

# Asian Resonance

## Problems of Teaching English to College Students: With Special Reference to The Junior Colleges of Sundargarh District, Odisha

The main objective of this paper is to discuss the apparent problems faced by the English teachers of Junior colleges, specifically of Sundargarh district, so that corrective measures can be taken before the scenario worsens. English has been divided into two between haves and have-nots. Haves are the people of the cities and towns whereas have-nots dwell in the suburbs and English is a basic need of all today. Therefore, care has been taken to reach at the core of the problem, keeping in mind at the same time, of the backgrounds, conditions and consequences. Further, causes of problems are also justified from both the angles. It is a paper, which incorporates open views of different English teachers with regard to the theme. It also provides a conclusion with some feasible suggestions.

**Keywords:** Importance of English language, social networking websites, tribal belt, sms language, spelling mistakes, Odia English pronunciation.

### Introduction

English is evidently an International language today and so, has been successful of being the first language in many developed countries i.e. United States, United Kingdom. Further, it is of note that it has also been successful to find a special place as a second language in the countries like China, Japan, India and most of the European as well as African countries. To be more precise, it is both written as well as spoken, as K.K. Prashar (2011) states "Language is a medium of communication either through oral or written form or both". From morning to evening, whatever we work with has English. Therefore, "Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English."—Aravind Adiga (The White Tiger). Ratna (2011) calculates, "More than 400 million people in the world speak English. It has no competitor in the race to become the language of the world". To talk of India specifically, we have succeeded driving the British Empire out of India but not the language. It still rules over us even after Independence and will continue to, forever. And the option left for us is, we have to let it because today, we ourselves cannot do away with it. Because "By the time India became independent, English had already consolidated its position in the school and university education" (Ratna 2011).

### Importance of English language

Being a promising language, English is also of paramount importance for the present generation as well as for the generations, yet to emerge in the long run. In short, it has become part and parcel of our life. The reasons are:

- (i) It is a mode of communication which connects the whole world in the fields of Science, Commerce and Arts.
- (ii) It is a medium of all the paper work today, being an official language.
- (iii) All the exams, be it college or competitive or interviews for that matter, whether government or private, all are conducted in English.
- (iv) It is the language of computers and cell phones; and most importantly Internet which is inevitable today irrespective of age, caste and creed.
- (v) Whether text or fiction, it is the language of books.
- (vi) Most popular social networking websites of today i.e. Facebook and Twitter function in English.
- (vii) Lastly, it is a symbol of respect for the speakers and also an enhancement of personality.



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## Problems of Teaching English in college

There are basically 3 main problems which fail the language to flourish in the personalities of students who are actually the future movers and shakers of the world. But as Avinash Chander (2011) observes, "it has been the common experience of English teachers that their students fail to communicate effectively in English in spite of their 'teaching' efforts. Even after ten to fifteen years of learning English at the secondary and under-graduate levels, the students are still confronted with the inability to use the various skills of language effectively". Observation is true but it may vary place to place because the urban students are more privileged than the rural since the urban belts have quick access to all the best people and immediate facilities provided by the government. Therefore Savita (2011) agrees upon "When one finds a group of students usually self-confident and articulate coming from a certain kind of "good" schools and given a pampered background, the interaction between home and school which might have produced this desirable maturity, then there is not much of a problem". Moreover, Ratna (2011) again comes out with a finding that "The pressure on rural teachers to teach English is very high. All the professors and lecturers said that the present situation of "English teaching and learning in rural colleges" is really pathetic. Teaching in rural colleges is very difficult and challenging". The problems are:

(i) **Lack of good English teachers-** The first problem faced by the language is lack of experts. Not every teacher is an expert of his subject or probably has a little knowledge of what he is supposed to teach, which is a great loss indeed. And the reason is there are no sufficient government appointments to fill up the vacancies and pathetically, in aided colleges, Jr. Lecturers are not appointed by the government, and hence they are exempted from the ability test. Just because they have an M.A., they get appointed but at the same time, the fact cannot be denied that there are a few good teachers too even in the aided colleges. But if we talk of inexpert teachers- 'taught wrong once is learnt wrong forever'. Sometimes, teachers are experts but prefer to maintain their standard and so, never get down to the level of students. And the rest, those who understand the gravity of the situation, do merely the job of a translator i.e. the whole English text gets translated into Hindi or Odia. And, that is teaching English in colleges.

