

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE & MANAGEMENT

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDIA: REVIEWING THE RELEVANCE OF THEORY

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ABSTRACT

It is now a widely acknowledged fact that, with the advent of globalisation impelled by the tremendous advances in Information technology, English as a language has gained a new currency in India. The realisation that the adequate knowledge of English can open the doors of many possibilities in economic arena has focussed the attention on the art of possibility of teaching-learning processes and practices, and their effective orientations. However a cursory look makes it quite evident that the situation is quite chaotic. Even after attempting (or trying to attempt) to learn the language for about 15 years in schools and colleges, our graduates and post graduates are not equipped enough to write or speak simple correct sentences in their communication. There seems to be something wrong somewhere. The present paper is my humble attempt to relook at the various methods and practices adopted by the teachers of English at different levels, consciously or unconsciously, and their usefulness in the real situations. I have also tried to find out and suggest the right kind of method to be adopted and right kind of environment to be evolved for a better result.

KEYWORDS

globalisation, communication, methodology, environment, acquisition, skill.

INTRODUCTION

In independent India English began its onward journey as a deeply detested and despised object due to its colonial roots. Since then it has travelled a long way to assert its primacy and acquire a position of relevance and importance in the patterns of Indian life. From being viewed as an instrument of oppression to its present position as a second language, English is today widely accepted and hailed as a global passport for good career, commerce, knowledge and engagement for the globalised world. Today there is a vast section of the elitist demeanour which rightfully can claim English to be their first and natural tool of communication. Though this section of English speaking Indians is very small, yet it is visible in all forms of life as it "controls domains that have professional prestige (Kachru, 8)". With the momentous advances in information technology, English is expanding its area of influence and reach in every dimension and direction. As a consequence the functional use of English today extends "far beyond those normally associated with an outside language, including the instrumental, the regulative, the interpersonal and the innovative, self-expressive function (Kachru, 37).

In 1991 when India deregulated its economy to integrate it with the globalised world, it created all the right reasons for the learning of English for the purpose of global communication. A new brave world opened up for all those with adequate skills in English with the advent of this market economy. Multinational companies with global reach in marketing, tourism, advertising, call centres, I T industry, this all created conditions which gave impetus to the practices and processes of English learning in India. With this new zeal and desire to equip adequately with this tool of empowerment so to face the competitive global reality, the status of English language teaching also underwent a complete modification and reinvention. From Gurukul system of imparting education under the shades of trees to the present system of smart class room, the entire gamut of education has gone through a complete metamorphosis. However one thing has remained a constant. It is the role of teacher. It is still the sincerity and the skills of the teachers which inspires the process of learning among the students.

DISCUSSIONS

When we look at the various practices and the methods that influence the process of English learning in the class room, there are certain variables that play a considerable role in the acquisition of the language. These variables include: learning styles and strategies, use of audio-visual aids, weakness of the students in linguistic skills at school level, faulty system of examination, teaching English through literature, use of methodology and the lack or otherwise of motivation.

THE USE OF AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS

Today it has become quite fashionable to make use of the audio-visual aids to support teaching. These aids can be useful for the purpose of guiding the students through the material and help them understand important points. There is no denying the fact that the right use of the audio-visual aid does make the teaching a bit more interesting, a bit more dynamic. These aids can also reduce the teacher's effort, economise teacher's time and help a teacher in accessing the relevant material from different sources.

Though the use of these technological tools that create a huge interest and attraction as they appear appealing to the eyes and ears of the learners, yet these cannot be the ideal substitutes for what the teacher says or does in the class room during the process of his interaction with the students. It is the teacher and his or her competency that matters more than these fancy aids. The audio-visual aids can definitely be useful but even in the absence of these aids the process of learning language can be easily carried forward. A smart and resourceful teacher can do with whatever resources he or she has got in hand. Even the class room can be used as a language laboratory. A strong visual effect can easily be created by using the human body, black board, flashcards, pictures in the books or black board, chalks and charts. The black board still continues to be used as the most important teaching aid throughout the world. Chalks and talks still continue to be used as the most effective method of teaching throughout the world. In addition to all this an efficient teacher can always use theatrics like gestures, expressions and actions to put across the meaning of the words and explain the situations. The use of flashcards can be quite useful in practicing new structures and sentences. For an elaborate presentation the use of large sheets as charts, with diagrams and pictures, can effectively be used to drive home the point. However all such aids should be used judiciously. An excessive use of these practices can hamper the real process of learning by creating an unnecessary distraction. Ultimately it is the knowledge, skill and the right aptitude of the teacher that carries the day and creates the real impact on the students.

