

The Need for ELT Training

Sarat Kumar Doley, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Second language acquisition (SLA) studies mainly explore how human beings, having mastered their mother tongues, acquire their second language. Second language acquisition theories systematically investigate the nature and the acquisition process of a second language. Roughly speaking, second language acquisition researches began in the west at the end of 1960s or at the beginning of 1970s. Originally, second language acquisition study was a branch of applied linguistics and it mainly aimed to provide helps for language teaching. However, with the emergence of interlanguage hypothesis, second language acquisition broke away from applied linguistics and transformational generative linguistics and became an independent discipline. English language teaching (ELT) has been a commercially viable area within SLA studies. Claims for the need to train teachers in ELT have been vibrant in recent times. This paper is an attempt at an understanding of this claim.

Recent Trends in SLA studies

Second language acquisition (SLA) theories have developed rapidly in the last 40 years. These second language acquisition theories, however, hold different point of views. Each theory brings forth some characteristics and rules of second language acquisition from its own perspective. Ellis (1985) summarized seven second language acquisition theories or modes. They are -acculturation mode, accommodation theory, discourse theory, monitor theory, variable competence mode, acquisition theory, creative conformation theory, and universal hypothesis and neuro-functional theory. It has been categorized into process-oriented and condition-oriented theories. Process-oriented theories emphasize the psychological process that the second language learners must experience. Condition-oriented theories emphasize the teaching skills and classroom conditions that activate the psychological process of second language learners.

Nurture and Nature Theories

We may classify the second language acquisition theories into nurture and nature theories. Second Language Acquisition theories based on nurture include zone of proximal development of Vygotsky, Skinner's verbal behavior, Piaget's view of language acquisition, the competition model, language acquisition view of cognitive theory, discourse theory, the acculturation model, accommodation theory, the variable competence, the inter-actionist view of language acquisition, and the connectionist model. Second language acquisition theories based on nature include neurofunctional theory, the universal grammar theory, Fodor's modular approach and the monitor model.

Influence of SLA Studies

The first language acquisition is the inborn ability of a person while the second language acquisition is not. The similarity between first language acquisition and second language acquisition lies in the fact that language learners must have the conditions and abilities to acquire a language and they are in a language acquisition environment. The learners must follow certain cultural rules to acquire pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The first difference between the two is the differences related to the acquirers. The mother tongue knowledge of an acquirer will exert positive or negative influence on the acquisition of the second language. First language acquisition occurs in a person's childhood while usually the learners of the second language are beyond their childhood.

The differences also lie in the acquisition environment and styles. More often, first language is acquired under natural environment. Second language learners are not the same in this respect. Second language is learned, in most cases, in classrooms. In first language acquisition, spoken skill is learnt first. In second language acquisition, usually both spoken and written skills are learnt at the same time.

In addition, the emotional state and learner motivation of the two are different too. A person acquires his or her mother tongue in order to meet his or her basic needs and there is no learner motivation problem. However, the emotional state of the second language acquirers is influenced by various factors and varies from person to person.

Acquisition and Learning

Acquisition refers to the fact that learners subconsciously acquire a language through large amounts of contacts and usage of the target language. During this process, what learners care are the meanings of language and not language forms. Learning refers to conscious learning. During this process, language form is the core of learning. Acquisition also includes conscious learning. Conscious learning may help learn some unexpected knowledge unconsciously. Considering its complex nature, second language acquisition should contain two basic concepts, conscious learning and unconscious acquisition. Therefore, second language acquisition researchers cover not only informal learning environment, but also emphasize on formal learning environment and classroom teaching.

Too Animated a Claim for ELT?

A great many linguists and teachers concerned with English language teaching (ELT) in India have expressed their disappointment on the fact that second language teaching in India has not been viewed and dealt with an approach embedded in a framework provided by English Language Teaching, and that refractory areas of investigation, particularly those in which such pedagogical issues and practices are involved, have not received any fruitful exploration. An article by Raj Kumar Khanna, **“THE NEED FOR ELT TRAINING FOR COLLEGE LECTURERS” (1995)** is one such first large-scale attempt to incorporate the major thrust areas of English Language Teaching within the Indian pedagogical situations, it merits and will undoubtedly receive careful attention. Raj Kumar Khanna is noted for his contributions to the study of English Language Teaching in India. The article under review is the product of a study

of the contemporary English language education in India involving various higher education institutes across the country. The article has been fairly widely circulated, and there are quite a few references in the English Language Teaching literature to its major ideas.

