ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: IN THE CASE OF RURAL INDIA

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Abstract

Growing popularity and ceaseless demand of English language, lingua franca, have compelled most of the people around the globe to learn and acquire it in order to get good job, build national and international connections, enjoy accessibility and develop cognitive flexibility. Knowledge of and competence in English language is a prerequisite for establishing political, cultural, intellectual, economical, commercial and social relations with the entire world.

In India, especially in its rural parts, students of schools, colleges as well as universities lack competence in English language due to 'not-so-rich' environment which lacks proper exposure to the target language and direct engagement of students in teaching learning process. For its smooth and continuous learning, it is the responsibility of the planners, policy makers, administrators and teachers to provide input-rich conducive environment in schools as these students are devoid of the same at home and their nearby surroundings.

This paper is mainly focused on the need of developing and enriching English language competencies and skills in students of rural India to prepare them for ever-changing competitive world of today. Besides this, it also tries to present the important dimensions of school environment through which teachers can provide support and assistance to their students for accelerating the process of attaining the desired level of learning and reaching the pre set goals.

Keywords: English Language, Language Learning, School Environment.

Introduction

"Language is at the centre of human life. We use it to express our love to our hatred, to achieve our goals and further our careers and to gain artistic satisfaction or simple pleasure. Through language, we plan our lives and remember our past, we exchange ideas and experiences and we form our social and individual identities."

-Cook (2001)

Language is not only a medium of expression or means of communication but it also carries the thoughts of the communicator and shows the identity of the person. These unique features of language make human beings apart from the other creatures of the universe. According to Shaffer and Kipp (2002), "One truly astounding achievement that sets human apart from the animal kingdom is our creation and use of language."

Language occupies a very important position and plays a role in giving direction, conveying messages, preserving information and controlling fresh thinking in all spheres of life. Such language becomes an extremely flexible, fruitful, productive, effective and efficient tool of communication which facilitates our thinking process, constructs and re constructs realities, connects and links us with the larger society and above all it gives us a unique identity. Every language has certain features like communication of ideas, social interaction and emotional expression, instrument of thought and expression of identity, recording and preservation of facts and ideas for future generations.

English Language and its Features

Every language makes its own place in community, society and nation by being the means of communication for day to day conversation. English has occupied this place in most of the communities, societies and nations by being not only library and link language but a language of great opportunities. It is the most widely used language of the world. Vergheese (1989) said, "One person out of every four on earth can be reached through English." The growing importance of English language cannot be denied and neglected. Knowledge of and competence in English language is a prerequisite for establishing political, cultural, intellectual, economical, commercial and social relations with the entire world.

According to Crystal (1997), English is the language 'on which the sun never sets'. The advancement of science and technology; industry and commerce; travel, entertainment and globalization in different walks of life have accelerated the spread and use of English. English is a language of international organizations and conferences, international banking, economic affairs, advertisement, education and communication. English language is required for better careers, higher education, access to research and information along with understanding foreign cultures, traditions etcetera. Looking over the importance of English language, French (1963) rightly said, "No language, ancient and modern, can be compared with English in the number of its speakers, writers and readers all over the world." English is remarkable for its diversity and its propensity to change and be changed. This ever changing feature of English language makes it flexible and rich. Various features of English language can be stated as follows:

- ***A hybrid and flexible language:*** English has always been an ever evolving language and language contact has been an important factor or driver of change. Britain's colonial expansion established the pre-conditions for the global use of English, taking the language from its island birth place to settlements around the globe. It is a hybrid language which rapidly changes to meet new cultural and communicational needs. English language has borrowed freely, first from Celtic and Latin, later from Scandinavian and Norman French, and more recently from many languages spoken in British colonies. Its unique features allow it to expand quickly into new domains and explain in part its success as a world language.

- ***Access to rich art and literature:*** Various literary articles, films, dramas, arts etcetera are available mainly in English language. Until and unless one knows that language, one cannot access the large number of literary and artistic productions. And it is well known that the best literature of other countries is first translated into English and then comes to us through English translation.

- ***Language of science and technology***: English is known as the language of science and technology. Most of the books, journals, magazines, periodicals and weekly in the field of science and technology are published in English language. The equivalent terminology and expression of scientific knowledge do not seem to be feasible in Indian or other languages. If one does not adopt English, he/she cannot keep abreast of scientific knowledge with the western sciences.