FAULTY SYSTEM OF EXAMINATION

There is urgent need for reforms in our examination system as the present system is no test of the real knowledge or skill acquired by the student. The present practice of judging a student on the basis of attempted (crammed) answers in writing at the end of the session or semester is not suited to the process of English learning. The entire focus of the student is to get a good score at the examination, not on the acquisition of the adequate skills in the language. Our examination system is more achievement oriented rather than performance oriented which leads to an unnecessary emphasis on marks and grades instead of skill and fluency in the language. In such a scenario the role of the teacher becomes even more important. While keeping in view the performance of the students in the examination at the end of the year, he must also slowly but surely concentrate on imparting and improving the communicative proficiency of the students along the way. This kind of modulation in the teaching methods can somehow offset the adverse impact of the faulty ways of evaluation in practice.

TEACHING THROUGH LITERATURE

Literature has always been an integral part of language teaching. Though recently the focus has shifted to the genre of specialisation which has wrongly separated literature from language, and announced the advent of a new school called E L T. But this separation is based on a wrong hypothesis because literature is nothing but language dancing. One of the main reasons of the popularity of English is the vast reservoir of literature written in the language and the rich and varied experience it provides. It is through literature that the students remain captivated and indulge, consciously or unconsciously, in the usages and practices of the language. Reading a short story, a play, a novel or a poem not only enlivens the interests of the students, but helps the students in

understanding the different nuances and aesthetics of the language. The students get to know the use of familiar words in different contexts with newer layers of meanings. This also enriches the students with the knowledge of the entire evolutionary changes that any language undergoes over a period of time. However there has to be a careful selection of literary texts or pieces keeping in view the comprehension level of the learners. What is strongly suggested is the distinction made between the study of literature per se and the study of literature as a source of language teaching. The primary aim of imparting linguistic skills to the students should not be lost sight of at any cost. The famous linguist Lazar recommends certain factors to be kept in mind while selecting the text. These factors are the students' cultural background, linguistic proficiency, literary background, availability of texts (kinds and ease with which these are available), length of text (Do you have enough time available to work on the text in class? How much time do students have to work on the text at home), exploitability (What kind of tasks and activities can you devise to exploit the text . . .), fit for syllabus (How do the texts link with the rest of the syllabus? Thematically? In terms of vocabulary, grammar or discourse? Can you devise tasks and activities for exploiting the text which link with the methodology you have used elsewhere in the syllabus?) (Lazar, 35). The University Boards of Studies which take upon themselves the onerous task of framing the syllabi must bear in mind these relevant and useful inputs illustrated by Lazar.

GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION

For the purpose of proper comprehension and correct usages of the language the rules of grammar are of utmost importance. This method has always been an essential component of language skills. The proper learning of the parts of speech, proper use of verb or adverb enables the students to translate his sentences and thoughts into target language and vice-versa. On the basis of the data or set of rules learnt, the student acquires the skill of translating in writing from mother tongue to the foreign language and from foreign language to his own mother tongue. Language in this method of learning is treated merely a deductive process or a transfer technique. O'Grady explains it further: "This method emphasises reading, writing, translation and the conscious learning of grammatical rules. Its primary goal is to develop literary mastery of the second language. Memorisation is the main learning strategy and students spend their class time talking about the language instead of talking in the language. The curriculum requires the memorization of paradigms, patterns and vocabulary; with translation being used to test the acquired knowledge. Consequently the role of L1 (that is, mother tongue or native language) is quite important" (O'Grady, et al. 21). However this model of learning faces a lot of criticism from the contemporary theorists.

