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Teaching English in Schools: Problems and Solutions A Case Study from Rajasthan, India

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The Intensity of Effort required to Learn English

The changing times have witnessed the growing importance of English language in every walk of life. Conscious and unconscious use of the words in our everyday conversation from the English language bears evidence to the growing importance of English language in every walk of life. But learning English as a second language has never been an easy task. It can and often does become a life-long journey of discovery, frustration and boundless rewards for those who pursue it.

The intensity of effort required to learn it depends on numerous factors. While full immersion in a language is the best and fastest way for a student to learn a new language, there are various extraneous factors to be taken into account.

Teachers' Situation

The above context is equally true to the situation that teachers are in. Teachers of English face far more problems than the learners. Curriculum selection, methodology decisions, reviewing and redesigning strategies for improvement and classroom management are a

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few important factors. These can be challenging at times because of a number of variables involved.

However, one key element of teaching and learning English remains the same: the desire to communicate in English.

Focus of This Paper

The present paper, which is an outcome of an extensive study of curricula of the schools in Rajasthan, investigates into some of the relevant issues hampering the process of learning English as a second language while suggesting some important changes towards betterment of English teaching.

Fear and Fever about Learning English

It is a noteworthy fact that most of the students accomplish their schooling with English as one of the main subjects. Though they score heaps of marks in this subject, yet they remain very poor when it comes to applying it. The students have an unknown fear and fever about English.

Many factors influence the roles that teachers and learners adopt in the classroom. A peep into these factors will prove beneficial for the understanding of causes for failure or success in teaching of English at school level. The process of learning a language in the classroom is directly proportional to the relationship between the teachers and the learners.

Some Reasons

The teacher needs to know a considerable amount about his students as each class is unique, and as a result each class will need to be treated differently. Nowhere is this truer than in planning, where the teacher selects the activities that will be suitable for the students. In order to do so, he obviously needs to know a lot about them.

The unwieldy strength (40-50 students per class) of the class and short span of contact time is a hindrance that most teachers are very emphatic about. Although *National Curriculum Framework 2005* recommends the ideal class strength of 30, yet it is hardly adhered to due to a variety of reasons.

In a period of less than 40 minutes, a teacher cannot justify her/ his duties that too with an element of creativity. It is almost impossible for teachers to go for a personal touch in planning and to cater to the individual needs of the students. In this short span of time the teacher cannot conduct the activities and assessments of different variety.

1. So, a uniform regulation which restricts the class strength to 30 should be implemented seriously.
2. An online grievances forum should be set up by NCERT/ CBSE where parents, teachers and concerned citizens could appeal against the breach of rules of conduct.
3. Immediate follow up by the concerned authorities would keep a check on the anomalies in the infrastructure and working of the schools.

Variable Student Skills in English

Student variability in levels of knowledge, skills, proficiency and performance is a factor which not only discourages the teacher but also is unable to bind the attention of all learners to the class.

A thorough analysis of the previous knowledge of the students should be done by the teachers. While discussing this matter for our research, teachers brought forth an important handicap: They are incompetent to judge the level of language acquisition of the students.

1. So, the curriculum should provide checklists for all levels.
2. Teaching strategy for slow learners or a remedial plan for each class should be included in the curriculum, as teachers with their present competencies and workload are incapable of managing this issue.

Lack of Trained Teachers

Lack of properly trained teacher is also a limiting factor in authentic teaching of English. The English teachers at some schools are untrained and more over they are unaware of the current trends and techniques of teaching English. The reason for appointing these unskilled English teachers may be a lower salary to be paid and their easy availability. Teachers were honest in admitting during this survey that they had no formal training to teach English. Some of them found teaching English a troublesome task because of the workload of correction. Teachers felt that they are not competent to organize speaking, listening, reading tests as no guidelines were ever given to them in this regard. They lack the technical knowledge to assess the level of proficiency or to conduct a remedial/bridge course to bring about a uniform level of proficiency.

Teacher Training Schedules

Teacher training schedules are the most sought after issues with the teachers. There is a huge gap between theoretical and practical aspects of teaching.

