

Linguistics: An Aid to ELT in Indian Contexts

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Abstract

English is larger than any of the communities in which it is used. The members of these communities need to be fully aware of the international linguistic resources at their disposal. One positive and natural outcome of this unique state of affairs is that no one can even think today about who *owns* the language or try to restrict its many varieties. In the multilingual context of India, English adds a unique and distinct colour. Used extensively in communication, trade, business, media, technology, education, etc., it really has a purpose-bound presence and does not operate in vacuum. Many institutions of higher learning provide special training to improve English language communicative skills. Yet majority of the students lack proper communicative competence in English. Companies that come for campus recruitment look for students who are articulate in their conversations. Experts believe that students in India face problems in campus recruitment or interviews because of poor spoken English. Poor spoken English is the result of inadequate development of language skills, its major reason being mother-tongue-influence (MTI).

This article discusses various methods of teaching English to non-native speakers of English and lists various grammatical errors committed and changes in structures in the speech of Indian speakers of English. Suitable remedial actions are also suggested relating to various levels of language: phonetics, morphology, sentence and semantics.

Key words: English as a second and foreign language, Nuances of English spoken by Indians, errors, prescriptive versus descriptive solutions.

1. Introduction

At present English is the major language of international business, diplomacy, science and technology. English used around the world is described as “International English” as well

as “Global English.” “Global English” blends in with the current economic buzzword “Globalization”.

English is a pluralistic language, having layers after layers of extended processes of convergence with other languages and cultures like French, Italian, German, etc. English language is now open to the non-western world, which was traditionally not a resource for English. The non-western world has now become contributors to and partners in the pluralism of the language.

The fact must be acknowledged that now English is larger than any of the communities in which it is used. The members of these communities need to be fully aware of the international linguistic resources at their disposal. One positive and natural outcome of this unique state of affairs is that no one can even think today about who *owns* the language or try to restrict its many varieties. The English language has become a global resource. It does not owe its existence or future to any nation, group or individual at present. English has become the possession of every individual and community that wishes to use it.

In the multilingual context of India, English adds a unique and distinct colour. Used extensively in communication, trade, business, media, technology, education, etc., it really has a purpose-bound presence and does not operate in vacuum. Importance of English seems to grow bigger every year in India, although it was/is often described as a foreign language. In spite of the fact that English is used by around 9% of the entire population, it is the language of ‘power’ and ‘prestige’. In spite of the fact that English is still considered as a foreign language, it clearly outweighs all the Indian languages in terms of power. It continues to be a status symbol in Indian society and commands prestige in walks of life.

Many institutions of higher learning provide special training to improve English language communicative skills. Yet majority of the students lack proper communicative competence in English. Companies that come for campus recruitment look for students who are articulate in their conversations. Experts believe that students in India face problems in campus recruitment or interviews because of poor spoken English.

Poor spoken English is the result of inadequate development of language skills, its major reason being mother-tongue-influence (MTI). MTI includes the problems in second language (L2) learning due to the first language of the learner (L1). Hence, it is essential for the Communicative Skill Development Programmes to follow a descriptive approach (rather

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than prescriptive) and to address the root cause - MTI. In other words, a linguistic approach is needed to rectify the problems that exist in ELT (English Language Teaching) in Indian contexts.

2. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) & MTI

There are several theories of language acquisition, e.g. Behaviourist Theory (Skinner 1953; Brown 2007; Lightbown & Spada 1993), Innate Theory (Chomsky 1959; 1965; Cook 2010; Pinker 1995), Cognitive Theory (Bloom 1976; Piaget 1972; Atherton 2011; Clark 2004), and Interactionist Theory (Vygotsky 1986; Bruner 1960, 1972). The behaviourists try to make us understand the acquisition of routine aspects of language and emphasize the role of imitation and practice; the innate theory contribution lies in understanding how children acquire the complexities of grammar without being taught. The cognitivists correlate language development with the overall cognitive and intellectual development and explain the reasons for the order of acquisition of several aspects of the language;. Interactionists focus on the importance of surroundings for normal language development.

When a non-native language is learnt and used in the country where that language has an official status (like English in India), the term ‘second language’ is used. SLA grew as an independent discipline in 1960s and during its formative period it was influenced by linguistics and psychology. With the help of linguistics, it tried to describe the linguistic system of L2 (Second Language) learners. Earlier, the SLA research was oriented towards “... a desire to test a linguistic theory rather than to address the practical problems of teaching” (Ellis 1997:6).