The problem to which this article is addressed is that of giving a description of the shallow ideological abhorrence to ELT reflected in the current teaching practices in English Language classrooms in India. The ideological abhorrence involves the general attitude of hostility shown to ELT training by college teachers and professionals together in terms of their reluctance to accept any teaching approach, method, or technique loaded with ELT perspective. Raj Kumar Khanna calls for an identification of the problems of English language education in India and specification of how they should be addressed to bring about a change for a better future with regard to fruitful English language education. Furthermore, the change of attitude will create an atmosphere of research in the field of language education that has the potential to make a direct impact to pedagogical practices in a classroom. In other words, the goal of the article is to provide a case for ELT training for college lecturers which will put a stop to the illogical and irresponsible teaching practices in language teaching classrooms in India once and for all.

Raj Kumar Khanna complainingly states that majority of the lecturers recruited in India have literature background, “be they M.A., M.Phil., or PhD” and these lecturers are “perorating on poems or plays or novels” in the name of teaching language skills. Even the general atmosphere of the universities and colleges in India is such that any attempt to change the approach to language teaching by bringing in ELT perspectives into the course syllabus is doomed to fail as the “hapless maimed teacher needs the crutches of the book.” This is so even though majority of the “Subsidiary English Classes” allotted to each of the lecturers far exceed the Honours classes. The immediate result of such a lopsided approach is that “no learning of language takes place in all the three years that the students are at college.” Some meaningful steps in the past to improve the situation had often been disturbed as ELT training attempts were “derided and looked down upon.” But, it is a trite to state that only ELT training to Lecturers and proper implementation of ELT based course designs in colleges have the potential to make any difference as the “college teacher may be himself a model for the students to imitate” and he “needs to have been trained’ in the niceties of the language. Moreover, there are various areas of research and investigation in ELT potentially as intellectually challenging as ‘existentialism or the deconstructionist idea,’ but which are pedagogically more relevant. More than the prospects of research in syntax, semantics, and psychology is its engaging fact that in ELT, social “factors come into play.” An ELT teacher creates motivation for learning as he focuses on ‘communicative competence.’ Finally, Raj Kumar Khanna dwells on the need for proper language testing as “our examination papers are perhaps most outmoded in the entire developing world.” He ends his article in a hopeful note that valid language tests, in addition to some other aspects of ELT like error analysis, will give “a proper direction to English language teaching at universities and colleges.”

Usefulness of Literature in ELT

A careful study of this article forces us to observe, however, that the tall claims for ELT made at the expense of the utility of literature are far from justified. Furthermore, to think that a mere shift of focus from literature to ELT training for the college lecturers with a view to

equipping them with language teaching skills, though quite genuine, will do away at an instant with the problems of English language education in India is not based on a logical understanding of the gravity of the situation. The complexity of the real-life teaching situations that act as a contact zone of various socio-political and economic factors touching the stakeholders is such that it interferes with most language learning projects. Since Khanna's article has an overtone of animosity against the use of literature in language classroom and an undertone of indifference to factors other than linguistic, a word or two about them will not be out of context here.

Does Literature Work?

The use of literature as a technique for teaching both basic language skills and language areas is very popular within the field of foreign language learning and teaching. According to Collie and Slater (1990:3), there are four main reasons for the use of literature in the language classroom and they are-- valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. In addition to these four main reasons, they have also discussed some other secondary reasons for the incorporation of literature into the teaching of language. Among them, universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power and ambiguity are the most significant factors justifying the use of literature as a powerful resource in the language classroom.