1. To bridge the gap, a compulsory paper with Listening and Speaking Skills Development curriculum should be introduced at the degree level.
2. The syllabus for degree students in all universities should be changed entirely where students should be tested both on paper and in person.
3. Their speaking and listening skills should be nurtured with the help of audio and video devices.
4. The paper should have two parts as Theory and Practical. The latter should consist of viva, project work, public speaking, research, group discussions etc.
5. The concept of Language Labs should be introduced at least in the degree classes.
6. Another need in this field could be that post-graduate studies in English should be restricted to regularly enrolled students only.
7. No provision for a degree through private or correspondence enrolment should be permitted.
8. Better curriculum in B.Ed colleges and a stricter norm similar to PMT, PET etc about the admission to B.Ed colleges can really solve the problem.
9. Those who opt for English as their subject in B. Ed, they should have a specially designed practically tested module which caters to the pedagogic issues concerned with teaching English.
10. Compulsory one year internship, field observations and case studies should be part of teacher training. National Council of Teachers Training (NCTE) should consider these issues seriously. Another option is a pre-service training programme for English teachers.
11. Those who have not attended this training should not be eligible to teach English. Workshops, orientation session and refresher courses should be organized frequently and attendance of a minimum of one such session per year should be made compulsory for all English teachers.

The primary aim of such programmes, according to Mark Bartram and Richard Walton (1991) should be:

The constant and on-going re-energizing of teachers' technique whilst the teacher is actually in the job.

Although the National policy of Education of 1986 has visualized both the pre-service and in-service programmes for teachers, nothing so far has seriously been implemented in the state.

Teachers of Other Subjects Teaching English

A teacher who has been teaching any subject for years can be directed to teach English as and when required by the school authorities. During the interaction with teachers they accepted the fact that they were not comfortable with teaching English although they had English as their subject at the under graduate or the post-graduate level. The situation is even worse with the teachers who have done their under-graduate or post-graduate studies as private students or through correspondence courses.

It seems fair to state that the majority of primary school teachers have an insufficient command over English to be able to teach it effectively. Good command of grammar and vocabulary is lacking and alongside this the most striking failing is in the pronunciation. Definitely, these kinds of teachers make English a subject of rote learning for students as they instruct students to learn by-heart. This is one of the main reasons that no effective learning of the subject takes place and it remains a mere formality.

Teaching is a Complex Act

Teaching is a complex act, requiring many kinds of knowledge. Some of this knowledge is general, some are more specific. The various categories of knowledge are not discrete entities, and the boundaries between these domains are hazy. The following set of categories of teacher knowledge is loosely based on an article by Shulman.

- Knowledge of subject matter content
- Knowledge of general pedagogical principles and strategies and their application
- Knowledge of learners, their characteristics, and how they learn
- Knowledge of educational contexts
- Knowledge of educational goals, purposes and values

A teacher who is not proficient in any of these cannot do justice to her students. So, the guidelines to school should mention a strict adherence to all terms and conditions of appointing teachers of English. Grievances redressal forum mentioned earlier could cater to such issues.

Some Practices of the Heads of Schools

It is often observed that the heads of the institutions have a tendency to allocate less skilled teachers to the younger classes. This is most apparent in class I and II, where teachers with no special skills in English are often allocated to teach English.

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The teachers teaching classes I and II remain with their students all through the day have a greater knowledge of each individual student in their class. They also have the chance to use English at different times during the day and could use English for cross-curricular purposes.

There is, therefore, a special need for re-addressing the teaching of English to these classes. Not only are their teachers with them all day long, but these students are at ages where their development and ability must be carefully considered regarding teaching methodology, teacher allocation, teaching materials and syllabi.

Research shows the longer the period of initiation the better the level attained by the students, but there appears to be a saturation threshold above which increased time is less effective. So, frequent short lessons are more successful than less frequent longer ones.

