

# Emphasizing English Language Skills – A Part of Providing Quality Education in Rural Areas

Dr. C. Muralidara Kannan

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## Abstract

The days have gone by when every organization, be it social or individual, governmental or non-governmental, educational or industrial, focused its attention only on urban regions in rendering their quality service, extending their helping hand in creating an awareness and any other programmes and schemes of development. The present century has been witnessing a sea-change and all the organizations, irrespective of their status, support from internal and external sources and other factors, focus their attention on the uplift of rural areas. The much-sought after society building sector—Education—has also joined this main stream of its powerful flow on the quality education offered to rural stakeholders. Institutes of higher education, viz., colleges, universities and deemed universities, have a greater responsibility towards this goal. Hence, providing quality education to the rural students could be the best way for each institute of higher learning to contribute their best for the overall development of our nation.

There are so many ways to provide quality education to the rural students in a college. They could be curricular, co-curricular, extra-curricular, social awareness programmes; psychological well-being through personality development programmes; vocational and other special skills training sessions, etc. Of these, emphasizing the acquisition of English language skills is the most important one as it turns out to be the primary requirement for the better and suitable employability of the students.

The potential profile of any institution is rightly gauged by its track of placement record. Thus, in addition to their students' subject knowledge, analytical bent, creative skills, competitive spirit, a major thrust has to be given to their English language skills. Better English skills can be equated to better placement.

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Hence, this article makes an attempt to give a brief discussion on the importance of emphasizing English language skills to the rural students at the portals of higher education.

## **Introduction**

The writer considers the topic as a vital issue. He reflected on it in terms of certain fundamental interrogatives like, *What is it that this article should look at?, Who is the target group?, By whom will it be attained?, In what manner, why and what could be the benefit?* The answers to these questions have formed the discussions of this article and they have sprung from his long-standing experience as a teacher of English language and by virtue of his continuous reading of books and journals on English Language Teaching and Learning.

## **The Issue**

Emphasizing English language skills to the rural students will certainly contribute to quality educational service. This is the issue placed for discussion. Teaching as well as learning of English language and the skills thereof are already in practice in the rural and urban regions of our country for quite a long time. But how serious is the pursuit of this process? How effective the programmes are? What is the real output especially among our educated (graduated and graduating) rural youth? How many of them could be suitably and gainfully employed? Answers to all these questions are not very encouraging. Hence, it is right time to think of an effective way that can accommodate all possible resources and lay an **emphasis** on the imparting of English Language Skills to the rural students which, in turn, would undoubtedly pave its way to quality education at the portals of higher education.

## **The People**

To this issue in our focus, the people concerned are the rural students and the teachers in the institutions of higher learning which are situated in rural areas; or in some cases the urban suburban institutes where a considerable number of rural students are admitted for various undergraduate programmes. In addition to these two main groups of the teacher and the taught, there are the other groups/individuals like administrators, policy makers, and experts drawn from

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the industries and corporate world who may also have their say either directly and indirectly. All these eventually work for the main target group: the rural students in institutions of higher learning.

Understanding the importance of the growing need for acquiring English language skills, especially for the rural students, the educational administrators and policy makers should readily green flag such of the programmes/crash courses/bridge courses/seminars/symposia/workshops, etc. Then, the experienced teachers, trainers, and subject experts in co-ordination and co-operation with others concerned should work together, chart out a plan of action and carry out the same focusing on the requirements of the main stakeholder: the rural learners. All these will require collective effort— team work. Team work works in language learning also and so it should be emphasized in processes that focus on enabling rural students to acquire English language skills.

### **The Ways and Means**

With the advent of IT (Information Technology) and internet resources, and in addition to the existing human ware of teacher and trainer resources, one cannot suggest a single foolproof method or even just a few methods to enable rural students to acquire English. As a matter of fact, a successful, open-minded and accommodative team of teachers/trainers of English language skills would certainly accept a kind of all pervasive or an eclectic method--a method that envelopes or takes hold of all the existing means and methods. For, there are plenty of resources to teach and learn English language skills. First of all, the teacher should gauge the students in matters of his/her social and parental status, previous knowledge, his or her level of understanding, aptitude and motivation for language learning, memory power and above all his or her bent for acquiring the four basic skills like listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English.

