

Teaching of Grammar and Reading Skills in English Classrooms: A Case of Madrasas in Hyderabad

Sajida Sultana

Introduction

The inclusion of English as a subject in the curriculum is fairly recent in some madrasas and an established practice in others. The present day madrasas are making an effort to modernize their education system by including mainstream subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science, and Computers in their curriculum, thereby combining both contemporary and religious subjects.

In this paper, I will look at how grammar and reading are taught in the English classrooms in madrasas. I chose to study the teaching of grammar and reading skills because these were the two most frequently taught skills in the 10 classrooms that I observed across 5 madrasas in Hyderabad, India. The two skills mentioned here are specific to the madrasas that were visited during the study. The teaching of English may vary in other madrasas depending on the language requirements of the students. I would like to state here that investigation into the various methodologies of teaching English in madrasas is seldom reported. Stern (1992, p. 48) mentions that research into the study of language teaching contexts needs analysis, and evaluation, and selection of the curriculum content. These contexts need to be carefully analysed for effective planning of language courses and could be collected using linguistic, sociolinguistic, cultural, historical, sociological or literary documentation.

The teaching practices of English in a madrasa depends on factors such as the organization of the madrasa, the views of its management on English, the availability of resources and the motivations and attitudes of the students towards the language. These teaching practices may help in the understanding of the discourse on teaching styles of differently circumstanced schools. To reiterate, the information presented in this paper is specific to the madrasas visited and cannot be generalized for other madrasas. I have used the term differently circumstanced schools (West, 1960) because the teacher, as is also the case in many other schools in the country, is challenged in terms of space for teaching, arrangement of classrooms, availability of materials, varied levels of learner proficiency in English, and the changing need for learning the language. In madrasas, teachers spend a minimum of 30–60 minutes per day per group on teaching English. They may not hold a certificate in education or in the teaching of English, but best efforts for teaching and learning under the circumstances in spite of the challenges mentioned can be seen and this situation needs to be recognized and appreciated.

Canagarajah (1999, p. 174) believes that there must be a “third way” of using the discourses and the grammar of English according to the needs and contexts of the periphery communities¹. English must be pluralized to adapt to the needs and discussions pertaining to different cultures so

that the subjects of the periphery are appropriately represented, thereby making them agents of using the language in a creative and critical manner.

Before I move to the details of the paper, it would be helpful to understand the general practices of English teaching in the five madrasas that were part of the study. The teaching of English in these five madrasas happens in a step-by-step manner, irrespective of age of the learners. The teaching of the English alphabet, simple words, grammar, reading, spoken English, and examination preparation are some of the features of the classrooms observed. The teacher writes the letters of the alphabet in the students' notebooks and the students copy the same on the entire page. It is possible to write in the notebooks of all children because the size of the class is usually small; it varies from five to nine students. Once the students gain knowledge of the alphabet, the teacher moves to the next level—teaching simple words and sentences, followed by reading longer sentences and using the textbook.

Teaching Grammar

Grammar was taught according to whichever method the teacher felt was suitable for the level of the students and as per the plan that s/he had devised for the class. For better understanding, I would like to roughly divide the observed grammar classes into two categories—“occasional” grammar classes and “continual” grammar classes.

In “occasional” grammar classes, the teacher planned a dedicated session on grammar, separate from the textbook sessions. In this session, the teacher mostly began with the definitions of the parts of speech. This was followed by the study of a specific grammar concept in each class. Relevant examples

were provided and similar concepts in Urdu/Arabic grammar were also discussed. The teacher usually asked the students to give examples and wrote them on the blackboard. In the case the students were unable to come up with examples, the teacher provided the same, along with explanation in Urdu. The blackboard was always used for such activities and the teacher gave enough time to the students to copy from the board. In both the “occasional” and “continual” classes, these classes were regarded as writing skills classes. This tells us that the teaching of English still revolves around learning the parts of speech. This may be due to the fact that languages such as Arabic are taught with a strong focus on grammar as a separate class and textbooks exclusively prepared for the purpose.

In contrast with “occasional” grammar teaching, in “continual” grammar classes, grammar was taught while reading sentences from the lesson. The teacher would ask the student to state the present form of a word or describe the usage of apostrophe. In case the student did not know the answer, or responded incorrectly, the teacher asked another student and also made them revise the concepts or check in their notebooks. Teachers who followed this approach believed that teaching grammar separately was time consuming and would not yield the desired result of making the students speak English in a natural manner.

A similar view is held by trainers of spoken English classes, where they make the students speak and write in English after discussing the topic. These trainers focus on usage rather than on the rules of the language. In the following example, the teacher makes use of Urdu that is spoken by a majority of people in the old city of Hyderabad.

Teacher: *Chalo aaj past tense karenge...kaise poochna past tensef* (Come, let us study past tense today...how do you say past tensef)

Students: “did” *lagaake* (using “did”)

T: *Haan...did you...when I use did, main “past” mein gaya...*(Yes...did you... when I use did, I refer to the “past”)

It can be said in the context of madrasas that the teaching of grammatical rules/structures cannot be disregarded, whether learning English or Arabic. The teaching of grammar is however dependent on the teacher's perspective. Even if a teacher conducts formal grammar classes, his/her aim is to see that when the need arises, his/her students perform correctly and naturally.

Teaching Reading

Just as the practice of grammar teaching is specific to each madrasa, the practice of teaching reading also varies from one madrasa to another. Most of the students in the five madrasas observed joined these institutions with English proficiency levels of basic beginners. For this reason, the process of reading at these madrasas began only after a student had acquired the basics—alphabet-word-simple sentence. That is to say that when the student was able to read and recognize words, the teacher introduced the relevant texts for reading. During the reading of a lesson, the focus was on comprehension of the text, correct pronunciation, and meanings of the new/difficult words. This relates to what West (1960, p. 20) calls the “triple impact” i.e., meaning & sight & sound.

