

English Language Teaching in Government Schools of Kashmir: A Study

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Abstract

Despite the unrivalled importance of English on the global stage, many language learners still face significant obstacles in their quest for English proficiency. Learning the language is still a seemingly complex challenge for learners who do not have the required resources. This article attempts to focus on the challenges faced by students studying in government schools in Srinagar. It examines the reasons for the low level of English proficiency in these schools, and also suggests some remedial measures based on the study undertaken. Several classroom variables can render the entire process of implementing quality education and skill orientation ineffective. The present article focuses only on the classroom interactions like teaching methodology, language of teaching, classroom activities, examination system, etc. This study also advocates reform in these spheres for better English proficiency output.

Keywords: English proficiency, government schools, quality education, skill orientation, classroom interactions, teaching methodology

Introduction

English plays a key role in our educational system and has increasingly become the medium in every domain of communication, both in the local and global contexts. English competence has become a critical component for communication on a global scale since it is the language used by a vast majority of people for a variety of purposes. Teaching and learning English has become crucial for communicative purposes

to meet the demands of global economics and to cope with growing local, national, and international demands for English skills. According to Crystal (2003), "English is now so widely established that it can no longer be thought of as 'owned' by any single nation" (p. 27). In a global community, being multilingual is beneficial for interaction, communication, and understanding of other cultures and languages. Grin (2010) is of the opinion that English gives you a competitive advantage, but only if accompanied by appropriate educational background. English also plays a key role in our educational system: it is the associate official language in India and has become the language of all the major fields. Today, it has become a symbol of quality in schooling and fuller participation in national and international life. The growing number of English-medium schools in India is evidence of the language's dominance. The University Education Commission (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1949) states that English is studied in high schools and universities to be in touch with the living stream of ever-growing knowledge. This would prevent our isolation from the world, and help us take advantage of the wider reach of the English.

English Education in J&K

In Kashmir, as in most parts of India, proficiency in English is seen as both a prerequisite for success and essential for enjoying the benefits of contemporary technology. English, to a great extent, altered the mindset of the average Kashmiri, and his socio-psychological profile also indicates a leaning towards the language (Kak, 2005). Urdu was the medium of instruction in government-run schools right up to the Standard X. In 2003, the government made a change over from Urdu as a medium of instruction to English. Attitudes and views of Kashmiris regarding English, Kashmiri and Urdu have also undergone a gradual change, with English speakers being stereotyped highest in the most relevant attributes (Kak, 2002) indicating what English proficiency indicates for Kashmiris.

Despite the enhanced status of the English language, teaching spoken English to students learning it as a second language has remained a major challenge. Many researchers have revealed that English proficiency is much desired among most students, especially in government schools. Ironically, despite dedicating 10–12 crucial years of their school life studying English from Standard I onwards, most students still struggle

to achieve the requisite level of competence in the language being 'functionally illiterate' in English. In J&K many interventions aimed at improving the quality of education have remained unimplemented to a large extent. Shah (2011) points out, "the focus should be on the curriculum, pedagogy, learners assessment, classroom organisation, teacher training, strengthening of institutional capacity, etc in order to develop English language proficiency" (p. 94) and it is still a dream.

Methodology

For this study, interviews, interactions and observations were carried out with 50 students and 40 teachers in 3 Government schools located in Srinagar. The methodology used was participant observation which involved being a part of the classroom and interacting with students and teachers. Interviews were conducted both with students and teachers, comprising of questions that are mostly open-ended, and which relate to the teaching methodology, teaching material, activities used for teaching, testing patterns, qualification of teachers, medium of instruction, etc. The data so collected was focused on a larger study, of which this article is a part.

Analysis

The major findings and analysis of this study are observed as under.

The Use of Kashmiri and Urdu

It was observed that on paper, the government schools have English as the medium of instruction, but the actual teaching is carried out in Kashmiri and Urdu, which sort of takes the form of translation of the English texts in different subjects including English. The main reason for this is either the inability of the teachers to communicate in English or in some cases, the feeling that this will make teaching easier. This causes a deprivation of exposure to English, lessening the chances of better English proficiency. A better option would be for the teachers to communicate in English, and to encourage the students to do the same. There is a need to switch to English language as a medium of instruction for real in these schools and encourage the use of English as a medium of interaction among the students in classrooms. This was also the opinion of most students, as it is essential to develop the learner's speaking and linguistic abilities.