Relevance and Irrelevance of Lesson Planning

Most of the teachers not only plan their lessons in advance but also admit that it had hardly anything to do with actual transactions of the syllabus. They also had no idea of ideal components of a lesson plan. It is for them, a mere formality to be completed for records.

Writing lesson plans is a preliminary and essential stage that helps increase the success-rate of anything taught. A well-planned lesson or unit is most likely to help in delivering the best. A large number of teachers use them to varying degrees.

There are five issues to be kept in mind while planning lessons for any class.

1. Relevance –The content is relevant to the students’ language needs.
2. Completeness –It is inclusion of all the language skills necessary for the stated learning objective of the topic.
3. Authenticity – The supporting material/activity should be both linguistically and culturally authentic.
4. Satisfaction –The student should feel benefitted more than simply feeling engaged.
5. Application – The student should be able to use the material in a lesson straight away.

Guidelines for lesson plans should be the most important component of curriculum. Each theme mentioned in the curriculum should be preceded by a sample lesson plan. Care to include a variety of sample lesson plans in the curriculum should be taken.

Using Multiple Intelligences

The concept of multiple intelligence (Howard Gardner 1983) and experiential learning should be applied to lesson planning. The curriculum should mention specifically the activities for different learners.

The teachers can take help from teachers' resource books in curriculum for planning the lessons according to different learning styles of the individuals. A mix and match of teaching techniques would result in much better output than plain lecturing method. The lessons from the text can be adopted in different ways to make them suit the class in a better way.

The types of intelligence as proposed by Gardener are: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical-rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and existential.

Most of the teachers are more concerned with disseminating facts, information or principles in classroom than teaching language skills or allowing students to do and learn, practice and engage in language activities useful for communicative competence. They do not teach lessons with an aim to inculcate language acquisition or for practical application but instead teach English as an academic discipline. They do not attach themselves or their planning to result in effective language learning for their students.

Teachers and students study English like any other subject without realizing that language is essentially an integrated skill and proficiency in communication is the prime concern of all language teaching programmes. All the skills of language listening, speaking, reading and writing in present scenario should be given due importance by teachers and students.

Present Materials in Ready to Assimilate Portions

The approaches to language skills are not much content-based instead stress on the practical implication. But most teachers and students neglect the applied linguistic competence development. Learning a language is a process of mastering a succession of steps each one building on the previous step. One weak step would result in a drastic fall. The duty of the teachers is to present the target language in ready to assimilate pieces, starting with easy parts and gradually moving towards the tougher parts. In between at every step the teachers should check for the level of acquisition. It is very important to get learners use the English language for the purpose of true communication as against the imposition of grammatical structures.

For this, English teachers should plan purposeful enrichment activities which involve the learner actively in the class. But, care should be taken that task based learning should not be considered as atomized or to be practiced in small segments. Actually language is

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learnt when learners are placed in a position where they have to use any or all linguistic resources available to them in order to achieve meaningful communication. Learners learn best when different learning methods are used.

Motivation Levels of Students and Teachers

The motivation level of the teachers as well as students is one of the biggest obstacles in teaching and learning of English. The monotony of classroom teaching mars the motivation of the students. Alan Cunningsworth (1980) observes,

A well-motivated student badly taught will probably do better than a poorly motivated student well taught. Motivation determines the students' level of attention during class and the assiduity with which he does his home work. It certainly has a deep influence in the effectiveness of learning.

The teachers are the greatest motivators. Motivation is considered to be the most important single factor in ensuring success in language learning. There are various factors which motivate the learners. Teachers also hold top position in the list of motivational factors. It depends on a teacher to make a boring text interesting or an interesting text boring. Motivation in the classroom is derived by the activities and approaches of the teachers, whereas the long-term motivation is provided by awareness on part of the students about the uses of the languages. The students also need to motivate themselves.

According to Gardner RC and Macintyre PD (1972),

Motivation is a complex construct defined by three main components: Desire to achieve, effort extended in this direction and satisfaction with this task.