(ii) **Lack of Audio-visual aids-** not a single college of the whole Sundargarh district, has language laboratory with audio-visual aids which is a must for an English learner. Not only English but in fact, any other subjects for that matter, are learnt quicker audio-visually. Pronunciation which is one of the basic requirements of the language can be only way and effectively done audio-visually.

(iii) **Lack of interest-** this is another basic requirement of learning and it applies to all the disciplines of the world. Nothing can be learnt without being interested. A student has to have an interest to

learn which is hardly seen, these days. A teacher can help only those students learn the language who come to class because English being a compulsory subject is not compulsory at all for most of the college students to attend.

"A language is not a subject which can be taught, it is a subject to be learnt", said Dr. Michael Philip West (1888-1973), an English language teacher and researcher who worked in India in the mid-1900s. Therefore, it is more of self-interest than language expertise. Books, YouTube and Spoken-English Institutes, an interested student today can turn to for additional help. According to Smitha Jha and Anurag Kumar (2011), Language environment is something that the learner hears and sees in the new language. It may include a wide variety of situations as available in or through stories, conversation with friends, watching television, or books.

## Junior colleges of Sundargarh District, Odisha

Sundargarh district is basically a tribal belt with 6 Government Junior colleges and 62 aided Junior colleges, as per the updated information according to the Department of Higher Education, Odisha (<http://www.dheorissa.in/>). And around 80% students of these colleges belong to ST, SC and OBC categories, agriculture being their mainstay. Their parents are poor and uneducated. Because they live on land, has nothing to do with education and especially with English. It still remains a foreign language for them. And hence, the hope of implanting the value of English language in the minds of their children remains a distant dream. They only afford to admit their children to colleges but are unable to provide books without which, there can be no learning.

Secondly,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Junior colleges are situated in the rural remote areas and therefore, the government facilities with regard to modernisation of education don't reach so easily. Moreover, students of these colleges have no special interest to come to colleges and utilise their valuable time on learning. Coming to college becomes a formality or possibly a pastime to be in peer groups. Even if they are seen on the premises, some of them are never found in the classes. And thus, especially the English classes are taken for granted. Students of Arts don't attend English classes because they are afraid whereas students of Science do the same because they are overconfident.

Thirdly, since the students are the children of poor farmers and wage earners, whether boy or girl, parents need them on the farms and kiosks to supplement to the family income. Likewise, the regularity of absentees in colleges recurs year-round without much care and attention. Learning can take place only when a student is present in the class and to talk of English, it too demands presence as well as presence of mind.

## Problems faced by English Teachers

"Teaching English is in a chaotic state today", said V. K. Gokak (1909-1992), a writer in the Kannada language and a scholar of English and Kannada literatures. The words of V. K. Gokak persists even

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today. The challenges, an English teacher has to face everyday are as follows:

