

The Teaching of English in India: Changing Scenario

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Abstract

English education was in fact introduced in India in the middle of the nineteenth century. Three universities were established, one each at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857. The teaching of English in these Universities however, followed a set pattern. The then University of London provided the model. However, the traditional approach to the teaching of English came in for severe criticism later.

At this juncture, in 1917 the Calcutta University Commission took note of the rapid decline in academic standards in all subjects, especially English. The commission recommended the adoption of scientific methods of teaching English. The commission also stressed the need for the rationalization of the English curricula, text books and examinations. In fact, the teaching of English now aims at developing communication skills.

The education commission had pointed out, the teaching of English as a skill and as literature should be clearly differentiated. Examination procedures, instead of improving communication, they just improve the memorizing power of the students. The UGC Study group had also highlighted the need to replace the existing English courses by a course in language skills. The focus of English teaching at the undergraduate level now, therefore, should be on the teaching of language rather than on literature. The importance had been often given to the study of literature. This needs to be corrected. The poetry selections used to be dominated by Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Eliot and others.

Keywords: English Teaching, Communicative Skills, Language Skills, Puppetry, Teaching Aids, Creativity in Teaching Language.

Shift from Traditional Chalk and Talk Method

There is a greater shift from traditional chalk and talk method to the multimedia class room teaching. In recent years such acronyms as EGP (English for General Purpose), EIP (English for Instrumental Purpose), EST (English for Science and Technology), EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP (English for Official Purposes) and so on have gained considerable importance.

Communication as Best Means to Teach and Learn

Language is in fact, best learned when it is taught as a means of communication. We find it advisable at any rate to think of reorganizing our teaching programmes in such a way that the oral and written communicational aspects of English get more prominence. Hence to cater of the needs of the learner, various teaching aids are introduced in the class to replace the chalk and talk method. The use of media and technology bring about motivation and the teaching of English becomes more successful and relevant.

History of English Language in India

Although the history of English language in India can be traced back to the 31st of December, 1600, the day on which Queen Elizabeth I of England granted a charter to the “Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading with the East India Company”, English education was only introduced in India in the middle of the nineteenth century. If we confine our discussion to universities alone, three universities were established, one each at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, in 1857. The Senate of the University of Calcutta adopted a resolution in 1861 that all examinations should be conducted in English. Needless to say, this compelled all schools to introduce English as a very early stage. Thus over a hundred years ago, that is, when the British introduced the modern system of English education in India, the study of English became an important part of the liberal and humanistic discipline. Sir. Henry Maine, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta in the 1860’s, noticed the ambition of all its graduates to write the finest English possible. Sir. Henry was one of the rare Englishmen of old days who recognized that the English of some of us was very good, and he raised his voice against the chorus of jeers against Babu English from the majority of his countrymen in India. The teaching of English in the Indian universities, however, followed a set pattern. For all we know, the then University of London provided the model. However,

the traditional approach to the teaching of English has come in for severe criticism in later years.

Calcutta University Commission and Other Developments

The focus of our ELT programmes and the role of English in our educational system have been shifting over the years. In 1917, the Calcutta University Commission took note of the rapid decline in academic standards in all subjects, especially English and stressed the importance of the study of English as part of general education in India. The commission considered English indispensable to higher education in India at that time. According to the commission some of the causes of the deterioration in the quality of the teaching of English were lack of contact with teachers who spoke English as their mother tongue, unsuitability of the lecture method and a lack of systematic instruction in spoken English.

The commission recommended a progressive reduction in the use of English as a medium of instruction all the way up to the matriculation stage and its retention as the medium above that stage, the adoption of scientific method of teaching English, the introduction of more highly trained teachers and more difficult tests of a practical knowledge of English. Interestingly, the commission found that the students displayed a disquieting preference for literary studies. During the 30s the regional languages were made the medium of instruction which resulted in an alarming deterioration in the standards of the teaching and learning of English.

Set Back After Independence

The teaching of English in our colleges and universities received a major set-back after independence because of the prevailing psychological attitude. The regionalization of the medium of instruction at the university level resulted in an inadequate exposure to the English language. The examination system in use was largely unrealistic and the text books rather outdated. All this led to a sharp decline; the people concerned have taken note of the growing inadequacy of the teaching of English in colleges.

Once again, a number of commissions and study groups stressed the need for the rationalization of the English curricula, text books and examinations. The 'service' nature of

the teaching of English has been largely realized and also the need for the diversification of courses to suit the diverse requirements of different categories of students of science, commerce and humanities and consequently of the suitable changes in teaching techniques. In fact, the teaching of English now aims at developing the communication skills.

