Challenges in Language Acquisition in ESL Classrooms

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Language acquisition begins at birth. When a person is born, they grow up listening to their mother tongue and with learning and hearing their mother tongue spoken all around them. With age, there comes an understanding of the language as they slowly understand and speak in the language that they grow accustomed to hearing. Thus, a person's first language is something they learn naturally.

If a person is born into a family where English is not or spoken, then they need to learn the language separately outside their home. Since learning a second language itself is challenging, learning English in a country where English is not the native language is even tougher. As it is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, and as it increasingly gains ground to become the preferred language of employment and social success, the importance of English cannot be understated. English is spoken in 101 countries, more than any other language in the world [1]. For any student, or any professional plying his trade on the International stage, knowledge of the English language is crucial for being able to communicate with clients, partners, or any other interested party.

In such a situation, the ideal thing for any person to do is to find a solution to meet the challenge, a way by which they can learn to grasp the nuances of the language and understand its direct and implicit meanings. With that in mind, the best solution for these individuals is to take a course in the English Language. Schools all over the world have identified the need for teaching English and have opened ESL courses. This is one of the ways by which the challenge can be met in acquiring proficiency in ESL classrooms.

The obvious question then is what is ESL? Defined as English for speakers of other languages, ESL programs are designed to help those individuals who are non-native English speakers to improve their oral and written understanding of the language. Usually, these students are learning the language as their second, third, and in some cases, even as their fourth language. In such instances, these students take courses where they can learn English as their Second Language (ESL), from teachers specialized to teach them, and who are often bilingual to be able to communicate with them better. "Oftentimes, these programs are located in English-speaking countries to give students a real immersion experience. There are ESL Programs that can be found in home countries as well." [2]

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Along with the language itself, the structure of these courses often involves other subjects as well, such as Mathematics, Science, and History. These subjects are taught in such a way that non-native speakers will get a firmer grasp of terminology. "Many programs teach mathematics, science, and history classes in a way that is easier for students who are non-native speakers." [3] It allows them to enjoy a more immersive experience -- not only learning the language but getting a feel of it in the same manner that Native English speakers did when they first learned it.

So then, why is there a need for ESL courses? Often, people question the actual need for an ESL course. Most people feel that since they can pick up enough of the English language to get on a day-to-day basis, they do not need to study it separately. The answer to this persistent question is a simple. A large majority of students studying the course do so with the explicit aim of preparing for a life in a country where English is the official spoken language. Since any country brings with it a distinct culture and a separate set of expectations along with it, a person moving there find themselves implanted in a whole new world they are quite unfamiliar in terms of culture, a different sort of people, the way of doing things, and most importantly a whole new language.

In such a situation if a person does not have a proper grasp of the language it is easy to become completely overwhelmed. The best thing then, to avoid such an extreme condition, is to have adequate knowledge of the language to at least be able to understand what people are saying to them, learn how to ask questions, and read signs and notices strung up on the street. Apart from this, there is obviously the need to be able to conduct business fruitfully. So, a grasp of the language indeed goes a long way.

The development of ESL courses has worked wonders, as the number of students learning English has gone up exponentially than in the past. As the knowledge and requirement of English increases in the business world, so does the need for tailoring better courses to meet the need. But as is common with any solution to a problem, nothing comes without its own challenges. The ESL course is no different.

Surrounding the course, are challenges faced by the participants on both sides - The teacher, and the students. This brings up the need to find a balance between the two which can be achieved by the ability of the teacher to explain the intricacies of the English language in the classroom to students who are attending the course is crucial, thus paving the way for a smooth acquisition of the language in the students as they develop proficiency in both the language and the coursework. There are several challenges a person may encounter when it comes to ESL courses. They arise due to several reasons. For a thorough understanding of the challenges faced in language acquisition and proficiency in ESL classrooms, it is necessary to elaborate on these challenges and their source. One of the challenges encountered includes Communication. It is not difficult to realize that in a classroom where language is being taught, the first and foremost difficulty that can and does arise is that of communication between the teacher and the students. Unless there is a thorough comprehension of all the connotations and nuances of what is being said and taught by the teacher, the entire course will be rendered pointless. It is important that the teacher in question be bilingual, or at least has a communicative knowledge if not fluency of the native language of his students. Otherwise, the explanation of the course is lost in translation, and the course itself would be rendered

ineffective. This problem can especially be seen in a classroom where the students are from mixed backgrounds, thus speaking different languages. While it is possible to overcome this challenge, it is not easy and depends on the skills and ability of the teacher to communicate with each student. "Support and maintenance of the young ELLs home language contribute to the learning of English. High-quality programs have teachers that find ways to use the child's home language to display respect and provide scaffolding to increase first language proficiency." [4]

Another major problem faced by students when trying to acquire a language in an ESL classroom is the fact that they are put into a group. In this scenario, it is not always possible for the teacher to concentrate on each student. As a result, if a student is not vocal about not understanding a particular portion of the coursework, then it might never be clarified, and they can get left behind. This is because each part of the coursework is designed in such a manner that it has an influence over the next part. Without knowledge and a clear understanding of a particular portion, it may be problematic and even impossible for the student to move on and understand what is being taught next. There is no place for guesswork in an ESL course, and as a result of being in a group, it is highly likely that a student gets left behind for not raising doubts at a crucial juncture. Due to limited class participation and even more limited lecture test performance drops as no learning takes place.