Teachers can motivate students only if they themselves are motivated. Teacher motivation is a matter of professional satisfaction which comes from continuous progress in learning and optimum performance in the class. So, the best way to motivate is a well planned, well designed and well implemented curriculum.

Importance of Creativity

Creativity is terribly missing in a majority of teachers due to rigid mindsets, lack of resources and time. The teaching material and tasks should have variety and creativity. They should lead to personal involvement of the students. Classroom interaction should be stressed as much as possible.

These activities and tasks bring the means of learning and the purpose of learning close together. They should set a direct link with the world outside the classroom. The mindsets of teachers can be changed through information and exposure to the world and the latest changes in education scenario. DA Wilkins (1972) has observed,

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Language teachers' skill is dependent on two factors, his own proficiency in the language and his knowledge and expertise in methods and techniques of language teaching.

Creativity is in some way related to knowledge. Teachers can be creative if some support through ideas is provided to them. A curriculum with extensive activities and guidelines can be the best source of it.

Types of Assessments

The other factor which affects English language learning is the type of assessments conducted by the schools. The question paper is only theoretical and sometimes 50% of the questions are very short answer type ones which the teacher designs for the comfort of correction. The school authorities also find it suitable as it produces better result records. There is practically no inclusion of variety of assessments. The whole system of written assessment is taken lightly by the students as there is no fixed syllabus for Reading section, Writing section and Grammar section.

Teachers identified three challenges for assessment in the English Curriculum namely: time, appropriateness of assessment tools, and catering to the range of students' abilities in English. Teacher-designed tasks and tests were the most frequently used tools for observation. The development of quality questions for unit testing, diagnostic testing and criterion-referenced testing is a pre-requisite.

Moreover, the use of such questions in textbooks, examinations and teaching provides good feedback as well as serves as a quality-control device. It is therefore suggested that a crash programme for the orientation of subject teachers should be established to develop in them the necessary technical know-how for preparing objective questions and blueprints for setting better question papers for their term tests and annual examinations. This orientation in diagnostic and criterion referenced testing would be quite relevant.

Make It a Dialogue

Teaching for most teachers is a monologue process. Even if it turns towards the direction of dialogue, the teachers discourage the students as most of the times the questions or discussions are too imaginative and tend to divert the class from the topic being taught. This leads to tongue-tied, hesitant and inferiority complex ridden students who carry the burden throughout their lives. In fact, no English speaking centre can make them come out of their hesitation. This is the most serious disaster that could happen to any language learner.

Teachers should provide a threat free, accommodating and conducive to learning environment. This, at times, needs a lot of patience and energy but this is worth the output. The teacher should provide the stimulation for dialogue, where students answer

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questions and ask questions. A warm emotional climate is crucially important in creating a higher degree of effective learning. Students should not be passive learners but should be interested individual who lend life to the class. Teachers themselves are not aware of the theories and process of language acquisition. It is through a rigorous curriculum in B.Ed. that this knowledge along with its practical implications can be imparted.

Teachers use resource room / audio-visual rooms very rarely thus limiting the learning experience of their students. Language is a form of social behaviour, so, it is as complex as most other forms of behaviour. It cannot be taught and learnt in isolated units. A proper context while teaching and learning words and structures is required.

So, a variety of learning experiences need to be introduced.

Resourceful and aware teachers effectively use audio-visuals aids to have impact on conscious as well as sub conscious learning. These aids have special learning impact in junior classes, charts, maps, posters, photographs, film strips, specimens like coins, stamps, tickets, news-papers, encyclopaedia, dictionary, thesaurus, movies, CDs, electronic board are some of the teaching aids that can be used according to the text and level of learners to make the class interesting. Multimedia aids not only help learn the language in context but also help in acquiring the verbal intonation, gestures, mime, facial expressions and body language. They not only allow flexibility in delivery, but also create a linguistically and culturally rich environment in the class. Things that are time consuming and complex can be simplified and personalized with these aids. An extensive list of audio-visual resources can be provided in the teachers' resource book as most teachers are not aware of the resources available in this field.

