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Grammatical Precision and English Proficiency: An Analysis

Dr. Deepa Mary Francis and Dr. Susan G. Varghese

Need for New Techniques to Encourage Students to Gain Communication Skills

“Lack of Fluency in English makes Transition to City Colleges Uneasy for Rural Students” – this is a headline of a news item found in *The Times of India* dated 1st July 2010. This may be just a news item for the readers. But for English teachers, this is a reminder of the Herculean task they shoulder, as the semi-urban and rural students consider gaining fluency in English as a daunting task. All English teachers are very much aware of this responsibility. A meticulous analysis of the prevailing situation reveals that only very few students are really interested in honing their communication skills. The dire need of the hour is to find out new teaching techniques to get the students more familiarized with the new language.

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English is an International Property

English which had originated “in the Anglo- Saxon Kingdoms of England... has been widely propagated around the world” and has become “ the leading language of international discourse and the *lingua franca* in many regions” (*English Language*). English, no longer remains to be the exclusive cultural property of native English speakers, but is rather a language that is absorbing aspects of cultures worldwide as it continues to grow. English has turned out to be a globe-trotter, reared and reinvigorated in different countries by diverse communities. One could even speculate that the native speakers are in a minority when compared to the total number of users. No one could deny the wide readership of works in Indian-English abroad that have stood the test of time.

With large and varied spoken English corpora, we have in India, speakers who are very proficient at one end, and at the other, millions of users of the language who aspire to speak and express fluently. The idiot-box and the Internet, especially the social networking sites, have further widened the appeal of this language.

Strengthening Spontaneity in the Use of English –Teachers’ Problems

This paper explores the difficulties of learners as their spontaneity gets inhibited by the over emphasis of grammar at the basic level. Teaching and learning grammar have become a complex issue. This paper reflects the disheartening experiences of learners and teachers while enhancing communicative skills among college students from semi-urban and rural places. As the language teachers demand grammatical accuracy from them, they are seen grinding so long that their desire to learn the language gets dripped forever. There is too much emphasis on grammar which develops in the learner an aversion towards this language. Thus, insistence on grammar has a numbing effect on the learners. The teacher is at his wit’s end worrying about how to accomplish the supposed goal in language classes.

Grim Reality

The present global scene demands innovative techniques to tone up English communicative skills in colleges. In spite of all the academic qualifications, students are unable to put across

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their ideas effectively. Completion of the degree does not assure the students a job. “Now, a study shows that 47% of graduates are not employable in any sector” (Poor English makes 47% graduates unemployable, says study). In order to become employable, candidates should have a lot of skills and English communicative skill stands second to no other skill. Lack of proficiency in English makes their chances of getting a good job slim. The grim reality is that, for the students from semi-urban and rural places, gaining clarity over the basic grammar usages is really a hard nut to crack. As today’s world shrinks into a single village, the need for every student to communicate in English fluently and flawlessly seems to be inevitable. But, the pathetic fact is that the present system of curriculum, by and large, does not enhance communication skills and so the students become unfit for a job, as there is a mismatch between vacancies and job seekers.

Slippery Slope for Semi-urban and Rural Students

Communication skill is a slippery slope for the students from semi-urban and rural places. On many occasions, all of us would have observed the uneducated or illiterate bead sellers and petty traders talking in English with foreigners who stop to buy things from them. How are they able to acquire this skill and come to know of the sort of vocabulary they need to fix a good bargain? It is nothing but their interest and a sort of compulsion that would help them earn money.

Getting Students Interested in Gaining Proficiency

Coming back to our semi-urban and rural students, in spite of being aware of the fact that English is needed to pursue their studies and to communicate in real life situations, they view English only as a subject. In many schools, English is a subject which is often taken for granted. Only when the students face a situation in which they need to understand this language and respond in the same, they realise the importance of proficiency in it. Getting students interested in gaining proficiency in English is a big issue that most English teachers have to deal with, especially when their students are from semi-urban and rural places. The primary focus should be on creating an interest among students in learning English.

