

# Teaching English in India: Debates and the Unresolved Issues

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## Abstract

English has often been referred as a 'global language'. It is the *lingua franca* of the current era and the same is taught and learnt as a second language around the world. In India, English is used not only for communicative purpose but also as a link language for inter-state and intrastate coordination as the nation has a lot of ethnic and linguistic diversities. However, many Indian students studying English at school and college level manage to get through the exams without making enough attempts to either understand or learn to appreciate the utility of English. The challenges faced by the contemporary day English Language Teaching and the strategies to overcome them are considered in this paper. This paper tries to examine the inevitability of English in today's world, the issues and remedies for teaching English in India.

**Keywords:** Teaching English as a Second Language, Indian Education System, Problems of Teaching/Leaning English, Remedies.

## Introduction

The debate that began with the minute of Macaulay on Indian Education regarding the medium of instruction in schools and colleges of India still continues even after almost two centuries. Amidst the opposition from various sympathisers of native languages and people who want to do away with this "colonial hangover", English continues to dominate the public sphere in India. Teaching English has undergone various ups and downs and the pedagogy of English has also undergone various forms since its introduction in India. Now, globalisation, modernity, growth of the corporate sector, trends in various professional courses and job markets have started to influence our approaches to the study and teaching of English.

## The Background

Starting from the requirements during the colonial regime to the present demands in the job market, English has been a necessary medium in India. There is an "aura" around the elite jobs in corporate sector, as a channel for many competitive examinations, as a sign of a "highly educated / intellectually sound" individual than a native / vernacular speaking person. Consequently, there has been a flourishing of English medium schools and private coaching centres that offer spoken English courses in India. Even in schools and colleges where a local language or mother tongue is the medium of instruction, English is being taught as the second or third language so that the students are not "left behind", Respective state governments too, despite the animosity from various local writers and thinkers, have spent large funds, reformed their educational policies and restructured their curriculum to accommodate English.

However, in spite of all these developments across the nation for more than a century, the availability of fluent speakers and flawless writers in English is scarce in India. Contrary to the expectations of parents and society, students, especially from rural areas remain fairly inadequate in terms of their proficiency in English. Therefore, an attempt has been made here to examine the inevitability of English, the ailing issues in Teaching English in India and the possibilities for a better pedagogical approach.

## Objectives of the Study

The present paper tries to look into these four vital objectives:

1. To understand the problems of teaching English in India.
2. To know the teachers' and learners' approaches towards English.
3. To assess the significance of English in the contemporary context.
4. To look for an amicable solution to the ailing issues with respect to English in India.



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**Review of Literature**

Many theories have been formulated and many articles and books have been published discussing teaching/learning of English in India. A select review of some of these helps us to identify the ailing issues with respect to the problem of teaching English in India.

In his book *Teaching of English*, Mohammad Aslam tries to help prospective teachers to achieve proficiency in teaching English. It deals with status of English in India, Language Teaching Methods, Developing Reading Skills, Writing Skills, Teaching of Prose and Poetry, Teaching of Grammar.

N.P. Ahuja, in his book *Teaching of English* focuses on guiding teachers and teacher trainees of B.Ed classes. The aims and objectives of teaching English in Indian schools have been discussed. He opines that a teacher can achieve desired result by making use of technology while teaching English. The book also evaluates the curriculum of English for B.Ed classes in various Indian universities.

*Approaches and Methods in English Language Teaching* by H.S. Sinha puts special emphasis on teaching strategies to be adopted and activities to be performed by the teaching for the benefit of normal and handicapped students. It aims to help the beginner teachers in making them aware of how to teach English.

*Teaching of English* by Rajinder Singh tries to give guidance to teachers, teacher – trainers and teacher – trainees of all pedagogical institutes and departments. It stresses on the important aspects of English language, Methods of Teaching English, Modern aids to teaching English, Techniques of teaching education issue in teaching of English.

All these books focus on the problems that are already known or spoken of. There has been a trend to consider English in Indian scenario in a one-dimensional way. Hence an attempt has been made in this paper to look into the hitherto neglected issues.

**The indispensability of English in India: A propaganda or fact?**

The departure of the colonial masters brought a new dimension to the Indian psyche. This was because of a need for bringing a united national fabric and promoting India's cultural and linguistic spaces. Still, English remained to be a handy option as a common language between the linguistically divided spaces within India. The decades' old conflict between the Hindi dominated North India and the Dravidian South India is deferred only because of the presence of English as a viable media.