Affective Filter

Memorisation and rote learning, instead of stimulation of actual English proficiency, are the basic learning techniques employed by the students. These do nothing to arouse students' interest, build their self-confidence or improve their communicative strategies in English. From the observations and interviews carried out, it was observed that hesitation and shyness to talk in English are certain issues that need to be taken care of among students in these schools. During most of the interviews, it was observed that the fear of making mistakes, shyness and nervousness lowered the confidence and motivation among the students while speaking in English. This was evident from the fact that whenever the students were asked a question in English, they either switched to Urdu or chose not to speak at all. It was also observed that this was never taken care of in the class by the teacher; rather it invoked a lot of amusement when a student faltered in English. An effective remedy would have been to encourage students to cross these stumbling blocks, which is seriously lacking.

Teacher Variables

One of the core problems in English language teaching is the unavailability of teachers who know what they are supposed to do. In government-run schools, this problem is amplified. It was observed that, especially for lower classes, any teacher irrespective of his/her specialisation is expected to be a teacher of English. It is unrealistic to expect these teachers to be aware of the current language teaching/learning theories. It was found that teachers often skip the exercises and activities given both before and after the lesson. The focus is on the lesson, glossary words and the questions asked at the end of the lesson. The text is translated and answers to the questions at the end are either dictated or simply marked in the main text. Also, almost all language teachers have an English literature background with no skills in Linguistics as a discipline putting them at a disadvantage. In such schools, teacher training is also part of the problem. Furthermore, the government school teachers are often enrolled to conduct other unrelated surveys like taking the census etc. putting a lot of pressure on them to finish the prescribed syllabus within the stipulated time.

During an interview with the students in one of these schools, a group of students hesitantly requested us to carry out a similar interview

with their English teachers. Although we could not understand their meaning at that time, later, while interviewing their English teachers, it was observed that these teachers could not speak even passable English. Even with M.A. and B.Ed. degrees, teachers either could not use English, or even if they began a sentence in English, they would invariably code switch after a couple of words into Urdu or Kashmiri due to their poor English proficiency. Although not universal, this situation cannot be expected to result in good English proficiency among students.

The Gap between Curriculum, Theory and Practice

The gap between curriculum theory and practice is perpetuated by the alienated relationship between theorists and practitioners. This gap in the case of the present study is visible in terms of the contrast between the English learning objectives given in the syllabus, the method of instruction and implementation and the actual outcomes achieved. Most of the students and teachers were unaware of the set objectives and learning outcomes of their curriculum. Moreover, educational institutions lack the facilities to implement most of these objectives which makes the achievement of desired objectives unattainable. In Kashmir, the aims of English language teaching are determined by the Ministry of School Education without considering the contextual factors. Only a few beneficial learning opportunities are provided to the learners indicating that one of the problems lies in the implementation of these theories. It can be suggested that this gap might be reduced if both theorists and practitioners focus more on the action, coalescing and mutually supporting each other.

Role of Teacher and Student

The role of teachers is very dominant in government schools. The study revealed an over-dependence on the teachers who played an authoritarian role in the classroom in these schools. While the aims and objectives of English language teaching propose a learner-centred program, these aims and objectives lack practicality. Most of the time is spent understanding the texts and preparing for answers given at the end. Learners do not get many opportunities for active participation in the classroom. The teaching practice over the years in these schools has made it to a large extent 'examination oriented'. In one instance, a student informed us the teacher told him that his marks were less than others because the other students wrote the answers that the teacher

dictated, whereas that particular student answered the questions in his own language. How can better English proficiency be expected in such an environment? Moreover, instead of the teachers' monologues where the student is a mere observer, student participation should be the focus.