Speaking Skill

As spoken English is not evaluated, teachers and students tend to ignore it. Most schools give no importance to spoken English in their assessment criterion. Though the curriculum stresses on good oral communication, yet it has never been a part of evaluation because no specific guidelines about how to conduct such an evaluation are given anywhere in the curriculum document. The teachers also find themselves inefficient to handle such assessments as they have never done it before. The difficulty of oral testing (speaking and listening skills) poses a serious problem. Gillan Brown and George Yule (1983) say,

The assessment of the spoken language has traditionally been a headache for the English teacher. Many well established tests do not even have an oral component, since grammatical accuracy and vocabulary can be assessed quite adequately; it seems in the written mode.

Teaching English, as mentioned earlier, is a monologue so students hardly get a practice in its spoken form. The first and foremost requisite is all teachers of English should be trained specifically to teach the language.

The teachers should be well aware of the link between English syntax and pronunciation, graduation and other features. Electronic devices can help the teacher in this area. Speech training through electronic devices in small group is an effective remedy to this problem. Model reading in class by the teacher with proper stress, pauses, and intonation is equally important to give them the concept of the spoken skill of the language. For testing this skill at least 20-25% weightage should be given for intra class activities such as debate, group discussion, extempore, poetry recitation etc to judge their oral competence in the language. Various multi-media kits available have testing facility where standard pronunciation can be recorded and judged. Rubrics for testing all the skills of the language should be provided in the curriculum. Teachers have no clue about testing of the speaking skill like basis for testing, model standard for reference, the method to conduct such tests and level of consideration of variables.

Time is a Determining Factor

As paucity of time is a determining factor in effective teaching methods, its importance could not be neglected. Instead of covering the syllabus in a monotonous routine of lecture method, some innovations in curriculum transactions lead to faster as well as better learning. Students love when routines are broken, they learn with fun. So, use of teaching aids, reinforcement worksheets and multimedia can be effective as a remedy.

Overview Planners to give better time management techniques can be of help. This planner can be organised during summer and winter vacations. This documentation saves the teacher's valuable time in preparing:

- Weekly lesson plans
- Progress reports
- Assessment and evaluations plans
- Home work schedule
- Project work plans
- Send-home material
- Yearly records
- Teaching portfolios
- Guide to curriculum for school administrators (unit wise break up of the syllabus)
- Preparation of presentations

Curriculum designers and policy makers should also consider internal choice in completing the units mentioned in the textbooks. For example, it could be mentioned

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appropriately in the curriculum that out of the given eight units, a minimum of six need to be taught. This would give an official liberty to the teachers to give priority to qualitative teaching instead of quantitative teaching. Creativity, time management and teaching ideas if mentioned in the curriculum can provide enormous help in this issue.

Improving Communicative Competence

The main reason for the lack of communicative competence can be deduced as lack of focus on listening activities. Nobody can speak a language without listening to it. Students are lacking speaking abilities because they have not been properly guided in listening skill. Communication in English has been playing a major role in business world too.

With the advent of Information Revolution, it has become much easier to teach English in order to develop communicative competence. A special stress in curriculum reforms should be paid in this area of the language. Teaching and testing, both in schools and in the national examinations, focused mainly on two language skills: writing and reading. Listening and speaking are found to be much neglected in the classroom. This is a major concern as it is through speech that children learn to organise their thinking and focus their ideas (Lyle, 1993).

The neglect of oral communication practice in the classroom will hinder such an important language learning foundation to emerge and severely obstruct the development of other aspects of language skills (Zhang & Kortner, 1995).

The essence of modern languages is to be found in the four Cs of communication, culture, context and confidence. Ideally all students should be able to communicate at some level in culturally appropriate ways in specific real contexts with confidence, and to do so with positive enjoyment and enthusiasm. The teaching and testing of the four skills need to be well balanced in weightage with proper guidelines for each of them mentioned in the curriculum.

