

Learning and Teaching English as A Second Language: Problems and Remedial Solutions



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Abstract

Learning English is not as natural to us as it is to the native speakers. The native speaker of English imbibes the language with his mother's milk; he becomes familiar with the components of English with the natural process of growing up. For us, Indians, English has a special place. This is not only because English has become a world language but because it has historical association and has made a very special impact on our cultural life. For this reason, English is not a foreign language to us; it is a second language. It is unlike Russian, French, German or any other language to us. Learning of English is essentially a calculated effort at developing a command and control over the different components of the language; its phonology (the sound system), its morphology (the pattern and parts of words) and its syntax (the pattern of phrases and sentences). Classroom and teacher play a very vital role in language acquisition. Initially, as a child, we learn whatever language is exposed to us. The question is how can an Indian student master these components of English when he learns it as a second language? The question is how a teacher can make his student master these components of English when he teaches English as a second language? And, what is the role of English outside the classroom? Dealing in detail with these questions and their answers, the paper concludes that our aim in teaching English should be to enable the students to use English with ease and comfort in day to day life, to use it both instrumentally and interactively.

Keywords: English Language, Teaching-Learning, Multilingualism, Role of Teacher, Teaching Methodology, Language Acquisition.

Introduction

English language unlike other languages is not a foreign language but a second language to us. So, learning English language is not as natural to us as it is to the native speaker. The native speaker of English language naturally learns his respective mother language, he becomes familiar with all the essential components of English as we all learn our respective mother language effortlessly in the natural process of growing up. Learning of English as a second language is not merely confined to the four walls of the classroom. There are many problems in English language acquisition.

Language learning-teaching is not an easy task but as there are several hurdles so the possible solutions can also be found out. The role of teacher, his knowledge, use of techniques and methodology can make it happen. English language, for Indians, has a very specific place. So, this paper deals in detail with all aspects of English language learning and teaching.

Aim of The Study

English language has a very special place for Indians. Although, we are not Indians the native speaker of English language. India is a country of diversity with multiculturalism and multilingualism. English has a special place not merely because it is a world wide known language. For Indians, English is not just a foreign language or a lingua franca, this language is the language of communication, a status English has made a special impact on our cultural and social life. For Indians, English language is not just a language like Russian or French or German vice versa. In India, English is taught not as a foreign language but as a second language. English is a major connecting link in multilingual, multilingual India. Learning is a lifelong process and there is no harm in learning any language; learning enhances knowledge. So, in

the teaching of English in India, we should teach it as a second language and not as a foreign language.

Albert H. Marckwardt has made a distinction between 'English as a foreign language' and 'English as a second language'. According to him, when English is taught as a school subject on an adult level solely for the purpose of giving the student a foreign language competence which he may use in one of several ways, then it is taught as a foreign language but English becomes a second language when it is a language of instruction in schools and colleges and is used as "a lingua franca between speakers of widely diverse languages, as in India."¹ The same kind of distinction is made by D.A Wilkins when he says: "it is common to use former (foreign language) to refer to the status of a language which is not used for any normal day-to-day social interaction in the country where it is being learnt, and, by contrast, to use the later (second language) where, without being the native language of any social group in the country, it is nonetheless used for such purpose as the conduct of commerce, industry, law, administration, politics and education."²

For us, Indians, learning English is essentially a purposeful effort. English is not our mother language so to learn English language and to command over the different components of English language, we need to do extra efforts. The essential components of every language are its phonology, morphology and syntax. Phonology or phonetics is the sound system of language, morphology is the patterns and parts of language and syntax is the pattern of phrases and sentences.

We learn our mother language through imitation as it is the first and basic step towards learning. Imitation is the natural process of language acquisition. From the very first day of his birth, a child listens to the various kind of sounds of a language. Listening comes on the first place of teaching-learning process, speaking comes after listening. Reading comes after listening and speaking and writing comes at the end in this process. We listen to the people surrounding us and the actions and objects in the surrounding is the condensed form of language for the child and later on he learns to utter words spontaneously. A child spends many hours in listening the accent and essential components of mother language. He gets stimulated to the exposed language i.e. mother language.

The most important aspect of language learning is that we learn whatever language we are exposed to and normally we at the beginning exposed to one language only and that is our mother tongue. But if we are exposed to two languages in case we are brought up in a bilingual environment we can learn both languages simultaneously. In other words, it is a natural process. We have examined that when a child is exposed to a language, he picks it up easily and quickly but for an adult it is comparatively a little bit difficult to grasp the language. Generally, it is observed that when children and adults experience the same kind of bilingual situation, children learn the new language (culture specified language) more quickly.