- *Language of trade and business:* The world has become small due to the advancement of information and communication technology. This has eased the process of business which is done through English. No other language can replace English in trade and industry. Large multinational companies conduct their office management and administration in English only.
- *Language of opportunities:* English continues to be the language of opportunities, the language of development and the language of upward mobility. Any individual will find competence in English as a pre requisite, if he/she seeks socio-economic advancement at any level.

English in India: Second or Foreign Language

There are three kinds of English speaker: those who speak it as a first language, those for whom it is a second or additional language and those who learn it as a foreign language. English in India is considered as second language rather than foreign language. But in some areas, it can be considered as a foreign language. According to Nunan (1989), "The foreign language situation is when the target language is used within the ambit of school or institution where it is taught and no opportunity is available to the learner to use it in social life." This is the situation in most parts of India other than big cities and towns. (As in Sharan, 2012)

Before its expansion in literary, business and educational field, it was taken as a foreign language but later on it has taken place of second language in urban and some rural areas too. Second language is the one, which has importance next to the first language in communication. English is basically second language at national level, but when it comes to state level, it may differs from one state to another for example, in Bengal, Bengali is the first language but their second language can be Assamese or Hindi. In Delhi, the capital of India, Hindi is the first language and some people have Punjabi as second language.

Teaching of English in India

The uniqueness of the second language classroom is that language is involved in two different ways. First of all, the organization and control of the classroom take place through language for example English becomes the language of communication and instruction for teaching various subjects except English itself. Secondly, language is the actual subject matter that is being taught. In the second instance, English becomes the subject to be taught. There is a need to bridge the gap between *'English as subject'* and *'English as medium'* (NCF, 2005) in order to make communicative learning more fruitful and productive.

A school subject like Physics does not turn the academic subject back on itself. Physics is not taught through Physics in the same way that language is taught through language. This twofold involvement of language creates a problem for second language teaching. The teachers' language is particularly important to language teaching. Teachers of Physics adapt their speech to suit the level of comprehension of their pupils, but this is only indirectly connected to their subject matter. The students are not literally learning the Physics' teachers' language. Teachers of languages who adapt their speech directly affect the subject matter that is language itself. Language teaching classrooms are different from other subjects because language is not just the medium but the content too. So it can be said that in language classroom, language is the most important ingredient in the classroom, the core of the syllabus and the basis for the teaching technique.

By expressing the views of Matthew (2008), Sharan (2012) presented two main problems of English teaching in the present scenario of India. First is teacher's poor language proficiency and second is the practice that views English as a content subject. English is tested in a way which forces students to memorize the texts from prescribed textbooks but not the skills of language that is what students can actually do in terms of reading, writing, speaking and

listening in new situations. In views of Sharan (2012), a teacher has to teach English, a foreign language, in a negative environment like large class, pupils without text, lack of motivation among students towards learning English, traditional and ineffective teaching methods and the only teaching aid available is the blackboard.

Reddy (2012) mentioned in his article the several problems of teaching English in India such as lack of clear cut policy, lack of exposure to the languages, non-availability of suitable teaching materials, lack of good teachers of English, defective methods, lack of motivation and large classes. Besides these problems, interference of mother tongue, lack of opportunities, negative attitude, lack of trained teachers and non-conducive school and home environment also come in front while teaching English in Indian schools especially in rural parts.

Basic Objectives of Teaching English

Language is not a content-based subject like history and science, but it is a skill-oriented subject which does not require information of the taught subject but it needs the practice in the use of language. We learnt to speak our mother tongue not after reading a book, but through repeated practice and exposure, we started speaking on our own. It is necessary to develop in students the language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Later on, the learners will develop the competence in using the language for effective interaction or communication and overall academic achievement.

Objectives of English language teaching change according to the level of education. At elementary level, its main focus is to develop language skills and to develop love for literature. At secondary and higher secondary stage, its objectives become broad which focus on competence and proficiency in language skills, enrichment of vocabulary, development of their interest and aesthetic sense, etcetera.