Education Commission Thoughts

As the Education Commission had pointed out about two decades ago, the teaching of English as a skill and as literature should be clearly differentiated. The scales had often been heavily tilted in favour of literature. This needed to be corrected. The poetry selections were still dominated by Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Eliot and others. Shakespeare's plays are even now prescribed in some form or the other. A researcher has noted that even in the short Shakespeare edition of Julius Caesar, there are 154 archaic words and 400 sentences containing old-fashioned elements of structure and vocabulary. One wonders how the book gets prescribed for students who do not even know the rudiments of modern English usage, who are yet to be taught how to make a subject and the verb agree. Examination procedures are often so clumsy and antiquated that a student can pass by memorizing summaries of passages dictated by his teacher without reading the texts prescribed or trying to learn a word of English. The course often degenerates into a blind alley and encourages a memorizing and point-grabbing mind and not a thinking mind. The UGC Study Group had also highlighted the need to replace the existing English courses by a course in language skills. The Group had recommended that at the degree level, teaching should equip students with communication skills necessary to cope with the predictable situations one is likely to encounter.

Focus of English Teaching at the Undergraduate Level

The focus of English teaching at the undergraduate level now, therefore, should be on the teaching of language rather than on literature. "The shift in emphasis from literature to language is a happy shift indeed and a sensible shift too. It is not elegance and grace and style we crave for today, it is rather a working knowledge of the language, achievement of an acceptable standard, both in comprehension and expression" (Mathur, 1982). It is, however, uncharitable to analogize the learning of English in India today with the learning of Latin in the medieval era, when the study of literature became vestigial in the curriculum and,

allegedly, a narrow careerism became a motivation. Although this task can be performed by a communication course as well, the literary texts are now being increasingly employed in the context of language teaching keeping the 'language scheme in the foreground'. "Language through literature" course prepares at the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, exposes the students to the living language, as it exists today. The approach of the course designers is not historical or rhetorical; they do not wish to introduce the students to literary landmarks. Both language controls and cultural controls have been exercised. Several courses designed after 1975 are generally functional, communicational or notional and have been prepared bearing in mind the fact that English is now chiefly a 'service' subject and a library language. There is now a greater concern for the learner's need. There is a greater shift from traditional chalk and talk method to the multimedia class room teaching.

Use of Media and Technology

English by Radio and TV courses now in use have not been necessarily based on textbooks. In fact, they attempt to teach English through dramatized stories, anecdotes, conversations and the like. The basic objective of these media courses is to expose the learners to acceptable models of English being used in different situations. The programmes have been popular and could be considered potentially effective. Language laboratories have been found useful for teaching a language, but even now there are very few laboratories in the country. A language laboratory is not meant to teach merely the phonetics and the repetitive drills: it can be effectively used for listening comprehension, reading, testing and evaluation. Wiring three rooms as an extension of the laboratory and broadcasting lessons to students sitting in all three rooms simultaneously was an experiment initiated at the Wilson College, Bombay, with a view to solving the problem of large classes. It was an experiment worth pursuing. There is a feeling, however, that the programmed materials or those used for mass media may sometimes reduce the teacher to secondary importance or the teacher becomes just a 'manager' or 'facilitator' of learning. The computer also opens up possibilities for language teaching though computer-assisted ELT which is still in its infancy. The vast potential still remains largely untapped. To cite an example, the programming in the computer presents a series of interconnected problems to the student. As the student answers each question or solves each problem in the series, the answers are compared against a standard list for acceptability. If the student is correct, he automatically moves to the next

problem and consequently, gradually increases his knowledge of some specific central issue. If he commits an error, the programme directs him to re-do the same ground or to an auxiliary remedial series of problems. It is interesting to note that student is rewarded immediately, or corrected and allowed to continue at his pace.

ESP (English for Specific Purposes)

In recent years such acronyms as EGP (English for General Purposes), ESP (English for Specific Purposes), ELP (English for Instrumental Purposes), EST (English for Science and Technology), EAP (English for Academic Purposes), and EOP (English for Official Purposes) etc. have gained considerable currency. Robinson (1980) defines ESP in terms of what might broadly be seen as language situations and functions in various combinations. The attempt is to teach a certain group of people, for example, the scientists, just what they need to the exclusion of everything else. As a result, the concept of deciding the specific needs and teaching only that much was developed. It may be profitable to being up-to-date with Error Analysis with a view to specifying the students' needs. The UGC Study Group had also emphasized that one general course of English for everybody would hardly serve the purpose and that specific courses for specific needs should be offered. The report of the Education Commission (1964-66) claims that where such courses have been tried, they have proved helpful in enabling the students to use English as a library language in their own fields far more efficiently than a General English course would have done. Of late, intense interest has been taken in ESP and new courses and materials in this area have been produced.

