

Language Acquisition : English in Patiala

Abstract

English language learning in India has always been a problematic situation. The present paper focuses on the role played by the medium of instruction in the students' ability to master the English language. Their performance differs according to the medium of instruction and are of residence. Another important factor which effect the language-learning process, is the socio-economic background of the students. The teaching of English at the college level is not an easy task. The teacher has to keep in mind the students' socio-cultural background, his native tongue and his previous knowledge of English language in order to achieve the desired results. But, a little bit modification in teaching/learning process can certainly improve the scenario in the colleges.

Keywords: Factor Responsible For The Situation, Socio-Economic Background, Socio-Cultural Background.

Introduction

English language learning in India has always been a problematic situation. Student's skills in language acquisition are never of the same level. Their performance differs according to the difference in the medium of instruction and are of residence. This situation may be the result of certain factors which are beyond control. The obvious reason is that in English medium schools, students' exposure to the English language is much more than what is available to students of vernacular medium schools. English is learnt in such schools by using it but in schools that use a vernacular medium of instruction, students learn English by memorizing the rules of grammar. In English medium schools students learn English not only in the period meant for learning English but also while they go about other activities as well. In other schools, they are exposed to the language only six hours a week.

In vernacular medium schools teaching takes place in an unfavorable environment as, for instance, a large size of class without a proper seating arrangement, and without proper teaching aids. Such a situation is not only de-motivating for the students but also depressing for the teachers. On the other hand, in English medium schools, teaching taken place in a conducive environment. The classes are small. So, it is possible to pay personal attention to the students and engage them in group activities. This is impossible with a large class.

In government schools lack of good infrastructure is also an important factor. English medium schools have a spacious campus, airy-classrooms, modern furniture, rich libraries, language labs, the modern teaching aids all this is essential for enhancing language learning. No such facilities are available in the government schools. The situation is worse in rural schools. The method of teaching is outdated. The grammar translation method is very popular in rural schools. Absence of opportunities to listen to and speak in English seems to be the greatest bar to language learning. In English medium schools the language skills are naturally developed as the emphasis is on co-curricular activities which is considered as an effective means to enhance not only language skills but also for the overall development of the students. On the contrary students in vernacular medium schools engage less in activities like debates, discussion, declamation etc. Which provide a platform for the development of language skills? Because vernacular medium schools students' experience is less, so their vocabulary is also limited. The art of using right words in meaningful context is lacking in government schools students. They are taught grammar and vocabulary in isolation. That is why, after studying English for so many years they lack communication skills.

Most of the students of vernacular medium schools do not indulge in extra-reading. Newspapers, magazines and journals can be a good source of teaching English as they expose students to current usage of language. The habit of reading is not developed in students of government

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schools situated in rural areas. Let alone English, they do not read even in their mother tongue. This inevitably backlashes on to their second language learning.

Another important factor is the socio-economic background of the students. Students of English medium schools already belong to a background where they are exposed to English in all aspects of life. They pick up the language from their environment only. On the other hand, students of vernacular medium schools have no access to such an advantageous situation. Even students studying in some of the English schools situated in rural areas live in an English speaking environment but spend most of their time in non English-speaking community, which is surely going to affect their learning skills.

There exists a lot of difference between the English medium schools situated in the cities and the English medium schools situated in rural areas. Many English medium schools lag behind the established schools, because they are not up to the mark. Most of there are 'teaching shops' catering to colonial hangover of Indian parents who want their wards to be proficient in English. They are happy that their ward is going to a English medium school without bothering about the standard maintained by the school. There does exist a significant difference between the rural English medium schools and urban English medium schools as far as the quality of education is concerned.

Most of the student's studying in English medium schools in rural areas come from a socio-economic group where English is not of much relevance. On the other hand, students of English medium schools of urban areas come from a background where English is spoken not only at home but also in other spheres of life as well. For students of rural areas, English is just one more difficult subject from the examination point of view. They only read the substandard notes available in the market.

On the whole, to cope up with the situation, they should be taught in such a manner that English becomes an automatic habit with them as is the case of students coming from English medium schools.

The teaching of English at the college level is not an easy task. The teacher has to keep in mind the students' socio-cultural background, his native-tongue and his previous knowledge of English language in order to achieve the desired results. A big unmanageable class-size, lack of student interest and absence of modern teaching aids, de-motivates the teacher as well as the student. It becomes extremely difficult for the teacher to begin from the elementary level and secondly to wipe out the effect of bad learning. The situation is worse in the rural colleges, where the students can not write a single sentence in English correctly. They have no idea of proper sentence structure and pronunciation. They don't study English as language but as a subject. Their main objective to pass the exam for which they depend on the readymade notes provided by the teachers or the substandard material available in the market. To motivate such students is really a challenging job.

