. The recommendations of various education commissions constituted in the post-independence period have explained the importance of the vocationalisation of education. For example, the Secondary Education Commission of 1952-53 (Agarwal, 1992: 95) said: "... there is a need to promote technical skill and efficiency at all stages of education so as to provide trained and efficient personnel to work out schemes of industrial and technological advancement."

Similarly, the basic education Standing Committee of the Central Advisory Board of Education (Agarwal, 1992: 107) pointed out: "In basic education, as... in any good scheme of education, knowledge must be related to activity, practical experience and observation. To ensure this, basic education rightly postulates that the study of the curricular content should be intelligently related to three main centres of correlation viz., craft work, the natural environment and the social environment."

The Kothari Commission of 1964-66 (Agarwal, 1992: 178, 79) also spoke of the need "to give a strong vocational bias to secondary education" and added: "We visualize the future trend of school education to be towards a fruitful mingling of general and vocational education...." In the context of the present paper these recommendations imply that a lack of thorough English education should not deprive those students who wish to shake

off the burden of English, and thus decolonize their minds, of earning a decent living from their own productive work.

Intensive Training for English Language Teachers

The importance of technology-based teacher training cannot be ignored. Every newly appointed teacher, right from the primary school to college levels, especially teachers from a rural background, should undergo at least a one-month intensive training in the skills of English. The purpose of this course is to fine-tune the teachers' own proficiency in the language and to help them teach English with technological aids for concrete results. Such courses may be held under the guidance of experts at the State ELTIs or at centers constituted for this purpose.

There can be doubts about the viability of such a short-term project for long-term results. But let us remember how BPO companies train raw graduates to be fairly good users of English within a short span of time. What is important is the seriousness with which we undertake such activities and the concerted effort of the agencies that control primary and secondary education to make the earnestness real.

We have excellent teachers in university departments and trainers in industries who can be good resource persons at summer institutes and orientation programmes for teachers. Such programmes often turn out to be sessions of theoretical discussions rather than sessions of intensive practice for skills upgradation. Informal get-togethers conducted in the company of teachers, outside the classroom, could help learners come out of their diffidence and inhibitions.

Anjana Desai (1993: 43) has recorded the experience of proposing such a meeting in which a group of high school and higher secondary school students were to be invited to spend 6 weeks of their summer vacation with college teachers in a tribal area. They were to live, eat and drink together and the language of communication, as far as possible, was to be English. There was to be some formal teaching to simplify difficult points in their lessons. The proposed budget also was not unaffordable. Yet she and her colleagues were not allowed to carry out the experimental project because authorities informed them that "university teachers have nothing to do with schools, which are the province of the NCERT"

To Sum Up

To sum up, the purpose of this paper is not to challenge the reality of mixed ability classrooms. It only seeks to point out the fact that the mixed abilities that we encounter in our college classrooms are far more complex than in other places.

We do not have enough time and resources to deal with the difficulties of a large number of undergraduate students who do not have enough language to study the syllabus prescribed for them. It is impractical at higher levels to train students to master the four basic skills and teach them their lessons/textbooks.

What is suggested here is a concerted effort on the part of the State, teachers and institutions to make the basics of English clear to the students at a very early age and reduce the problem of teaching unmanageable mixed ability classes in post-secondary and graduate levels.

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