Developing Anxiety

An objective analysis of this subjective issue brings to the forefront that lack of proficiency in English adversely affects the students' confidence level. In a heterogeneous class, the students in question develop anxiety when

- the other students speak better English
- they are not able to follow what the teachers say
- they do not recognize certain words and do not know the meaning of some words

For the students to transcend this divide, they should gain proficiency in this language.

What Will Help?

Exclusive grammar lessons are not going to help the students talk fluently in English. In spite of knowing the grammar rules, some may be unable to frame even simple sentences. There is no magical method that will dramatically improve the communicative skills. The students should get chance to listen to good English, because the natural sequence of learning any language for that matter, is to be adopted even in learning English. Commenting on a spoken language, the eminent philologist Vendryes says, "...the speaker has neither the leisure nor the time to mould his thought according to the strict rules of reflective and organised language....Spontaneous language is therefore in definite contrast to grammatical language" (75) (qtd. in I .Morris).

Place of Grammar Learning

Antony Burges, in his book *Language Made Plain*, tells about the difficulties of grasping the grammar of a foreign language at the primary level. He has compared the language learner to a swimmer who swims "miserably in a marmoreal sea of abstractions" (138). It is true that teaching grammar is an abstraction from language itself and it takes away the spontaneity in using it. But, the present curricula in colleges offer grammar as a separate unit. These separate

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grammar lessons put them off from reading and writing forever. The fear of the unknown gets mustered up which in turn affects their improvement. Thus, through reconceptualising and reframing grammar texts, we believe that we can redress this difficulty. Penny Ur, in her book *Grammar Practice Activities* says:

The learning of grammar should be seen in the long term as one of the **means** of acquiring a thorough mastery of the language as an end in itself. Thus, although there may be at times at which we ask our students to learn a certain structure through exercises that concentrate on virtually meaningless manipulations of language, we should in principle invest more time and energy in activities that use it meaningfully, culminating in general communicative tasks where the emphasis is on successful communication, and any learning of grammar takes place only as incidental to this main objective. (5)

Application to Real Life Situations

The application of language to real life situations enables a child to learn its mother tongue successfully. The learning and application of mother tongue happens naturally with the ‘subconscious operation’ of words. The child’s capability to reproduce the mother tongue indicates the operation of ingrained habits that it attains through experience in ever widening situations. But in the acquisition of a foreign language, ‘mental translation’ is applied. So, as the learner concentrates on language and meaning, he tends to ignore grammatical forms. The learner moves in a trajectory that he has internalized and thus, through dialogic interaction the learner sheds inhibitions and regains confidence. The learner, in turn, reinforces the goal to attain proficiency through continuous reading. The skill of language learning is acquired only through practice and not through grammatical activities.

Select Elements of Grammar

Only the very basics of grammar are to be taught for these students. For example, verb conjugation needs to be made clear for them. Students could be made familiar with constructing

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simple sentences with verbs in simple present, past and future tenses. The much important thing to be done at this juncture is to help them to come out of their hesitation. They should be made to use this language in an instinctive manner by giving them some activities like storytelling, narrating some incidents, asking questions about the story or the incident etc. Minor errors could be excused in such activities. Corrections could be done without disturbing their confidence level. Students should be equally encouraged to improve their vocabulary. A considerably good vocabulary is highly essential to really enjoy English. But the students in question should have a modest vocabulary of at least two thousand to three thousand words for their day to day conversation and for a better understanding of what they read.

Progress towards Proficiency

Proficiency in English has become a requirement in many fields, making communication skills occupy the prime position among the various employability skills. In this globalized era, mastery in English, both spoken and written, has become mandatory, as English is the only link-language among different countries. Proficiency in English does not merely help students to communicate their thoughts in this international language, but also help them to become a part of the refined society. “Grammar provides a platform to build the edifice of a language on. It is not the be-all and end-all” (Paul). Panini, the Sanskrit grammarian who lived during the fourth century B C, in his *Ashtadhyaya*, the greatest treatise on Sanskrit grammar, has written that “Grammar is the skeleton, not the soul of a language” (qtd. in “Is grammar everything?”). Apart from gaining clarity about the essential basic concepts of grammar, concrete and time bound measures are to be taken by these students to hone their communication skills, for it is a time consuming process. As in every other case, even in improving communication skills, hard work and perseverance pay.

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