Moreover, globalisation and the growth of corporate sector have further boosted the demand for English in India. Apart from being a "preferred" language in job market and competitive examinations, English is "handy" in educational and research institutions owing to the availability of a large repository of study materials in print and online in English. Now we have reached a stage that it is not possible to "undo" English in India. Moreover, for a multi linguistic country like India there is no better alternative to English. Thus, these factors have made English indispensable for India. This makes us to assess and

reconsider our approaches towards Teaching English in India.

**What ails English Teaching in India?**

Just like there are many theories in India regarding Education in general, there are many views regarding teaching of English. Broadly, these views pertain to teachers, students and the society in general. These views are the obstacles to teach/learn English in India:

1. Since English is a second language for many students of the rural schools they find themselves unable to express in English.
2. Students find it difficult to grasp the proper pronunciation, spellings and grammatical rules in English that are quite different from the ones in their respective native languages.
3. Students fail to notice the importance of learning English in this competitive world.
4. Lack of confidence to make an attempt to speak in English.
5. The failures of teaching English through Grammar-Translation Method make the students dependent on their mother tongue.

It has to be admitted that too much of experimentations have been done already with regard to teaching of English in India. Educational experts, academicians, teachers and policy makers have been trying too many things to improve the standard of English among students. There have been theories that propagate teaching English language through literature, through teaching grammar. Recently, communicative English and Functional English are the new trends with respect to teaching of English. On the other hand, teachers themselves too are concerned primarily with "completing the lessons" and preparing their students for exams. Classroom situations, in most cases, boil down to summarising the prescribed texts or translating the texts orally into the local language. Finally, at the graduation level, in most of the universities in India, English is excluded in the final year. This has led to a belief among the students that English is not as important as other "core" subjects.

Learners / Students, on their part, too have been adding their own contribution to the already ailing system. This includes a belief that it is enough for them to get passing marks in English. This belief prompts them either to skip English classes or to treat English as an additional burden in their curriculum that has to be done away with at the earliest with minimum effort on their part. Added to this is the phobia about English found in rural students who have done their primary and secondary education in their mother tongues. Such students prefer to shun English and think of getting passing marks in English, rather than learning it.

Further, there are some other issues specific to India that have been hampering the growth of English teaching in India. Supporters of vernacular language theory and linguistic organisations offer stiff resistance to the attempts to popularise or promote English. Their argument arises with their concern that promotion of English can or may threaten the existence of local languages. Some governments too,

owing to political pressure or political convenience have not dared to take any moves to improve the standard of English and thereby invoke the wrath of these groups. Finally, in post independent India, there has been a view / argument that English is the language of the coloniser that has to be decolonised from India.

Thus, too much of experimentations and not so conducive approach on the part of the teachers, students and society have been responsible for the problems in teaching English in India. Despite the spending of public funds, a larger section of India has not been able to get hold of this "holy cow". This prompts us to point out that, of late, countries like China and Japan have started to favour English over their mother tongue in their curriculum. Therefore, one can discern a stiff competition for Indian graduates at the global level in the days to come. Hence, there is an urgency to re organise our approaches towards teaching English in India.

#### **What could be done?**

We are yet to make teaching of English a student friendly exercise. Rather than following different theories / methods of teaching language, or starting up trending courses to teach English, the focus should be made on teaching English through usage. This includes the four basic ways for learning a language; Reading, listening, writing and speaking.

Most of the present classroom situations employ "Listening" only wherein a lecture delivers all the staff and the students "listen" to it. At the end of the academic year / semester, students will be given a test to exhibit their "writing" skills. Therefore, basically, this method involves "Listening", "memorising" and "writing" and "speaking" does not get due importance. Therefore, a new approach that stresses on all the four skills – Reading, listening, speaking and writing – should be developed.

There should be a uniform methodology for teaching English in schools and colleges. Whatever may be the syllabus followed in schools – state syllabus, CBSE or ICSE – English should be taught in a uniform way in all schools. The same logic applies to colleges as well. To facilitate this uniformity, training camps and workshops should be organized for teachers.

Further, at the undergraduate levels, English should be offered in the final year as well. This will bring more exposure to the students thereby enabling them to learn it in a better way.

Crowded classrooms reduce the student teacher interactions. Therefore, student – teacher ratio has to be improved, allowing the teachers to pay more attention to students. Group discussions,

creative writing, listening to audio clips and motivating the students to read English on a regular basis can definitely improve the standard of English among students.

#### **Conclusion**

Teaching and learning of English language can be promoted by cultivating skill based habits such as reading, listening, writing and speaking. English should be practiced for as long hours as possible. The language learners need to realise the process involving the language learning. Self education and practice of language are autonomous exercises and have no substitutes. The student community should realise the importance of learning this language that will make them competitors at the global level. Thus, a collective approach on the part of teachers, academicians and students is the need of the hour.

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