Like First Language Acquisition (FLA), there are several theories of SLA too, e.g. Behaviourist Theory (Ellis 1985), Structuralist Theory (Stern 1983; Lado 1957), Innate Theory (Chomsky 1959,1965; Cook 2001, 2010; Gass & Selinker 2008; Smith 1994), Creative Construction Theory (Dulay & Burt 1975; Smith 1994; Krashen 1987) and Cognitive Theory (Skehan 1998).

3. Addressing the Problem at Different Linguistic Levels - Based on Sailaja (2009)

3.1 Sound Level (Phonetics & Phonology)

- a) **Aspiration (release with strong puff of air):** Aspiration is an important feature of spoken English which is difficult for Indian learners because aspiration in many Indian languages changes the meaning but not in English. For example:

Pin = /p^hin/ /pal/ ‘moment’ /p^hal/ ‘fruit’
 Appoint = /ap^hoint/ /kaRaaii/ ‘strictness’ /kaR^haaii/ ‘embroidery’

- b) **Retroflex (sounds produced with backward curling of tongue):** English does not have retroflex sounds whereas Indian languages have. So, Indian learners produce retroflex sounds like T, D instead of alveolar t and d in English. For example: dog = Dog faultT = fault

- c) **Gemination (doubling of consonants):** Another strong influence of spelling is seen in geminate articulation of consonants since most Indian languages have this feature. Hence, learners have problems as following:

summer	/sama/ (Eng.)	/sammar/ (Indian)
happy	/haepi/(Eng.)	/happi/ (Indian)
killling	/kiliij/ (Eng.)	/killling/ (Indian)
bitter	/bita/ (Eng.)	/biTTar/ (Indian)

3.2 Word Level (Morphology)

- a) **Use of -ing (progressive):** In English, the progressive form is used with active verbs (eat, swim, run etc.) and not with stative verbs (have, know, like, understand, love, hate etc). But Indian learners tend to make mistakes as progressive in Indian languages is used with almost all types of verbs. For example:

I know these matters (Eng.)	I am knowing these matters (Indian)
I have three books (Eng.)	I am having three books (Indian)
I like it (Eng.)	I am liking it (Indian)
She does not understand anything	She is not understanding anything. (Eng.)
(Indian)	

- b) **Use of Plural Marker:** Some nouns in Indian English are used as plurals whereas in native varieties they would be classified as uncountable and, therefore, not able

to be pluralised at all – for example, *furnitures, moneys, feedbacks, equipments* etc. Thus uncountable nouns become countable. It is also possible for a person to say *an equipment, a furniture* rather than *a piece of equipment/ furniture*.

3.3 Sentence Level (Syntax)

- a) **Auxiliary Inversion absent:** In English, auxiliary inversion is used for making question sentences. For example:.,

You will come for Will you come?

But Indian learners tend to use question intonation sentence finally. You will come?

Moreover, if there is a *wh*-word and a question has to be asked, Indian learners often make mistakes. For example:

When you will come? for When will you come?

Why you are crying for Why are you crying?

- b) **Tag Questions:** Indian learners use the invariant *no* as a tag. For example:

You are coming, no? for You are coming, aren't you?

He will go, no? for He will go, won't he?

- c) **Verbs arguments:** Some verbs that are normally transitive tend to be used intransitively by Indian learners. For example:

I didn't expect for I didn't expect this

want and *desire* take a noun phrase after them while *wish* and *hope* take a prepositional complement.

I want a bigger house for I wish for a bigger house

I wish a promotion in my job for I want a promotion in my job

- d) **Particles:** In English, when a pronoun occurs, the particle *up* appears after it, as is the case with other particles in standard English:

(i) They called him up.

(ii) *They called up him.

(iii) They called up Sasha. (iv) They called Sasha up.

But some Indian speakers often use:

(i) They called up him (ii) Prateek rang up him.

e) **Misplacing Adverbs:** It is quite common in IE for the adverbial indicating place, time and other additional information to be placed at the beginning of a sentence rather than at the end.

(i) Recently, I found in a question paper the following: (ii) Yesterday, I went to see a movie.

(f) **Use of Reduplication:** As Reduplication a pan-indian phenomenon, Indian speakers tend to use this while speaking English too. For example,

I saw cute-cute babies for I saw very cute babies.

