

Key Issues in the Teaching of English at the Primary Level

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Introduction

The importance of English is now widely recognized, not only in India but also across the globe. Although languages such as Chinese, Hindi and Swahili are spoken by a much larger number of people, it seems that entry into the world of higher knowledge and social mobility is possible only with English. It has therefore become imperative to know the language. However, it is equally clear that English cannot flourish at the cost of other languages; linguistic and cultural diversity is as important to humans as bio-diversity. We must therefore think of teaching English in a multilingual context.

English today has acquired a global status and is seen as a language of opportunities. This view is very emphatically articulated in *Teaching of English, National Focus Group: Position paper vol. 1.4*. (NCERT 2006: p.1) as follows:

English is in India today a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life. Its colonial origins now forgotten or irrelevant, its initial role in independent India, tailored to higher education (as a “library language”, a “window on the world”), now felt to be insufficiently

inclusive socially and linguistically, the current status of English stems from its overwhelming presence on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena.

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC), Government of India, in its recommendations on school education submitted to the Prime Minister of India on 4th February, 2008 recognized

the significance of English not only as a medium of instruction but also as a determinant of access. An understanding of and command over the English language is most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities. School-leavers who are not adequately trained in English as a language are always at a handicap in the world of higher education.... And those who do not know English well enough find it exceedingly difficult to compete for a place in our premier educational institutions. This disadvantage is accentuated further in the world of work, not only in professional occupations but also in white-collar occupations overall. (p. 48)

NKC further recommends that the teaching of English as a language should be

...introduced, along with the first language (either the mother tongue or the regional language) of the child, starting from class 1. This phase of language learning should focus on using both languages to create meaningful learning experiences for the child without disproportionate emphasis on grammar and rules. (p.49)

As a follow up to this recommendation of NKC, the governments of several states and union territories have resolved to introduce English as a compulsory subject from class 1. The following issues, however, need to be addressed for effective progress in the teaching of English at the primary level.

Learners' Social Milieu

We need to take cognizance of the variety of social backgrounds different learners of English come from. One type of speaker comes from what is almost a native-like situation, where English is spoken at home by everyone. The family socializes with people who share the same linguistic experience and use their mother tongue sparingly. Learners coming from such a social milieu though rare, are at one end of the continuum of learners of English. On the other end of the continuum, there are learners who have absolutely no access to English both at home and outside. Whatever English they learn is at school and there also, it is used occasionally. But

these learners have a very strong motivation to learn English because they have been made to believe by their parents or the members of their community that English is the key to get them out of their existence of misery and backwardness. They are therefore more motivated to learn English rather than their mother tongue(s) or the language(s) used by their peers.

Thus, when we talk of intervention in the teaching of English, we need to first identify the kind of learners we are talking about. What learners need to learn at one end of the continuum may have no relevance for learners at the other end of the continuum, though eventually both groups will be equipped to work in any place, be it a call centre, a corporate office, the army or a university.

The Teacher

The second important issue is concerned with the teachers' beliefs, practices, competence and availability. We have noticed that except in some urban elite schools, teachers of English have very little training in the teaching of English. Even those who claim to have received training in the teaching of English have been fed obsolete ideas about how languages are learnt and taught. They therefore continue to believe that the learner is a passive recipient of knowledge and his/her prior knowledge has no role to play in the learning of a new language(s). If the learner tries to make use of his/her mother tongue in articulating his feelings, ideas and emotions, he is immediately snubbed. The learner is treated like an island in himself/herself, having nothing to gain

from the community to which he/she belongs. This sort of attitude of the teacher is symptomatic of the malady that the teacher training is currently inflicted with. Unless these teachers are retrained in the new knowledge with regard to how languages are learnt, they will continue to pose an obstacle to the new paradigm of language teaching which lays emphasis on collaborative learning, learner autonomy, comprehensive evaluation, concept attainment in mother tongue, promoting bilingualism and metalinguistic awareness, shift from information to knowledge construction, critical pedagogy, etc.