Basic Language Skills

In the words of Raimes (1983) "When we learn a second language, we learn to communicate with other people: to understand them, talk to them, read what they have written and write to them." There are four abilities of language which need development and enrichment: listening, speaking, reading, writing- with understanding as the main ingredient in each. This indicates that our chief concern should not be about difficulties of pronunciation, growth of vocabulary, grammar and structure, but with language abilities.

Teaching of English language basically focuses on the development of language skills, mentioned below:

- *Listening Skill:* Listening skill is related to audio sense. It is a purposive activity which is the basis and foundation of good learning of language. There remains a need of making the foundation firm and strong, then only the edifice built on it will be strong and durable. Therefore, it is necessary to develop listening skill properly among learners. The main objective of listening is to develop the understanding of concepts, facts, ideas and feelings. Good listening comes from mastering the sound system of the language being learnt. Because in speaking, we use the language we know; in listening we have no control over what gets said. (Tickoo, 2004) Poor listening habits and skills can cause as many failures of communication as ineffective expression of ideas.

- *Speaking Skill:* Development of basic language competencies lead to the development of effective communication. For effective communication, if listening skill lies on one hand, speaking lies on the other. For a teacher, training in speaking must produce skills and abilities that are needed for communicating successfully. Learning to speak a language makes the journey of reading and writing easy and approachable. It is basically related to

the articulation of sounds. Spoken language is a primary source of getting information and imparting knowledge. Effective communication depends upon the effective use of speaking skill which trains other competencies and abilities with it. It calls for correctness of articulation, pronunciation and intonation, as well as the spontaneous application of vocabulary and sentence forms.

- ***Reading Skill:*** A proficient reader uses the most effective and economical means to interact with the printed page in order to make meaning. (Tickoo, 2004) Reading is a progressive ability to read the text with ease and comprehension. From a cognitive point of view, Day and Bamford (1998) concisely defined reading as "the construction of meaning from a printed or written message." People read to obtain information, to satisfy the curiosity to know about some topic, to need instruction, to buy wisely, to solve problems, for pleasure, and for many other reasons. The printed words in any writing are merely symbols for the meanings intended by the author. These symbols serve as cues to the reader, who must organize an understanding of what is meant. The ease with which a reader can do this depends largely upon his background of experiences or schemata, building blocks of cognition (Rumelhart, 1980). Reading as a tool for learning will be ineffective unless it is accompanied by thinking. Learning to read and reading to learn should develop together throughout the school years.

  In the words of Kushwaha (2012), "Reading is a process of finding meaning in written words." Reading can be called as: the skill of grasping the gist of the passage; the skill of deducing information or ideas from what has been read; the skill of being able to find facts and information in books and other printed matter, and the very valuable skill of being able to note exact information when one is reading, that is, to understand exactly and fully what is in print before one's eyes. Morris (1968) said, "Reading ability has the highest cultural value by giving access to literature. It has great practical value in regard to technical and commercial pursuits by enabling the reader to keep abreast of developments in his/her subject. The opportunities for reading practice are unlimited as they are provided by books and periodicals and do not call even for companionship. It also permits the application of self-study methods." Reading is purposeful, selective and text-based activity which involves complex cognitive skills like decoding, comprehension, making prediction, drawing inferences and assumptions.

- ***Writing Skill:*** Among two productive language skills, speaking involves production of sounds but writing involves production of written symbols. It is a useful means of organizing thought and giving it precision (Tickoo, 2004). According to Morris (1968), "Writing in the broadest sense is an ability to represent words by means of written signs. This ability is applied in note making, in taking down dictation and in tests; its highest form is the free expression of thoughts." Writing focuses on vocabulary, originality, accuracy and coherence. Writing helps in expression of ideas in logical and coherent manner, in learning new words, encouraging creativity and building confidence among students. There are six aspects of children's written work that often need special attention. These are: grammatical correctness, the content and ideas in the writing, the relevance of ideas to the subject, the continuity of language and of thought, the orderly arrangement of ideas and the expression of these ideas and how far such expression is effective in carrying out the writer's intention.

English Language and School Environment

Schools are institutional spaces for communities of learners, including both students and teachers (NCF, 2005). Schools occupy important place in effective teaching and learning. It has been mentioned in National Curriculum Framework (2005), "Schools have a major role to play in ensuring that children are socialized into a culture of self-reliance, peace-oriented values and health". And this effective socialization depends upon the environment provided by the school.