- (i) **Poor in grammar-** "Grammar is considered as the dispenser of correct language. If a student gains control over the grammar of the language he can surely use the language in a correct way" (Paramjit Kaur, 2011). All the English teachers have agreed to the fact that the Junior college students are devoid of the fundamentals of English. This further means that they haven't learnt their lessons well at schools. Reasons might be, either teachers have not taught well or students have not paid attention. Either or, could be a possibility. Now, mending cannot be done in colleges because syllabi are set according to the standards of the students, from lower to higher, considering the maturity of the mind. And therefore, it becomes a herculean task for every English teacher of Junior colleges to go back to basics, nor can he go ahead with the college syllabus, because fundamental is not clear. What can an English teacher do when forming a proper sentence becomes an uphill task for the students? What to talk of other things of English Grammar. And, this is again an agreed view of the teachers that the students of Arts are mostly the victims of these challenges. Therefore the truth is "In the third world countries and so in India, English has been taught through literature for the past many years. But students opt for various optional subjects like Political Science, History, Economics, Medicine, Engineering etc. where the medium of learning is the English Language. Such students, even when they become Post Graduate remain unable to write and speak it correct" (Savita 2011).
- (ii) **Unresponsive-** whenever comes the question of response, most of the students remain silent and reserved because they lack language. 'yes' and 'no' are the two words, they know to defend themselves. When given home works, they are unable to execute. It is said, 'when the foundation is not strong, building gets weaker', the case is much the same here. And, an English teacher is often grappled whether to teach Basic English grammar or poems of Wordsworth and Robert Frost.
- (iii) **Freedom to appear exams in Odia-** in Odisha, students of +2 as well as +3 are allowed to appear exams in Odia which is a strange thing whereas English should be the medium of all the subjects except Odia, Hindi and Sanskrit. When students have freedom, they never think of learning English because Odia is easier and have all come from Odia medium schools except a few. They know very little of English and prefer to possess the same.
- (iv) **Overcrowded class-** According to Hariom Verma and Ahuja Sandeep (2011) "It becomes difficult for the teacher to pay attention to each student, and special attention to the weak students, in a class of more than 50 or 60 students, in a period of 40 to 45 minutes. If he tries to pay attention towards

the weak students more, those good in the subject suffer, and if he does not do so, the weak, suffer. If he decides to create a balance by going slow, the syllabus suffers". The statement is very true because when the students are more, effect of teaching is less. When the homework is carried out the following day, a teacher is unable to listen and correct everyone's due to lack of time. And it is more painful when there are no sufficient appointed English teachers. But this happens only in the early days of session when all attend classes with rapt attention. Later, they are found bunking off.

- (v) **Spelling mistakes-** on asked, English teachers of Junior colleges have sadly admitted that everyday they are faced by unique kinds of spellings. Now, cell phones are in vogue. Whether rich or poor, every student has to have one. What has marred English with the popularity of cell phones among the students is sms language. All the spellings have become shorter or probably, are modified. By now, they have all become used to sms language, so much so that college is written as 'clg', similarly book is written as 'buk' and exam becomes 'xam'. There are enough and more examples. And the argument is backed saying, "Even though seventy percent of the Indian population resides in towns or the villages, most of us now carry mobile phones. In texting messages, we murder English literally" (Mamta Rana, 2011).
- (vi) **Odia English pronunciation-** as we Indians have Indian English Pronunciation, Odias too have a typical Odia English pronunciation. English teachers of schools and high schools know very little about 'Phonetics' which is a study of speech sounds and how they are produced. It has its own script and is unfortunately known only to few. Phonetics teaches one to pronounce English correctly. Therefore, Mamta Rana (2011) further argues, "The speaking skills of the teachers taking up English language classes are under their regional language influence. As a result, the pronunciation skills of the students in rural areas gets hampered at an impressionable age and it becomes very difficult for the teachers at the later stage to make them unlearn the faulty pronunciation". There are hundreds of words today which are often wrongly pronounced by the Junior college students because they are taught to. Some of the common, are as follows: Table-1.

English Word	According to Phonetics	Is pronounced as
Coming	'kʌmɪŋ	kʊmɪŋ
Fear	fɪə(r)	fɪɔ
Collection	kə'leɪʃn	kʊleɪksɔ:n
Dull	dʌl	dʊl
Horrible	'hɒrəbl	hɔrɪbʊl
Nothing	'nʌθɪŋ	nʊθɪŋ
Tension	'tenʃn	tensɔ:n
Mother	'mʌðə(r)	mʊðɔ
Brother	'brʌðə(r)	brʊðɔ
Teacher	'ti:tʃə(r)	tɪtʃɔ

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Some of the English teachers of junior colleges, Sundargarh district have shared their open views on the matter, concerned. Table-2.