Simple, Capital-Saving Technology

In the Third World it is imperative to use new aids of teaching in the classroom. The teaching of foreign languages in particular, should not be a 'Chalk and Talk' profession only. But at the same time, we cannot afford to be extravagant in this direction. Highly mechanized and electronically operated teaching aids will be difficult to manage particularly in rural areas. Instead of holding the attention of the students of these areas, such aids will perhaps make them nervous and unduly conscious. Expensive and sophisticated audiovisual aids, therefore, are no answer to our problem. They are suitable for utilization only on a limited scale and in selected places. How many full-fledged modern language laboratories have come

up in India? Not many, perhaps, and even many teachers are not aware of the existence and use of such laboratories.

The charts have been tested and found valuable in different parts of the world. But we in this country cannot make a free choice due to our limitations. Bearing in mind our characteristic requirements and genius we can however recommend puppetry and sand table for wide use throughout the country besides blackboards, wall pictures, maps, plans, posters, charts, models and so on. Large pictures can be seen by the whole class by direct display and no projection is required. 'Perforated' maps can be used for drawing. In a chart or picture the visual elements should be given precedence over words in conveying information. A complex story must be told in a series of pictures or charts.

Puppetry

Puppetry is of special benefit to shy and nervous children and also gives the feeling of involvement and participation to the entire class. These shows give a sense of relief from the tension of classroom teaching and add variety to the lesson. The use of puppetry as a teaching aid will also save time, as time spent in going to the blackboard etc. is saved. Puppets are convenient teaching aids also because they are easy, cheap and fascinating to prepare and can be taken anywhere and a show set up at a moment's notice. They can be made for a fraction of the cost of a tape recorder or overhead projector. It has been suggested that a spare-time puppet club can be established to fulfil the need of the schools for recreation outside the class hours. Vocabulary tests arranged through puppetry will become interesting guessing games. Very useful counting games can also be arranged. Glove puppets or dolls can be used as talking partners in listening sessions.

We can make various types of puppets according to the requirements of the situation. Glove puppets with or without legs, papiermache puppets, rod puppets, wooden puppets, articulated or non-articulated shadow puppets, the marionette with or without aeroplane control, tube puppets, padded cardboard puppets and simple wooden puppets are some of the more widely used puppets. The puppet should be dressed with soft materials before it is strung. A shadow puppet screen may be made from an old sheet. Though a theatre is not essential, a very simple and cheap, portable and multipurpose theatre has been designed and

developed for such classroom shows. Puppetry has been specially recommended for teaching immigrant children, handicapped children and also adolescents.

Application of Aids - A Challenge to the Teacher

Audio-visual teaching aids bring about motivation and the teaching of English becomes more successful and more relevant. The importance of the use of some cheap supporting materials in classrooms in India, therefore, cannot be overemphasized. The international conference on the teaching of English literature held at King's college, Cambridge, in 1962 had also noted that chief obstacles in underdeveloped areas against applying audio-visual aids to the teaching of English are lack of funds, lack of facilities, and lack of technical resources, that the teacher must improvise aids from whatever meagre resources may be near at hand. The use of audio-visual aids must be limited by the economic resources of the country, and expenditure involved must always be taken into consideration. With this end in view, the present writer has recommended here some comparatively inexpensive and less complicated materials for wide use in this country. We can as well devise a number of other aids of like nature. It must be borne in mind that the application of these aids is not all that simple and the whole business is actually a clear challenge to the teacher. Sometimes the teacher may find the use of these techniques a little taxing. Of course, the teacher has to spend much time in gaining competence in the use of these materials. Nevertheless, it must be realized that they will ultimately prove beneficial to the teaching profession. If we seriously wish to improve the standards of language teaching in our country, efforts must be made in right earnest to spread their use. The teacher should see to it, however, that he does not over-use these aids. By giving extraordinary prominence to them the teacher might relegate the objects to a position of secondary significance.

Conclusion

It should be borne in mind, however, that many teachers just cannot imagine teaching a language without a textbook. They may feel a little awkward and out of place if the book is taken away from them. Also, we are definitely in a fool's paradise if we think that all teachers, irrespective of their equipment, can keep creating 'communication' situations for a number of days. It should be remembered, therefore, that for the success of English through communication or English without textbook approach, resourceful and imaginative teachers

with command over the language, are required. We find it advisable, at any rate, to think of reorganizing our teaching programmes in such a way that the oral and written communicational aspects of English get more prominence. Language is, in fact, best learnt when it is taught as a means of communication. It should be realized that the study of English is primarily the study of the process of how to communicate something to somebody with the maximum of clarity and effect that is best suited to a particular situation. It is human psychology to take interest in things socially desirable and immediately useful.

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