During reading sessions, the teacher would ask questions from the text after reading two or three sentences or sometimes after a whole

paragraph was read. Sometimes, the teacher made the students read and at other times, the teacher him/herself read the text. In some cases, to begin with the teacher asked the students to read, but after a point took up reading in order to complete the text.

West (1960, pp. 18-19) suggests separating reading and speech skills because the vocabulary of the two skills are different. In the context of the study, we found that there was a focus on correct pronunciation in the hope that when the students came across words, they would be able to pronounce them correctly. This could be an influence of the education imparted in religious texts, where correct articulation of each letter and sound is stressed to convey the right meaning. In some madrasas, the teachers tried to separate the reading and speech skills because they felt that the words that the students engaged with in the lesson must also be useful to them in learning the language. Also the pronunciation of complex or higher level words was not stressed upon during the reading of the lesson.

While reading, the students followed “Eye-mouth reading” (West, 1960, p. 22) because of the training in reading religious texts. We could say that the teachers' approach of frequent question-answers was a strategy to ensure that the students did not follow eye-mouth reading. It was evident from the interaction with the students (and by looking at their notebooks) that they had a fair understanding of reading (and writing) Urdu. The transfer of skill from Urdu, the primary language, and Arabic, the default language of religious texts, could be emphasized for better reading ability.

An important and common practice followed by all the teachers of the madrasas observed was to explain in Urdu each new or difficult

word that appeared in the text. When the students read the text, the teacher assisted and corrected them wherever necessary. Sometimes, the teacher of the madrasa would ask the students to repeat the words in chorus; at other times the teacher would make the students write the difficult words identified during the reading of the lesson in their notebooks or maintain a separate notebook to serve as reference notes. An example from the class is provided as follows:

Teacher: Evil *ka matlab hai* (means) *burai*, demon *shaitan hai* (is), storm *ka matlab* (means) *toofaan*, native...*uss jagah ke rehne waale* (those who reside in a particular place/region). What is your native [place]f

Students: Hyderabad

Teacher: You can also say some district of Telangana...Huts *ka matlab* (means) *jhopdi*...*Qur'an mein kya likha hai* (what is written in the Holy bookf)...

Students: *Doosron ki madad karna* (to help others)...

Teacher: God helps those who help themselves...Kashmir *mein kya hua?* *Kisko maloom hain?* (what happened in Kashmirf Who knowsf)

Students: Floods *aaye the* (came)...

A point to note is that English classrooms were the only place where the students could practice reading, and the teacher was the only person who helped the students to acquire the language. Given the context, the teacher found this style of teaching most appropriate. This practice of teaching according to the needs and level of the students in order to help them construct simple, grammatically correct sentences is also seen in the teaching

of grammar presented earlier in section on teaching grammar.

The practices observed in the madrasas reiterate the need for English language education to be made more appropriate to the social requirements of the students and the educators. One also needs to consider the manner in which language teaching fits into the given educational environment. Holliday (1994) tried to understand the social context of English language education to achieve appropriate classroom methodologies. According to him, a culture-sensitive approach could provide an understanding of the societal factors that influence English teaching activities such as syllabus design and its implementation. Holliday talked of three methodologies namely, teaching English in the classroom, designing and managing English language education (writing textbooks and examinations), and collecting information about the social context in question (Holliday, 1994, p. 1). He further added that more attention needed to be paid to social needs so that the methodology of teaching, the designing and implementation of curricula projects, and the education of teachers, would be beneficial to the people who used it.

Conclusion

To summarize, the teaching of English in the five madrasas observed was modified according to the level of the students. The decision to prescribe a textbook for the course rested with the management. There was a new trend where the teachers were trying to make students speak in English using different situations, i.e. the focus was shifting to oral skills, but this is happening at a slow pace. Further, classroom data revealed that teachers were trying to have simple

conversations with students, but there was some amount of strain on the students when they were asked to use English. Most students switched to Urdu for these conversations. Having said this, it is equally important to mention that most of the English classroom activities involved making requests and commands, asking questions to elicit responses from the text, acknowledging and praising students, conducting games and activities, and using the blackboard. The use of the two languages was fairly balanced when the teacher linked the lesson to religious knowledge, eliciting responses outside the text, and giving constructive feedback. It was interesting to see that the use of Urdu to translate words and phrases into English occurred mostly during teaching.

From the details presented, it is evident that the madrasas in the study had their own style of language teaching-learning principles that were specific to their location. The framework followed was “theory neutral” and “method neutral” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 32). The teaching of English in the madrasas is an example of going beyond the confines of the language in the personal and educational environment of the students.

References

- Canagarajah, Suresh A. (1999). *Resisting linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holliday, Adrian. (1994). *Appropriate methodology and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1994). The postmethod condition: (E)merging strategies for second/foreign language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28(1), 27-48. Retrieved from www.bkumaravadivelu.com/.../1994%20Kumaravadi%20Postmethod%20Condition.pdf

Stern, H. H. (1992). *Issues and options in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

West, Michael. (1960). *Teaching English in difficult circumstances*. London: Longman.

Endnotes

¹ By periphery, I refer to those institutions that do not form the mainstream educational institutions and that function in different/difficult circumstances.

Sajida Sultana is a doctoral student in the department of English Language Education at the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. She has done her M. Phil. in English Language Education and M.A. in Teaching of English as a Second Language from CIEFL (present EFLU).

sajidas@gmail.com