(g) **Use of 'Itself' and 'only' as Emphasizers:** In place of intonation Indian speakers tend to speak 'Itself' and 'Only' as emphasizees. For examples:

I am going to Delhi only for I am going to Delhi (falling-rising tone)

I will go to Mysore itself for I will go to Mysore (falling-rising tone)

(h) **Deictic use of Expletives:** Indian speakers tend to use the expletives as deictic. For example,

A lizard is there in my bathroom for There is a lizard in my bathroom

The train comes there! for There comes the train!

(i) **Deictic use of 'it':** It is very common for Indian speakers to use 'it' as deictic. For example,

Give it (pointing at 'it') to the boy. for Give this to the boy.

Move it! for Move this!

(j) **Absence of Reflexive Verbs:** Indian speakers use the reflexive verbs very less. For example,

Did you get hurt? for Did you hurt yourself?

You did not enjoy? for You did not enjoy yourself?

a) **Major Conversation Features:** Use of conjunction *and* by Indian learners is not equivalent to the native English use. It is often used as a linker. For example,

So I left Delhi when I was ten years old and then I spent most of my time in Calcutta—my schooling, and also my graduation. And for my post-graduation when I decided to come back to Delhi, I found out that Delhi has changed a lot . . . But Calcutta was the place I grew up, and especially for a boy, who's eleven-twelve years old, right up to his graduation . . .
(Sailaja, 2009:96)

Other very common discourse features heard in India are *I mean*, *What I mean to say is*, *the thing is* and *like* which are genuinely meant to clarify and are also used as fillers.

b) **The Aspect of Politeness/Respect:**

The question 'What's your good name?' (literal translation of Hindi equivalent), which is a polite way of asking 'What is your name?', is often listed as a pan-Indian one. Also, children (or even older students) refer to their teachers using either the subject they teach or their names – economics sir, maths sir, Hindi miss, Physics ma'am, Usha ma'am or Abida miss, etc.

It is customary in Indian languages to welcome people visiting their places by actually using words that are equivalent to *come*. So, they literally translate when they welcome: *come, come.....*

This feature is a striking feature of Indian English discourse. It appears in its address forms. Relationships in India are rather more clearly defined than in Western societies. My *wife* is considered less respected than My *Mrs*. For example, My *Mrs* is not well today. A related issue in conversation is that, when talking to a senior person, the use of *you* is avoided since that too is considered to be disrespectful. Students tend to say *As ma'am said* . . . even while talking to the teacher concerned directly.

4. Teaching Parts of Speech (POS) in a Descriptive Way

4.1 Prescriptive vs. Descriptive Grammar

Before we will zero in to POS, we will talk about what is the difference between Prescriptive and Descriptive grammar as it is the foundation to teach English to non-native

speakers in the best way. The Prescriptive Grammar is the grammar that we have read/been taught in school, often false, that prescribes how we *should* talk/write rather than describing how.

The Descriptive Grammar, on *the* other hand, is a scientific grammar that describes, rather than prescribes, how we talk/write. The most important thing to note here is that the conscious knowledge (like rules of algebra, principles of physics/chemistry, etc.) is actually *learnt*. On the other hand, the subconscious knowledge (like how to speak or how visually identify objects, etc.) is *acquired*. In some way this explains why classes in the prescriptive grammar of any foreign language/second language often fail abysmally to produce good results for the student to speak those languages. Being immersed in an environment where you can subconsciously acquire a language is more effective. In addition we may offer a few prescriptive rules based on perceived need.

4.2 POS (Parts of Speech)

Sentences are made up of words. POS of a word tells us how a word functions in the sentence. In any prescriptive grammar in the schools, we are taught that a noun is 'a word used as the name of a person, place or thing' or a verb is 'an action, state or state of being.' These definitions are based on semantic criteria and we will see how these are not scientific and totally wrong. For example,

(i) The *destruction* of Hiroshima resulted in a tragic loss.

In the above sentence, according to the definition of the prescriptive grammar, it shows action and it is not the name of a person, place or thing, so its POS category should be a 'Verb.' But native speakers would classify it as a 'Noun.'

Now if the POS is based on the meaning of the word, how can we assign a part of speech to word for which the meaning isn't clear to the native speaker too. The most surprising and strongest evidence that we can never use semantic definitions for POS is shown by the following example:

(i) The yinkish dripner blorked quastofically into the nindin with the pidibs.