The new breed of teachers need to be educated about the new paradigm and its classroom implications in terms of its methodology, materials and attitude towards the learner. Secondly, the State must make it mandatory that at least one fully trained teacher in the new paradigm is made available even in the remotest primary school, who can educate other teachers engaged in teaching English and other languages. This will have a cascading effect on teacher training in our schools.

Another very important issue connected with teachers is their lack of competency in English. It is sad, although a well known fact, that a large number of teachers who are responsible for teaching English lack proficiency in those very skills of English which they are expected to build among their students. Since the states have already decided to introduce English from class 1 without building essential infrastructure for its effective implementation, it is the duty of the State to organize workshops in competence building in English in which

teachers are helped to gain atleast a minimal level of proficiency in English to carry out the responsibilities assigned to them. One of the ways in which this sort of mass teacher competence building programme can be carried out is to deploy the breed of retired English teachers from schools, colleges and universities who are really proficient in English. NKC suggests:

In order to meet the requirement for a large pool of English language teachers, graduates with high proficiency in English and good communication skills should be inducted without formal teacher training qualifications. They should be selected through an appropriate procedure developed by National Testing Service and then given a short-term orientation. The nearly four million school teachers all over the country, regardless of their subjects' expertise, especially teachers at the primary level should be trained to improve their proficiency in English through vacation training programmes or other short term courses. Most teacher training programmes are not based on a real assessment of needs of teachers. Thus, the entire teacher-training system catering to pre-service and in-service training that exists today, including training for language teaching, needs to be thoroughly reviewed, recognizing the centrality of language in curriculum. (p. 49-50)

The same sentiment and concern has been voiced by the National Focus Group in their recommendations, in which they emphasize that “All teachers should have the skills to teach English in ways appropriate to their situation and levels, based on how languages are taught.”

Unless such steps are taken immediately, any effort and money spent in the direction of teaching English will be a colossal waste of national resource. As a result of this training, the teacher will also learn to respect the languages of the children and allow the usage of these along with English. In the initial stages of learning English, when the learner is more fluent in his first language, he could be allowed to use his first language whenever he is at loss for a word in English. This freedom to use his first language along with English will give him confidence and also motivate him to learn English without any fear or anxiety. As the learner acquires better control over English, he could on his own switch to English without suppressing or feeling ashamed of his first language. This state of mind is a necessary condition, in the opinion of many first and second language researchers (Krashen, 1987, 1988 among many others), for optimal learning of any language. This will have another very important fall out. It will lay a very sound foundation for producing multilingual users which, undoubtedly, is one of the goals of language education today anywhere in the world. The National Focus Group states in its recommendations, “Multilinguality should be the aim in English medium as well as regional medium schools” (Teaching of English 1, p. 30).

As a pedagogy, multilingualism has also been emphasized in *Teaching of Indian Languages*, a position paper of the National Focus Group which asserts:

...language-teaching methods can be suitable sites for utilizing the multiplicity of languages available in the classroom. A sensitive analysis of multilinguality obtaining in the classroom in collaboration with children will help in creating metalinguistic awareness among the teacher and the taught. (p. 23)

This position has been reiterated by Agnihotri in several national and international conferences and publications (Agnihotri, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2007). In one of his papers (Agnihotri, 2007) he remarks:

Multilinguality will have to become a basis for all future curriculum, syllabi, text books, and classroom transaction planning, initiating the implementation of a sociopolitical vision that will be governed by the values of equity, justice, social sensitivity, peace, and collective responsibility in a more meaningful way than empty rhetoric. (p. 3)

Textbooks

Most of the textbooks that are available in the market have been written with the assumption that learning takes place in a linear order, and learning a second language means mastering the structure of

that language first, which in the opinion of most textbook writers and teachers can be done by teaching the alphabet and grammar of that language before the learner learns to use it. Consequently, most of the English school textbooks begin with the teaching of the alphabet and structures such as “What is this?”, “This is...”.