Poetry has the potential to pave the way for the learning and teaching of basic language skills. As Çubukçu (2001:1) mentions, poetry is a rewarding and enjoyable experience with the properties of rhyming and rhythm both of which convey "love and appreciation for the sound and power of language." Talking about the educational benefits of poetry, he says that it provides readers with a different viewpoint towards language use by going beyond the known usages and rules of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. It triggers unmotivated readers owing to being so open to explorations and different interpretations. Poetry evokes feelings and thoughts in heart and in mind and makes students familiar with figures of speech due to their being a part of daily language use.

Drama is also a good resource for language teaching. It is through the use of drama that learners become familiar with grammatical structures in contexts. Students learn about how to use the target language to express, control and inform. Moreover, the use of drama increases the students' awareness of the culture of the target language.

Novels can also be used as a resource of language learning in language classrooms. As Helton, C.A., J. Asamani and E.D. Thomas (1998:1-5) pointed out that the open-ended questions of novels enable students to predict outcomes, make comparisons and contrasts, and draw conclusions. Discussions of various socio-economic issues such as sexual harassment and abortion, which are often an integral part of the plot of a novel, can provoke interesting debate and in turn they can also facilitate vocabulary development.

Are the Teachers Only to be Blamed?

So far as the second issue is concerned, there are a number of factors need to be looked at before joining the chorus of blame game at the expense of college lecturers with English

literature background for the deterioration of English education in India. The biggest of these factors are the question of the medium of instruction, size of the class, and the importance given to English at the undergraduate level.

A school is either an English medium school or a vernacular medium, but a college is not so, especially at the undergraduate level where more than one language is used as the medium of instruction. So, there is a homogeneity, at least to an extent, in the level of proficiency in English among the learners in a school. But, the learners in a college come from varied language background in terms of their medium of instruction at the school level and as a result, to an extent, there is a huge disparity in proficiency level in English among the learners. The obvious casualty in such a situation is the common teaching agenda that is suitable, more or less, to all the learners without which no teaching method looks practicable.

The situation worsens in a large class which has been a common problem almost in all the colleges in India. The grouping of the students into various sections in accordance with their performance in an entry level diagnostic test in English isn't practicable in most teaching situations in India as it appears to be. Especially because of the fact that English is no longer given importance in colleges as it was since the learners have the option of writing their semester examinations in the vernacular medium. Although, there is a compulsory paper in English, it exists only as a paper to qualify which have no significant role in relation to the final grade a student obtains in the achievement tests.

So, the college authority, along with the teachers and students, do not appear to be too enthusiastic to go too far in the matters of designing different course materials and devising of methods and techniques of teaching English so that they match the individual needs of the learners.

What is the Way Forward?

Second Language Acquisition theories and studies have been influential in bringing about a revolutionary change in the basic teaching perspectives of second language education. Considering the individual differences of foreign language learners, teachers now take into account the actual learning situation of foreign language teaching, and scientifically explore the linguistic process, psychological process, pedagogical process, and learning rules of learners of foreign languages so as to find out the most appropriate foreign language teaching mode and improve students' foreign language learning efficiency. In the efflorescence of such thoughts and concepts in the field of Second Language Acquisition studies, teachers and stakeholders engaged in second language education should be able to resolve various other difficulties faced by second language learners.

Notwithstanding, it is not easy to accept the view that English has been losing its ground in colleges, especially in the contemporary context of globalization and its baggage of opportunities, and most of the ELT designs devoid of the literature component do not work in most English language teaching situations in India. Yet this appears to be a fair description of the situation as it stands today. If this is correct, we can predict that any attempt to upgrade the standard of English language education in India by scrapping the literature component in

English accusing it for the failure of language teaching classrooms in colleges in India and at the same time overlooks the other important factors, will achieve very limited success. Literature must be incorporated into English Language Teaching programmes as a useful tool in language classrooms because of the fact that it is practicable in most teaching situations and at times the only. If these two major branches of knowledge try to exclude each other from their domain of operation, it seems inevitable that the entire project of language learning will remain a Utopian dream.

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Sarat Kumar Doley, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English
Department of English and Foreign Languages
Tezpur University
dolesar@tezu.ernet.in