THE DIRECT METHOD

The advocates of this model of language learning strongly argue against the grammar-translation method and oppose it by saying that the language learning is more than the learning of rules and the acquisition of translation skills. Of course, the rules are important here too, but these rules of grammar are to be learnt or acquired inductively by simply inducing the rules of how the language behaves from the actual language itself. The proponents of this school of thought argue that Adult L2 (second language) can learn a second language in essentially the same manner as a child. Therefore, if possible, the teacher should try to create a natural learning environment within the class room. Instead of explicit grammar instruction, the major emphasis is on communicating. Classes are carried out totally in the second language with absolutely no reliance on the first language or on any form of translation. The expectation is that through question and answer dialogues, the second language will gradually be acquired. However critics do not quite agree with this idea and argue that "problems have arisen with such an approach because adults do not in fact learn exactly like children, and they express the need for explicit instruction in grammar and other aspects of the second language" (O'Grady et al. 25).

However the discipline of direct method takes it to the extremes and refused to speak a single word of English as word meanings. In order to avoid translating new words, they look for an association between new words and the idea it stands for. Thus explanations become cumbersome and time-consuming. Further the proponents of this methodology fail to grade and structure their materials adequately. No selection, grading or controlled presentation of vocabulary and structures tend to plunge people into flood of living language – quite bewildering for people.

BILINGUAL METHOD

This theory of teaching language emerged as a reconciliation of both the extremes. These theorists believe that it is a waste of time to recreate the situation while teaching a foreign language. They argue that the teaching-learning process is facilitated if only the mother tongue equivalents are given to the learner without duplicating the situation. This method, therefore, makes use of the mother tongue in this restricted manner. The teacher is thus saved the botheration of manoeuvring situations in order to convey the meanings in English. Instead the meanings are explained in the mother tongue of the students. The time thus saved is utilised in giving practice to the learner. Bilingual method, in this way, promotes both fluency and accuracy. It promotes theory as it lays emphasis on speech and pattern practice. It promotes accuracy as the meanings of new words are given in the mother tongue of the learner. It does not require any teaching aids and is suited to all kinds of students – rural or urban. Unlike the Direct Method which ignores the linguistic habits already acquired by the learner in the process of learning the first language, the Bilingual Method tries to make the best use of them.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

This theory makes use of real life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher in the class room sets up a situation before the students that they are likely to encounter in their real life. Unlike the audio-lingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drill, the communicative approach can have students in suspense as to the outcome of the class exercise, which varies according to their reaction and responses. The motivation of the students comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways and about meaningful contexts or topics. Margie S. Berns, an expert in the field of communicative language teaching, explains this view that "language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak) (Bern, 5).

At present teachers of English around the world prefer some form of communicative teaching and learning, rather than any other method or its derivatives. However we must remember that a successful teacher is not necessarily biased in favour of one method or the other. He or she has to be, first of all, an individual of competence in and comfortable with the methods he or she wants to use. A good teacher of English must try to blend all these strategies and methodologies to suit the requirements of the students and the teaching material.

MOTIVATION TO LEARN

All the methods turn into pure madness if the learners lack adequate desire and drive to learn the language. Motivation can best be defined as the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language. Motivation can be categorised in two types: instrumental and Integrative. Instrumental motivation comes from a specific purpose. It underlines the goal to gain some social or economic reward with the acquisition of the second language, whereas integrative motivation is purely attained for the purpose of enhancing learning or knowledge. Integrative motivation is characterised by the learner's positive attitude towards the target language group and tries to completely integrate or merge into the cultural milieu as a global citizen. Since we all have turned into global citizenry, what is required is the integrative motivation for the purpose of learning English so as to establish an integrated and assimilated kind of consciousness.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be summed up that despite the fact that there are a number of theories and methods for language teaching, the teacher's presence in the class room cannot be underestimated. The best audio-visual aid is still the teacher. It is the teacher whose knowledgeable speech in the class room enthral and motivates the students. The students learn to speak by listening to the teacher. If the model they listen to is not good, their own speech cannot be good. The most effective and most tried & tested method of teaching English language in our country has been through traditional grammar and writing practice in the class room. The best way to achieve desired result has been to give daily class room assignments. Students can learn the language only if they use the rules of grammar, learnt in the process, in actual composition in language. What is needed is the realization among the students about the importance of English for a good career and the quest to realize that dream. On the part of the policy makers, it is quite pertinent to reduce the size of the class so as to enable the teacher to individual attention to the students; frame and update the syllabi to the goal of effective learning; and reform the examination system, especially for the language subjects, giving enough space to the oral communications.

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