Name of the Junior college	English teacher says-
Govt. Junior college, Sundargarh	Freedom to appear +2 and +3 exams in Odia is the root cause of inability to learn English. Therefore, English should be the sole medium of colleges. Some students are very weak in English whereas some are over-confident with little learning and so, don't attend English classes.
Govt. Junior college, Rourkela	Students have a tendency to think first in Odia or Hindi and then translate it into English, which is wrong learning. Instead, they should be taught to think in English right from the beginning.
S.G. Women's Junior college, Rourkela	Students come to class without books despite reminders. They are unresponsive.
Govt. Women's Junior college, Sundargarh	Students have an unreasonable fear for English. It remains forever a foreign language. They haven't taken it seriously at primary level. Parents don't encourage their children.
Prayas Junior college, Bhedabahal	Students are prone to spelling mistakes. Neither they know about the English language nor are familiar with English words.
Nirmalmunda Junior college, Bhalulata	Students are weak in vocabulary and not clear about tense. They lack motivation.

Source: Field Survey 2013

## Conclusion and Suggestions

Hariom Verma and Ahuja Sandeep (2011) look forward to future as "Since the day an Indian child starts his formal education, the sole aim of his parents (and later also of his own) becomes to make him 'perfect' in English because English in India is necessary not only to get a job but also to appear a man of position". Syllabi are set by the board of intellectuals, considering the cognitive development.

Hence, the setters cannot be blamed since it is done on mature reflection. Problem lies at the bottom where the plant has to be propped up. Problems will always be there, at best it can only be lessened. Therefore, it is a bounden duty of all three, namely (a) **Teacher**, who has to realise the responsibilities of his noble profession. He needs to be very careful of not teaching anything wrong or teaching something of which he does not have an adequate knowledge. If a student is prepared well at primary level, he will absolutely have no problem as he moves ahead for higher studies. When one teaches a new language, he should teach it well. Otherwise, purity of language gets defiled in the process. His first concern should be how to interest students in the subject, finding ways and means as mentioned by Savita. "In order to make English more 'user friendly', the teacher needs to use English as frequently as possible for interaction with the students. Mostly it is noticed that in our schools and colleges, teachers employ Grammar Translation method. They use English only when it becomes absolutely necessary – for example- while narrating a text – again and again the teachers deviate from one code to the other and translate the content of the text – as if they are narrating an old wife's tale. A teacher needs to use English while introducing the lesson, checking attendance, organizing the seating arrangement of the students, presenting new vocabulary, asking queries and correcting errors. All the activities that surround the classroom teaching when are designed in such framework, will help the students to remove their reluctance and disabilities so far as English speaking is concerned" (Savita 2011). (b) **Parents**, who have to be more responsible towards educating their children well. They have to attend to all the needs with regard to education of their children, realising well the fast changing world. It is time now, poor parents should be more aware and more ambitious to help their children build a bright career because today knowledge overpowers money. Instead of engaging them in household chores, they should send them to college everyday to learn, keeping an eye on them time to time because parents are the first teachers. (c) **Student**, who overall has a greater responsibility to be well-educated to face the competitive world. If he is not competent enough, if he cannot speak English well today, he is sure to be a back-marker. He should not hesitate to make mistakes while learning because that is how one learns. Instead, he should persevere. Thus, he can help the teacher to be helped. Furthermore, the situation is such that one needs to read English well, write English well and most importantly pronounce English well. And for it, English education has to be taken seriously by each and every student.

Besides these, there are other things too to be done. The vacancies should be filled up to avoid burden and encourage variety. Secondly, audio-visual laboratories should be provided in all the colleges for effective learning. Thirdly, students should be encouraged to watch English news channels because everybody today has a T.V. with multiple channels. Fourthly, loud reading should be encouraged since it brings out the correct pronunciation. If not, Phonetics

should to be introduced in the curriculum. And fifthly, which is the best, mobile learning should be given more importance since everyone possesses. Phonetics, grammar, stories and poems can be downloaded and circulated among students through Bluetooth for effective and better learning. If cell phones are the current fad, let's make the most of it for the good cause. To sum up, as things stand, English asks to be assumed as a survival kit for today's generation and there is no two ways about it.

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