Faulty Methods of Teaching

A language classroom is complete if the teacher guides the class through the four main language skills in a manner that would benefit them in real-life interactions. Contrary to the claims made by teachers, observations and interviews revealed that the teaching methods used in these classrooms are mostly the old traditional ones. Many students in these schools claimed that they have not seen any improvement or modification in the teaching methods being adopted in classrooms over the years of their schooling. The majority of language teachers still use the grammar-translation approach for teaching. The commonly observed prevalent pattern in these schools is translating the paragraph from books, providing meanings for difficult vocabulary and giving home assignments. Thus, the student ends by learning 'about' the language rather than learning 'the' language.

To improve the teaching and learning process, effective communicative methods of teaching and learning may be improved by adopting other result oriented methods, and by adopting the "learning by doing" approach, with the students participating and collaborating in the lessons along with the teacher.

Inadequate Provision of Teaching Aids

There are many teaching aids like blackboards, whiteboards, charts, pictures, static and working models, projectors, language labs, computer assisted learning, etc. that are proposed in the syllabus for carrying out the teaching in the classroom and to make language teaching interesting and exciting. However, it was observed that almost all of these schools are inadequate in terms of the available teaching aids, with the blackboards being the only teaching aids, denying the students of any interest and involvement.

Faulty Examination System

Analysis of the evaluation pattern revealed that evaluation of the English language is not being done in terms of the four communicative skills. Even though there have been considerable reforms in syllabi and

textbooks over the years, the examination system still has a long way to go. The focus is on rote learning at the expense of the development of actual language skills. There is currently no provision for measuring listening, speaking, and reading abilities in the same way as there is for writing ability. The student's knowledge is also confined to learning for passing the exam, and the creative and analytical skills of students are not tested. During the interviews, most of the students were unable to talk about the content of their lessons but most of them could answer the questions at the end of the prescribed text.

Classroom Activities

There is a long list of activities that the English language syllabus suggests. However, when the teachers and students were asked about the regularity of carrying out their teaching and learning using the various activities, it was revealed that almost none of these activities are employed while teaching. Most of the students admitted that it is because of this reason that the learning process becomes tedious and uninteresting, and keeps the students disengaged from the active learning process. Some of the most common reasons given by the teacher for not being able to use more activity-based teaching are the constraints of time and the unavailability of resources. For most of the teachers, completion of the syllabus on time is the primary goal.

Syllabus

The focus of the English Language syllabus in Kashmir is on English literature and not on English proficiency. Thus, there is a need to minimise the dominance of English literature in English language courses, with a focus on topics to enhance 'English proficiency' rather than 'English literature proficiency'. There is a need to restructure the syllabus in such a way that focus is given to developing proficiency in English language. The syllabus designers need to frame the syllabus according to the needs of the learners and by consulting linguists. By the end of the course, achievements can be assessed in terms of the given objectives, and currently the syllabus prescribed for teaching English in schools primarily lacks this.

Conclusion

The present study explores some of the common classroom problems that are encountered while teaching English language in Government run

schools of Srinagar. These problems range from lesser use of English in the classroom, the use of a more teacher-centred approach, ill-equipped educational institutions, faulty teaching methods etc. Also, student evaluation leaves a lot to be desired. The current English teaching and learning system which is mainly rote and examination driven, as well as content based, can benefit if the focus is being shifted on development of communicative skills being imbibed for use in society. These constraints to developing English language proficiency among students need to be reformed in these schools.

Instead of using a teacher-led learning system teaching English as a subject, students in these schools can be encouraged to recognise the functional significance of English. There is also a need to make teachers in these schools accountable for their student's performance. Perhaps too much time is spent learning the rules and not enough practicing their applicability in real life. Proficiency in English is expected to be enhanced by eliminating the redundant aspects of the syllabus and focusing on what really matters for the student to become proficient.

It is also pertinent here to mention the ideas related to bilingualism and proficiency promotion along with a collaborative teacher-student relation (Cummins, 1981, 2000), and translanguaging and multilingualism (Garcia, 2018; Garcia & Wei, 2014) for the purpose of language teaching in the school context in maximising communicative potential can also be relevant here. However, there is a need for its balanced and result oriented application. This can be an able resource to improve the English proficiency in the schools under consideration. Strategies like code mixing/switching can also help in ameliorating English language proficiency in these resource poor environments. More research in this direction is required for its implementation at ground level.

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