Whatever happens at the school level seems to be out of my ambit. But at the

undergraduate level a little bit modification in teaching/learning process can certainly improve the scenario in the colleges. For instance, the teacher can adopt some other strategies in addition to the lecture method to make learning interesting, enjoyable and effective as well.

Language can be taught through literature. A change in teaching methodology will make a tremendous contribution in the students' development and progress. For example, while teaching the poem 'Daffodils' they can be asked to underline the words that are used by the poet as expression of happiness like pleasure, joy, glee, jocund and sprightly or the words that depicts the loneliness of solitary reaper in the poem 'The Solitary Reaper'. The poem presented in such a manner will ignite a spark of interest in them. It will not only prevent the class from turning monotonous but also be useful in creating language skills. They will not only enjoy the poem but their vocabulary will also be enhanced. In order to make them familiar with native accent the BBC recorded recitations of poems can also be played.

Mere listening is not enough, more stress needs to be laid on oral communication as well. Many students can write well but fall short of the set standards when it comes to spoken English. They feel shy or do not have the confidence to speak in the class. To motivate the students listening and speaking exercises should be included in the syllabus.

Most of the students get bored, passively listening to the lecture in the class. A vast majority of teachers use the grammar translation method. In the teaching/learning process the involvement of students is a must. The topic of the text can be introduced in an interesting manner. The teacher should not reveal the whole truth, some suspense is necessary to sustain their interest. After reading a few paragraphs, short type questions can be asked to check whether the students are attentively listening or following the lesson. Loud reading no doubt helps to detect the pronunciation errors. Gradually students can be encouraged to do silent reading that enables them to grasp the text more easily. For intensive reading they can be asked to read a few pages from the prescribed text as a home assignment. Questions can be asked to test their comprehension abilities. To inculcate the habit of reading the class can be divided into two groups. One group can be asked to form questions and the other to answer those questions. Such healthy competition will trigger their mental and creative abilities also. Different activities like thinking, talking, discussing, reading and listening prevent the lesson from appearing boring to the students.

Due to inadequate vocabulary, the students often fail to understand the classroom lectures fully. To tackle this problem, habit of learning new words should be created. At the initial stage they should be motivated to learn simple words. Slowly, new learned words will become part of their own vocabulary will lead them to better expression. The teacher can make efforts to arouse their interest by asking them to come with two new words daily and their usages can be discussed in the class. This will build their confidence to speak in the class. The common errors made by the students in different usages of the same word can be cured by this technique. They can be made familiar

with different parts of particular words i.e. root, prefix and suffixes. More exercise on the formation of adjectives, nouns and verbs can be practiced. Because, they can be taught how adding a prefix or suffix the meaning of a word is totally changed? Formation of words, idioms and verbal phrases should be made an important part of the syllabi. They should be not only made to notice the differences between phrases like: look for, look into, look after but also how these words are used in sentences.

More and more of grammar should be included in the syllabi. If a student is unable to form a simple sentence or even introduce him well, reading Shakespeare or Wordsworth will not do him much good. Perhaps smaller size of classes held a few times a week with a prescribed work book could go a long way in improving their written English. For weaker students remedial classes can be held.

When they learn the different usage of words and develop a habit of reading, the common errors in translation can be tackled. Since a majority of students are in the habit of literally translation the sentences from Punjabi to English, it leads to erroneous expression like 'He killed my fifty rupees' or 'you are eating my head'. The students can be made aware of the fact that sometimes it is not right to translate a sentence ad verbatim.

The most important thing is to provide their exposure to good English. Reading is the core of language learning as it enables the students to become familiar with the vocabulary and structure of the target language. Reading exercises can be given to students. Unseen passages can be used for this purpose. Once their interest is aroused then they can be motivated to read newspapers, magazines, short stories.

Without exposure these can be no learning. Group discussion, debates, quiz competition or workshops can be arranged. They can be encouraged to express their own ideas and opinions. Simple topics related to their day to day life can be given to them for discussion in the class. They should be provided opportunities to talk in the class. They

should be made to realize the practical importance of English as a language. Only then they will be able to use it for communication purposes. The zeal for learning well helps them in their own advancement. Students can be motivated to listen to BBC news, English commentaries etc.

Conclusion

As we all know that the use of modern technology itself enhances English language learning. The use of traditional teaching methods along with technology based teaching will be helpful in achieving better results in teaching/learning of English. The use of computers to teach grammar, audio-cassettes for teaching pronunciations and video-clips can make the teaching more effective.

Last but not the least, the teacher's own personality, attitude towards students, and command over the language matters a lot. He/she should be aware of the latest techniques and methods of teaching. He/she should be capable of arousing the interest and kindling the imagination of the students.

The suggestions given above can help in making the teaching of English more effective. The standard of teaching can be improved and the desired results can be achieved in teaching and learning of English.

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