Of the four basic skills, only the latter two are given importance both at the school and collegiate level. Quite recently, a changing trend in being observed in imparting the first two skills: listening and speaking, the much neglected skills amongst our rural students. Any kind of dyadic communication could effectively take place only when the listening and speaking skills

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gain prominence, be it social, official or personal communication. The rural students, having had their twelve years of education through their mother tongue/vernacular, find it very difficult to cope with the college teaching which is done through English language. Some of them may think that these skills could be acquired by them overnight, by some magic. They are indeed misled and their pursuit turns vain. On the other hand, their parents cherish higher hopes for them and expect that their children would pick up these skills by and by as they graduate from the college. But, quite contrary to their expectation, the children draw more or less a complete blank.

Under these circumstances, the role of an English teacher at the portals of higher education is extremely significant. We do speak of quality quite often, but how many of us think that this particular area of imparting good language skills also contributes its own mite to quality education. A teacher is said to be a huge water tank in the process of disseminating knowledge and skills to his/her students. An English teacher/trainer is more so. This water tank has to flow and irrigate, in particular, the barren as well as unattended lands—the students of rural areas. Only then, it can be vouchsafed that quality teaching has taken place. The trainers in the British Council have a similar view and opine that there is a need, in India, for everyone (from the poorest people in the villages) to learn and use English.

The teachers' in institutes of higher learning, in the process of emphasizing English skills for the rural students, may face several problems and practical difficulties in imparting such skills. One of the major drawbacks is the mother tongue influence of the students in their English learning. It is not rigidly advised that our English teachers and trainers have to turn high puritans in using English language alone in their classroom, training and language laboratory sessions. When their mother tongue facilitates their skills acquisition, it is not a great fault on the part of the teacher or the trainer to use the mother tongue/vernacular to reach his/her students. The point is that it can be sparingly used. At the same time, encouraging and empowering the English language teacher/trainer to use as much as English possible in his/her teaching will certainly lead to a better communicative performance in their learners.

Any such programme drafted at the institutes of higher learning can be taught or trained in addition to the regular hours spent in English as a separate subject, since English as a subject

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encompasses other items in its agenda like prose, poetry, one-act plays, etc. The emphasis given to the language skills is more functional and it calls for a special approach from the teachers and the taught. It has already been stated that the field of IT (Information Technology) has emerged as a handy tool for learning anything and everything under the sun. And learning English language skills is no exception to this. There are many teacher- and learner-friendly programmes and software. The teacher has to be receptive in the first place and has to consider IT as a boon. If the teachers, especially the orthodox and traditional teachers of English language understand the situation, they will see a useful companion in the computers.

### **The Fruit**

If the team of teachers and trainers understand the reality as discussed above, they will certainly be doing yeoman service in emphasizing English language skills to the rural students in various parts of our country. They would help the rural students to improve their employability. If the institutions want to enhance their profile of placement, particularly their rural students, it is to English skills they have to turn their attention. The rural students are adept in their arithmetic and mathematic skills, they have very good exposure to international scenario by way of reading newspapers and watching TV programmes, but what they lack is communicative skill. They can communicate well in their regional language, but they are tongue-tied when it comes to English language. Their better employability is based on their better English skills.

### **Conclusion**

Hence, at the portals of higher education, let us work together to see that the most downtrodden amongst our students—the rural youth—establish their right to learn the basic skills of English language in addition to his or her learning of the other subjects. Uplifting the rural youth is a good step for the national uplift. Even some of the outreach programmes can have a module on emphasizing English language skills to the rural folk. A step taken in this line by the educators at the institutes of higher learning will surely be the right step in providing quality education to the rural students.

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Dr. C. Muralidara Kannan  
M.A. (English), M.A. (Ling.), M.A. (Psy.), M.A. (Soc.),  
M.Phil., Ph.D., (English) P.G.D.E.LT., D.G.T., R.B.P., (Hindi), Dip. in French  
Assistant Professor  
Post-graduate and Research Department of English  
Government Arts College (Autonomous)  
Coimbatore-641018  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[drcmuralidara@gmail.com](mailto:drcmuralidara@gmail.com)