"Small group and individual instruction allow the teacher to focus in on the needs and levels of each ELL. High-quality programs provide many opportunities for this style of instruction through the use of group time activities and centers. This individualized instruction creates an avenue for needed differentiation to occur." [5] In an individual face-to-face teaching method, problems of this nature are minimized.

Yet another challenge that may arise in an ESL classroom is the transition between different sections of the course being taught. For a new student, the newness of the entire experience of learning a completely new language can sometimes be quite overwhelming, and in such a situation, it is not uncommon to face problems. However, when a student is immersed in a particular part of the course and has understood it, and if the transition to the next part is not a smooth one, they get left behind. Then, there will be no way for them to be able to understand what comes next. A jarring transition, which does not necessarily follow the logic, can be damaging to a student's understanding of a subject. The transition, therefore, needs to be a logical process with the next step coming smoothly after a previous one, and which is at least connected to it in some manner.

Previous incorrect knowledge is one of the hardest barriers to overcome in an ESL classroom. In a situation where a person is learning a language for the first time, there is no problem if they do not know anything. The purpose of the entire course is to help them learn it from the base roots and base their foundations on this new learning, before building their knowledge on that. However, if a person comes in armed with knowledge which is incorrect, then it is far more difficult. Be it from television shows, or any other source, a person may feel they have a certain understanding of the language. In such a situation, there is a huge chance that what they know is not actually correct. Thus, their foundation is already built but not strong for they would not have learned the right thing. Also, prior to their course in an ESL classroom, the focus of their previous instruction would have been on English grammar and other aspects of standard usage. Essentially, learning English would

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have been viewed as a scholarly skill for the purposes of reading and writing, and not as a living language used in everyday conversations and expression of opinion. They would have learned English in classrooms where the main pedagogical style was didactic, with the students being inactive learners. They would have rarely had the chance to use English in conversation in the classroom, and there was no pressure for them to be competent in this. In an ESL classroom, the learning environment is highly regulated since students tend to make an effort to speak and write proper English when they are being monitored. However, since learning the English language needs practice outside the classroom, students find it difficult to relate their classroom learning with what they hear outside because outside of the classroom they hear the language being spoken in a different way. This makes it even more difficult for them to learn correct English.

Many learning materials are used in the learning process. Books may be a necessary material, but they are not enough by themselves and need to be augmented by other tools such as Audio tool. When a student sees a sound symbol in a book, he or she may not know how to pronounce it and will sometimes even go on to become teachers of the English language without ever knowing the correct pronunciation. Students also study unsystematically. They have books to read but they can't tell how certain words are said. They may hear the right pronunciation of words from the teacher or from a native speaker of English but when they often learn the wrong things when they watch English movies because movies contain slang and dialects which are incorrect and inappropriate.

"One implication of this interconnection between language and content is that classrooms will need to evolve to devote much more time to student discourse." [6] In such a situation, the burden falls on the teacher and the student, to unlearn what they incorrectly know, and replace it with the correct form of the language. To do this takes time and effort, something which not all people have in abundance.

Another problem is that ESL students often lack cultural references that are taken for granted by teachers take for granted. ESL classrooms abound with students who not only have language barriers but also come from diverse educational backgrounds and culture-specific learning styles. ESL teachers can be more effective if they gain some knowledge about the learning styles of different cultures and then set realistic learning goals to reduce stress on both the student and the teacher.

Finally, one of the most important and toughest challenges that students face in language acquisition in the classroom is actually applying language learned in their daily lives. While it is not a simple task for a person to learn a whole new language, it is still possible that they are able to do so within the confines of a classroom because a classroom is a safe cocoon for learning. There is a network of people present to support the learning process but this conspicuously absent in the outside world because it is very likely that the person they come across outside may not be understanding if they hesitate in speaking the language. They also have to cross the barrier of understanding colloquial terms, the accents, writing difficulties, and problems of interpretation.

Thus, all of these needs to be included in the coursework, and it can be confusing for people to hear and understand the different forms that the language can take. The difference between

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learning the theory from the safety of a classroom and applying it in the modern world is altogether stark and not something that can be crossed easily. One way this challenge can be dealt with is by introducing the idea of peer interactions, as it helps to deal with the situation, and not leaving education one-dimensional. "Peer scaffolding can be very productive for supporting ELLs. High-quality programs offer time and learning opportunities that support the use of peer interactions. Strategies such as Think-Pair-Share, and cooperative learning increase the opportunities for peer interactions in a structured way." [7]

These are, in short, the major challenges that a person comes across when trying to learn the English Language in an ESL classroom. While these challenges are being dealt with at an individual level, despite the progress on the courses of ESL, there are several barriers that are yet to be overcome in the classroom. With more time, English as a Second Language classroom will expand even further, and as it expands there will be more ways it is more likely it will be that the issues are dealt with.

Given the speed of problem-solving in the modern world, it is only a matter of time before these problems too are wiped out, and progress is made on the front of ESL classrooms, helping non-native speakers to enjoy equal opportunities, by providing them with the knowledge of the language. Teaching ESL is akin to any other job since it has its problems too. But by being aware of the challenges and anticipating and preparing for their appearance with pro-active reflection, can minimize the impact of ESL problems on both students and teachers.

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