In the document named 'National Focus Group on Teaching of English' (2006), it has been mentioned that "All learning happens through language". No one can deny the importance of language in learning other subjects as well as that particular language itself. This case becomes more complicated when the matter goes to second language learning especially English in Government run schools because learners do not get proper exposure and opportunities to learn and practice that language. "Teaching and learning of English today is characterized by....linguistic environment supportive of English acquisition..." (National Focus Group, 2006). Private and missionary schools have better environment for language learning as they impart knowledge in English medium but Government run schools lack that environment because they have Hindi or regional language as medium of instruction. Nowadays, parents want to send their wards in private schools for their better future though these schools charge more fees. English has become a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller preparation in national and international life. This language is being demanded by everyone at the very initial stage of schooling. For language learning, input-rich environment is a prerequisite (National Focus Group, 2006).

In schools, it is especially useful for giving practice in using the target language so that pupils begin to feel thoroughly at home with it and so confidently that it does not impede the efficiency of their thinking. It is also useful for training pupils to express their interests, feelings, needs and knowledge in the new language, and to express these as clearly and correctly as they do in their own mother tongue.

It is the duty of teacher to bring his/her students at the level so that they start making competent use of the new language, speaking freely as well as correctly to friends, acquaintances and strangers, among relatives and neighbours in social gatherings, and in home life, where the language is welcomed. There must be occasions when the pupils feel the necessity to inform someone of something, to explain, to instruct, to entertain with a story. For this, subject or the topic should be well known to the class.

In school atmosphere, continuous exposure to the target language, group activities, reading habit through story-telling/story-reading and class libraries etcetera must be brought together to give positive and vibrant climate to the learners. Lightbown and Spada (2013) gave various factors which are somehow affecting the language learning of the child especially second language learning. These are intelligence, aptitude, personality, motivation and attitudes, learners' preference and beliefs and age. Other external factors include curriculum, instruction, culture and status, access to native-like speakers.

The classroom is the primary setting in which talk-for-language-learning (learning talk) is carried out. (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974) According to Krashen (1983), learners acquire new language by being exposed to 'comprehensible input'. To develop an interest in learning English language, conditions in school and at home must be favourable. Input rich communication environments are a pre-requisite for language learning. Input includes textbooks, learners-chosen texts and rich library, media support and authentic materials (NCF, 2005). Teaching and learning of English today is characterized by diversity of schools and linguistic environment supportive of English acquisition (National Focus Group, 2006).

School environment includes three broad dimensions which are given as:

- **Physical dimension of school environment**: This broader category includes-
  - School building and classroom
  - School size and teacher-student ratio
  - Order and organization of the classroom
  - Availability of resources
  - Safety and comfort

- **Social dimension of school environment**: In the same way, this category also includes different sub-dimensions as:
  ❖ Students' cohesiveness and teacher support.
  ❖ Inter-personal relationship between and among teachers, students and staff
  ❖ Equitable and fair treatment of students
  ❖ Contribution of students in decision-making
  ❖ Participation in social programmes and gatherings
  ❖ Classroom interaction and student's involvement
- **Academic dimension of school environment**: This dimension is related with academic aspect of the school. Its sub-dimensions are:
  ❖ Quality of instruction
  ❖ Teachers' expectation for students' achievement
  ❖ Monitoring students' progress
  ❖ Task orientation
  ❖ Teaching methodology
  ❖ Meaningful goals and standards

According to Sharma (2011), "Language is a social tool and only when a classroom operates as a good society can this tool be used to good advantage."