(Carnie 2006:37)

Any native speaker of English would tell you that *yinkish* is an adjective, *dripner* a noun, *blorked* a verb, *quastofically* an adverb, and *nindin* and *pidibs* both nouns, but s/he can't tell anything about their meaning. The question here comes up - how can s/he know the POS then? The answer lies in the argument that was discussed earlier – POS can't be defined semantically. These depend on their position in the sentence and the affixes they take. For example, *yinkish* is an adjective because it takes -ish affix (an adjectival affix) and comes before the noun *dripner*. *Dripner* takes a noun affix -er (a noun affix) and it also functions as the subject of the sentence. *Blorked* is a verb as it takes -ed affix (a verbal affix). *nindin* and *pidibs* both come after the article 'the' and hence these are nouns. In other words, the POS of a word is determined by its position in the sentence and also by its morphology, but not by its meaning.

4.3 Some Major Blunders Made in ELT Using Prescriptive Approach

4.3.1 Intransitive and Transitive Verbs

In Prescriptive grammar, the transitive verbs are described as the verbs where the action denoted by the verbs *passes over* from the subject to the object. Similarly, the intransitive verbs are those verbs which denote an action which does *not pass over* to the object. But it is not clear what is meant by the term *pass over*.

On the other hand, if we explain it descriptively in a simple way in an ELT classroom without using the linguistic terms we can easily make the students understand the difference between the intransitive and the transitive verbs as well as the ditransitive verbs too.

For example, the verb denotes an action. Let us consider the action of 'eating' and think what does this verb need. The verb 'eat' needs 'someone who eats' and 'something that is being eaten.' This means it needs two compulsory participants. So, we can make a sentence like '*Parth* eats a *mango*.' Now ponder over a sentence like '*Parth* eats mango with a fork in the park on the bench.' In this sentence too, only two things – '*Parth*' and '*mango*' are compulsory, other things like – '*fork*', '*park*' and '*bench*' are only optional not compulsory for the sentence to be complete. It shows that the verb 'eat' needs only two things which are essential and hence it is a transitive sentence.

On the other hand, the verb like 'sleep' needs 'someone who sleeps.' For example, '*Ishaan* sleeps.' Even if we have '*Ishaan* sleeps at night on the couch,' '*night*' and '*couch*' are

the optional elements in the sentence and the sentence is complete without it also. Hence, the verb like 'sleep' needs only one participant that is 'one who sleeps.' These kinds of verbs are called intransitive verbs.

On similar pattern, we can explain the ditransitive verbs too. The verb like 'send' needs three compulsory participants. For example, '*Che sends the letter to Fidel.*' In this sentence, the three participants are 'someone who sends,' 'something that is sent,' and 'someone to whom that thing is sent.'

4.3.2 Active and Passive Voice

In most of the prescriptive grammars, the passive voice is defined as follows: the object of the transitive verb in the active voice becomes the subject of the verb. For example,

- (i) *Dhawal eats a mango* (Active Voice)
- (ii) *A mango is eaten by Dhawal* (Passive Voice)

But this is not the case that the subject becomes the object in the passive voice and the object becomes the object. To nullify this argument, in the above examples if we can closely examine, the action is the same 'to eat,' the doer/the subject is also the same, i.e. 'Ram' and not the 'mango' and the 'thing to be eaten' is also the same, i.e. 'mango.' The only thing that changes is the place of the subject and the object. Hence, we can say that in the passive voice the object of the active voice occupies the *subject position* but not that it becomes the subject/doer as 'mango' can never be the doer/subject.'

The second question is regarding the use of active and passive voice. This can also explain a lot about the active and the passive voice. When we want to defocus the subject we use passive voice and when if we need to make it prominent we use active voice. Hence, in passive voice the object is 'foregrounded' or used as the 'topic' of the sentence.

5. Final Remarks

The paper is an attempt to show how linguistics can be a helpful aid to English Language Teaching (ELT) in the present Indian perspective. As India is a multilingual country and hence, there can be various kinds of mother-tongue influences, it is only the scientific approach that can come to the rescue of English Language teaching methods by applying linguistics in a simple manner.

Therefore, the need of the hour is to understand and follow the descriptive approach rather than prescriptive approach to ELT (instructions consist largely of grammar-only types of activities such as mechanical drills, fill in the blank, and various other form-only exercises). Most studies show that this kind of instruction has short term effect.

The scientific /descriptive approach addresses issues at different levels, provides some diagnostic tools and helps in finding long term solutions. Advances in language instruction would not occur until we carefully examine language learners' errors (particularly MTI mother tongue instruction). Moreover, Contrastive/Error Analysis minimizes MTI and hence aids in improving communicative English skills.

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