This does not mean that adults are not good at learning a language but it is true that children have a better mastery of pronunciation system in comparison to adults, and, the reason is; adults already have an excellent command over the first language so it is not so easy for them to adopt and command over the new language and even if he tries, the accent of the mother language is always a hurdle in the way of learning. When a person from Punjab or Haryana speaks English, his accent and pronunciation of a few words can easily let everyone know from which region or a particular language speaking area they belong to. Learning the morphology and syntax of a new language is easier than its phonology. As adults have matured mental facilities. The actual achievement of learning by them is superior to that of children. Geoffrey Broughton and his colleagues are right when they say: "Adults learning English bring to the task a mature personality, many years of educational training, a developed intelligence, a determination to get what they want, fairly clear aims, and above all strong motivation to make as rapid as progress as possible. These are formidable qualifications which for outweigh any disadvantage and make teaching adults a challenging and satisfying experience."³

One thing that is quite obvious that both children and adults learn a language when they get enough exposure to it. So, one of the most important aspect of language learning is adequate exposure to the target language. Generally, second language learners get less exposure. A child gets conducive environment and a lot of exposure to learn his mother language but an adult even after doing extra efforts; gets less opportunities to get exposed to the second language.

As D.A Wilkins observes, "One year in the classroom provides the equivalent of from one of three weeks' contact in a language acquisition situation." He adds: "If it takes from three to four years for a child to learn his mother tongue to a reasonable degree of proficiency, we can work out for ourselves the astronomical length of time it would take for language learning to reach the same level if it was based on the same kind of largely random exposure to language."⁴ D.A Wilkins has also suggested a remedy that the learner of the second language must be given exposure of linguistic forms in a well-regulated, restricted manner instead of two diverse forms at the same time.

If exposure of language is made available for the learner, he becomes acquainted with the linguistic structures; he gets opportunities to use these linguistic structure and patterns. This learning of linguistic structures will make it possible for the learner to speak the language. The learning can be made easy by closely imitating the teacher and those who speak the language. Learning is a lifelong process and no one is perfect. We try make mistakes, try again and again and thus we acquire perfection. In the beginning, it is possible that the learner will make mistakes but these mistakes are very useful in the process of learning. These mistakes will become use for the learner because the feedback lets him know his

weakness to make up and leads his motivational. The teacher should make correction of the mistakes through constant feedback; it can be in the form of appreciation, reward or motivation. The learner should try to avoid mistake in pronunciation. He must not try to be over conscious in his utterance because it reduces the proficiency and confidence in his utterance.

Motivation is another important and significant factor in language learning. A child while learning mother language gets efficient environment for learning. In his surrounding, he has speakers of the same language. But the second language learner has his motivation in the need to communicate, whatever be the level of communication he wants to reach. So, more emphasis should be laid on the communicative use of language.

Language learning is an active not passive process. A child learns to speak first but he learns to write only when he is taught to write. He can not speak without being formally trained. In other words, Is it psychologically necessary or beneficial for speech to be learnt before writing? The history of human language shows that it came to be spoken first and written afterwards. The primacy of speech makes linguists argue that the language learner should be trained in listening and speaking first and reading and writing next. But we should not forget that the second language learner has already learnt his mother tongue and has reached an age at which he can learn what he sees and hears. So, we may not go the whole hog with the linguist; we may make use of both modalities- speech and writing- simultaneously in our scheme of second language learning.

There are certain factors which are of great importance in second language learning. The most important of these factors is the duration of exposure to the language. In India, English is taught as a second language in schools and colleges for five to seven hours in a week. Perhaps the duration is hardly adequate; also, the courses are spread over years. These two facts make it difficult for us to create a sustained interest and develop a sense of progress and achievement in our students. The long period of exposure to English enables our students to have a certain degree of familiarity with sentence patterns, words and phrases in the language which, with some more continuous contact with the language strengthens his ability to write it though not to speak it.

Another important factor in learning is classroom conditions. These conditions include the number of students in a class, the physical arrangement for the class, teaching material such as audio-visual aids, library, helping books and very common aids such as chalk, blackboard etc. It is very important that second language classes should be of right size. A class consisting a large number of students becomes manageable and no individual attention can be paid to students so the teaching learning aims cannot be achieved. One of the greatest reasons why a teacher cannot achieve his goal of teaching and teaching English in India does not leave the desired impact on the student is that the class is too big for the teacher to do any worthwhile job.