For developing English language competence, school should be rich in areas such as:

- **Exposure:** There is at least one characteristic that is common to every successful language-learning experience we have ever known, and that is...... learner is exposed one way or another to an adequate amount of the data of the language to be learned" (Rutherford, 1987) It means that children experience high-quality linguistic input both passively and actively within the classroom (Bunce, 1995). According to National Focus Group on Teaching of English (2006), "exposure to the language in meaning-focused situation triggers the formation of a language system by the mind."
- *Social climate of the school:* Language development occurs within social contexts, as it is the means through which ideas are communicated and information is received (Mashburn et al., 2008). Daily interaction among and between students and teachers; the spontaneous and appropriate use of language for at least everyday purpose (National Focus Group, 2006) will help in development of language competence.
- *Teacher-pupil relationship:* Research studies (Pianta, 1999; Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Mashburn et al., 2008; Hughes & Chen, 2011) have shown that students' relationships with their teachers are important contributors to their language growth within classroom setting. Teachers should accept and appreciate the thoughts and ideas of students. It also makes relationship strong and enduring.
- *Classroom interaction and students' involvement:* Active use of the target language by students is considered to be an integral part of the language acquisition process (Nunan, 1989). An effective learner-centered target language classroom, therefore, should provide an environment in which students can contribute to learning activities and maximize their use of the language (Lier, 2001). This classroom interaction and students' involvement become difficult for teachers if the class strength is more than enough. Way back in 1966, the Kothari Commission Report had warned that large classes would do 'serious damage to the quality of teaching' and that 'in crowded classrooms, all talk of creative teaching ceases to have any significance' (As quoted in NCF, 2005).
- *Teaching methodology adopted by teachers*: Merrow (1995) suggested, "Teachers won't survive, and school will become increasingly irrelevant, if teachers don't change their style of teaching." Teachers' choice and selection of methodology affects second language learning. Traditionally, English was taught by Grammar-Translation method. In the late 1950s, structurally graded syllabi were introduced as a major innovation into the systems of language teaching. (Prabhu, 1987) But in today's world, emphasis has shifted

from learning structures to development of communicative competence where major focus is laid on input-rich environment and exposure (NCF, 2005 & National Focus Group, 2006). This input-rich environment is essential for developing competent language users. But this kind of environment and teachers' competence remain silent on the pages of documents only, one hardly finds such teachers in school especially in rural areas of India. Language learning and acquisition are based on imitation and a number of productive exercises and drills which are not being provided in school which is the only place to reach and get exposure to the target language for students of rural India. These practices can be executed only by the changing attitude and methodology adopted by the concerned teachers. They need training on various aspects of language learning and teaching to be updated with current practices.

- ***Meaningful goals and standards:*** Teaching goals and standards must be clear and specific to the students along with the teachers. Goals must be achievable, measurable and should roam around the development of language skills and its proper use according to changing situations and contexts.

- ***Well-equipped classroom:*** Classroom should be well-equipped with essential and desirable tools and materials. Textbooks alone are not sufficient to develop and enhance language skills among students. Every school should be rich in infrastructure and equipments. It includes over head projector, computers, tape recorders, head phone, micro phone, charts and other visuals, story books, display board, a separate language laboratory, etcetera where students can practice language skills in more authentic and interesting way.

- ***Wide variety of activities:*** Activities should not be confined to the four walls of the classroom, but should go beyond those walls to make students learn something with long lasting effect and productivity. These activities and teachers' behaviour should provide cognitive and emotional encouragement to the students along with creative stimulation for productive responses. It requires teachers' knowledge and handling of the activities and full participation of students. As this paper does not deal with a separate language skill, the authors have described the activities (As in Zhang, 2009) which can integrate all skills together such as Read to Act, Read to Debate and Read to Interview. In these activities, students apply the information they have read into authentic speaking practice that improves their fluency (Zhang, 2009). In the view of the authors, teacher can screen an interesting animated film (or any other relevant documentary or feature film) in the classroom and can let the students watch the film and listen the dialogues attentively. After watching the movie, teacher can give them a task or series of tasks either on written presentation or oral presentation (or both kind of mixed tasks) followed by reading the responses by their peer. It not only includes listening, speaking, reading and writing, but also adds peer assessment which makes students more interesting and encourages their participation. Activities should not be based on the exercises suggested in textbooks only, but should come directly from their real life situations.

Conclusion

Thus on the basis of above described points and ideas, it can be concluded that English language skills and competencies can develop and flourish in the presence of conducive and supportive environment being provided in the school premise. Each skill needs input rich environment to grow faster. One skill enhances the learning and acquisition of another and leads to the development of basic language competencies. In rural India, most of the schools lack this supportive environment. But it can be created with the help of teachers and parents which will positively affect the English language of the students and make them better communicator.

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