Change in Instruction Methods

Instruction method is generally teacher centric leaving no space for any sort of interaction between students and teachers. The teacher-centred teaching style discourages the students. Classrooms are crowded and authorities equate noise to indiscipline. This further discourages teachers from doing any communicative activities. Instead, the students need to respond to closed questions only. These techniques are good to keep students busy but their effectiveness as a learning tool is limited because of the lack of interaction. Consequently, the students get bored and lose concentration when they have nothing to use. Teachers teach English mechanically and students learn mechanically too without being meaningfully involved in the generation of their own knowledge. In this way, the teaching and learning activities become teacher centred instead of resulting in

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effective communicative and linguistic competence. The teaching methodology should be changed from teacher-centric to student-centric. Student Talk Time should be higher than Teacher Talk Time. Teachers should explore more and innovative methods of teaching and learning instead to avoiding them. Updating teachers on the latest trends and discoveries in the field through regular workshops can prove beneficial.

Teachers' Self-assessment of the Situation

Most teacher participants admitted that they do not integrate technology in their teaching methodology. Most of teachers reported not using Integrated Communication Technology to support the English Curriculum. ICT use in English was generally limited to showing power point presentation to students. Little use of ICT for research purposes or for creative uses was reported by teachers. They felt directionless regarding its use in this area. The boom in information technology, the global collection of interconnected computer networks, is both informative and instructive. The Internet has become one of the most powerful resources in accessing information. This can be utilized to our advantage in education. Important websites and teachers' blog should be mentioned in the curriculum to provide support to teachers.

Some teachers stress so much on the play way technique that their students wanted nothing else except activities. Moreover, they lost class control and gave an impression of indiscipline which was taken in a negative sense by the authorities. So, they lacked spirit to organize such activities. It is recommended that the school authorities should change their age old mind sets that if a teacher is there in the class it has to be pin drop silence. Now, we talk of interactive teaching where Student Talk Time is greater than Teacher Talk Time. They should respect the freedom of a language class.

A Word of Caution

A word of caution to the teachers also, there should be a judicious mix of stirring and settling activities. A little imbalance might hamper the pace of progress of the class. Teachers could utilize the language laboratories for the purpose of organising noisy activities. In the fast changing world, it should be made mandatory to set up language laboratories in the schools so that students get an exposure to the environment conducive to acquisition of all the four skills of language. It must have three sections namely-multimedia section, library section and dramatic play centre. The multimedia section for the use of computer related activities, library section focuses on literary events related to reading and writing and the dramatic play centre caters to enhancing communicative competence.

The teachers who are aware of the concept of linguistic and communicative competence are at crossroads as to which approach would be more suitable for their students. Rivers (1964) suggests the concepts of informed eclecticism which is a combination of teaching methods and approaches designed to strike a balance between linguistic competence and

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communicative competence. Teacher should remember that language production and comprehension are normally carried out in varieties of knowledge forms like conscious knowledge (acquired from others) and tacit knowledge (unconscious). Tacit knowledge cannot normally be verbalized but forms the basis of many skills, including verbal ones (Klein, 1986: 40-41). Much of our language proficiency is of tacit form (i.e. the rules that define word order in a sentence or use of articles in English). So a judicious mix of both the approaches would be the ideal solution for the problem. But informed decisions can be made by the teachers if they know the pros and cons of both the concepts. In this case again, the importance of teachers' orientation sessions cannot be denied.

To Conclude

An evaluation of curricula and textbooks is a pre-requisite for any effective instructional programme. A good curriculum and a good textbook set the standards expected and also provide direction for teaching and learning strategies in the classroom.

The teachers need a clear framework of curriculum, models for pronunciation, a scheme of work and teaching ideas. The plight of teachers is grim. No attention is being paid to either to the qualitative improvement to their professional standards or to the resources they work with. Teachers are not even being treated as out-patients and yet the reality of their condition is for treatment in intensive care.

The only way to arrest the decline in English is to help the teachers as much as possible. It is not a task that can be ignored. It requires careful management at planning and implementation level.

Proceeding step by step with a premeditated course of action, there is no reason why English should not be well taught in the schools and why there should not be a cohort of competent, confident English teachers.

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