India is very well known for its multiculturalism and multilingualism, which is quite evident in classroom also. A multicultural classroom is also a challenge for teaching learning second language. Since learners are from different socio-cultural backgrounds and sometimes the teachers also come from different backgrounds. This can be a hindrance in the teaching learning situation.

The availability of the right type of teaching materials and audio-visual aids can certainly make the teaching of English in India quite effective. Audio-Visual aids are an integral part of the learning situation. In India teaching of English suffers as a result of the inadequacy and poor availability of these resources. Though English learning begins in the fourth or fifth standard (usually in the non-English medium schools in most of the states) and goes on till first year of college education (but most of the students do not take it seriously as they need to score only passing marks) yet the standard of English reached by students in general is very poor. It is so because of the educational atmosphere, environmental factors, poor classroom conditions, and inadequate teaching aids. Learning by doing, visualization of topics, demonstration, use of various relevant and latest technology can help a lot in language acquisition.

In a second language learning situation, the most important factors are the student and the teacher. A teacher plays a vital role in the growth and development of a person. In our country, the classrooms are teacher centered and students are mostly passive recipients because of the lecture-based method of teaching. The English teacher should teach in such a way that the desired goal of learning may be achieved. There are different approaches for teaching and learning process, such as, psychological, linguistic and pedagogical principles. These principles of learning a language are very helpful for the English teacher to raise the standard of English language and to make the teaching learning interesting activity. The active participation of student and teacher will help to achieve the desired goal easily.

Indian classrooms are very diverse. Students come from various linguistic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds, the teacher should keep this classroom situation every day in mind. The teacher should take this diversity as an opportunity not as a barrier in teaching learning process. But the teacher of second language has many problems to tackle when he is faced with the task of teaching a class of students who shows varying abilities of learning. In India even at the college level a large number of students have to be given elementary lessons in the language; in such circumstances the teacher will have to do extra efforts to make the students convince that whatever he is doing is in their own interests. Some of the students are poorly motivated owing to their social and family background; here the teacher himself must stimulate and sustain motivation.

The variations that exist in the standards of students in the same class cause other problems also. The large number of students in a class is also a

big problem because the teacher cannot pay attention to each student. Individual attention to students can be the only remedy to this situation to a great extent which is not possible in the classroom with a large number of students. This is possible only if the class is of small size. One possible solution to this problem is to assess the average competence of the class and then to impart systematic instruction, taking consideration to, the length of course, average teaching time, the size of class, availability of books, teaching aids etc.

The teacher himself is a vital factor in the teaching-learning process of a second language; his skills, method of teaching, personality, etc. plays a very effective and powerful role. He should be proficient in the language. The language educators have a crucial role to play so that the teaching and learning of English becomes meaningful. He must have an adequate knowledge of subject. He is expected to cater to students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. He needs to adopt diverse and flexible approaches towards English language teaching and must always try to explore innovative techniques and methods to make English language learning interesting. His experience, different tools and methods to make teaching learning interesting, techniques, should be of a high standard.

As Robert Lado says: The language teacher must be educated, at least to the level of his peers. He must have the general preparation of a teacher..... (He) must know the target language well enough to be imitated by his students.”⁵ In our country, the major problem is lack of competent teachers of English. Many of them don't have professional skills in their understanding of language and their command of methods and techniques of language teaching. D.A. Wilkins is right when he observes: “It should be unrealistic to expect a teacher to set objectives which he himself is not capable of reaching. A teacher who himself has difficulty in speaking the language, his teaching is not going to succeed in giving his pupils a command of spoken language.”⁶ So along with the adequate knowledge of

language, the language teacher must encourage maximum participation of students in the activities to make them feel valued. For effective implementation of new trends and approaches, the teacher needs to make a conscious effort to shift from the teacher centered approaches to learner centered approaches. It is very important to teach English through a contextually rich local perspective.

Conclusion

So, our aim in teaching English to the students of first generation is to enable them to use English to with ease and comfort that is to use it both instrumentally and interactively. That is to say, they should be able to speak and write English effectively and develop an ability to understand the basic patterns of the culture of the English-speaking people. It is possible for us to realize the aims if we successfully cope with the problems of teaching English as a second language. Learning English as a foreign language, that is, learning it instrumentally only, will not serve us adequately in our communication within India and those outside India. Our purpose must to be enable students and to enhance their knowledge and empower them.

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