Current research in first and second language learning has amply shown that second language learning does not take this route. Learners are believed to have a universal order of learning, and therefore it does not matter in which order the teacher or the textbook presents a grammatical or linguistic category. That does not mean that the teacher or the textbook has no place in the teaching/learning of a language. It simply suggests that both the teacher and the textbook have the role of facilitating the process of learning, which can be done not by forcing a rigid order in the presentation of language items, but by providing interesting and cognitively challenging inputs that the learner can relate to. Text books should therefore not only provide space to the learner for his/her creativity, but also allow the learner to bring to the learning situation his/her prior experience as well as the experience that he/she is gaining simultaneously in other languages and subject classes. This sort of learning across the curriculum will go a long way in making the learner grow holistically.

Other Teaching Materials

It is very important to realize that the learner is exposed to the target language in all its varieties to get him/her sensitized to it as in the first language. Just as in first

language learning, the learner experiences language in different situations, the second language learner should also be exposed to a variety of interesting materials through the use of audio-visual materials, TV, radio programmes, etc. He/she could also listen to stories, poems and rhymes, speeches and debates, see plays/short skits, etc. This sort of exposure increases the learner's potential for learning the language in actual use and helps him acquire the idiom of the language and its prosodic features.

Several NGOs working for elementary education in different parts of the country have produced interesting and innovative materials for children in the age group 3-12 years. For instance, Spark India, CIEFL (Hyderabad) produced a 'Spark Big Book' which tells a story titled “A Pot of Light”, for children between three and six years (*The Hindu*, 6 February 2003). The story is beautifully illustrated and is meant to be read out to children while showing them the corresponding pictures. Spark India has also produced audio-visual materials that can be used by primary school teachers for teaching stories, poems and doing other activities. As noted in the above newspaper article, storytelling helps children to rapidly progress from monosyllabic replies to speaking whole sentences and then writing their own stories. It is however unfortunate that most teachers are not interested in teaching English through stories. Even when they do it, they simply read them out like any other text, and not like stories. Some researchers have noted that storytelling helps to increase the language learning ability of children coming from the middle and lower middle

class backgrounds, who do not speak English at home.

In earlier stages of learning a language, we also need to present content in a way that is less dependent on language. Among other techniques used by teachers to make input comprehensible is the technique of graphic organizers which relies very little on language to convey information. According to Carrier (2005), graphic organizers are very powerful tools to use with learners because as Swain (1985) adds:

...they display information with pictures, labels, or short phrases, thereby reducing the language load. Also, they are much less visually intimidating than full text. Graphic organizers can be used to present major concepts and relationships between them, comparison and contrasts, processes, cause and effect, and attributes, to name just a few of their uses. They also help ELLs focus on key vocabulary, instead of having to search for it in an overwhelming amount of text. Graphic organizers have the added advantage of serving as prewriting organizers and unit study guides. ELLs need to be fully involved participants in their learning, which includes demonstrating what they know. In other words, ELLs need to produce comprehensible output. (p. 7)

Evaluation/Assessment

Another very important issue that needs to be handled with urgency at the primary

level is the issue of evaluation of the learner. At present, most schools in the country evaluate their students three to four times in a year, in addition to an annual evaluation. This is done in the name of continuous evaluation. Those schools or teachers use grades rather than marks for scoring their children round the year, and yet do not have much clue as to what the children really know. What this year-round exercise tells the teacher, the parent and the education department is rather what the learner does *not* know. Researchers all over the world have opined that this method of evaluation is not appropriate for recording the progress of the learner at any point of time in a year. They have even suggested alternative ways of recording learner progress such as qualitative measures, including maintaining a portfolio of the learner and also taking the learner into confidence while evaluating the progress he/she has made in relation to his/her earlier stage. This sort of evaluation is believed to help the learner look at his/her learning more creatively and critically, and not get into the rat race of competing with others and losing track of himself/herself in the process. The objective of self assessment is to empower the learner to undertake self-evaluation with the teacher as a facilitator in the evaluation process. The teacher also needs to be equipped with the techniques of assessment and the parameters for evaluation along with the tools to be used for the same. Only then will a complete understanding of what the learner has learnt in different domains be known. Thus, there is a need is to identify

broad concepts/indicators of progress that can serve as reference points to assess students' learning at the primary stage, based on the NCF 2005. These would serve as a broad feedback mechanism around the quality of systemic functioning, responsiveness and accountability.

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