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**Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Rural Areas and Strategies to Triumph Over**

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**Length of Study Should Help, But Here ...**

Even after years of learning English at school, many students fail to learn the language. They are unable to communicate freely in the language.

After six years of learning English as a subject at school and three years of compulsory English at college, our average Undergraduate cannot speak a correct sentence in English, Write hi, Curriculum Vitae, or even read an English Daily. There is no exaggeration. Complaints such as these are voiced all over the country. Parents, teachers, examiners and employers complain our learner's poor achievement in English (S. C. Sood, 1995: 167).

When they enter college most of the students do not perform well. Even after a decade of learning English in schools students are not able to use it appropriately to meet their needs. They fail to use the language effectively in day to day communication.

This problem is very acute with the students who come from the rural parts. We also notice that English language teachers in rural areas face many problems and come across a variety of challenges that hinder effective teaching and learning of English as a second language. We need to continuously identify these problems and challenges, analyze these in order to remedial steps.

### **Negative Attitude**

Negative attitude toward learning and using English is still prevalent in the rural regions of India. A part of the reason is historical - earlier generations were subjects under the British rule, only some classes of people, a very small number, indeed, learned English with enthusiasm and occupied position of influence authority in British India. We are now a free nation for over 60 years, and yet English has not yet penetrated into our rural parts and the families of first generation learners. However, there certainly is some dramatic change in the last decade. English now enjoys a pre-eminent place in the Western world and those who seek who seek personal and social prosperity, have softened their attitude toward the English language which in the past was viewed with fear suspicion as a symbol of servitude. Unfortunately, this dynamic change and transition have not yet led to change in teaching and learning strategies in the rural parts.

The attitude of the rural students can neither be called completely negative nor completely positive. Their attitude is paradoxical. They like English and, in this sense, their attitude is positive. However, they find English very difficult. They believe that English is too difficult a language for them to learn.

Their own attitude towards their ability and capacity is also negative. This negative attitude along with their attitude towards their English language teachers, whom they are afraid of as symbol of authority, de-motivates them.

Their negative attitude is stronger than their positive attitude and obviously it is a great challenge for the teacher to break off the negative attitude of the students and teach the language effectively.

### **Negative Attitude Exhibited by Teachers**

Some teachers have a negative attitude towards their students. They are always of the opinion that these students are dull and can never improve. They do not assign them any challenging tasks, complaining that these students would not do such tasks. Due to this attitude of the teachers, the students are not given enough opportunities to show or develop their potential and this lack of opportunity again is a challenge to the teachers.

Besides, the teachers' attitude is highly authoritarian and sometimes they even threaten the students with punishments. Teachers in the rural schools are overwhelmingly strict and as a

result the students are afraid of them. This prevents the existence of a healthy positive student-teacher relationship. The negative attitude of the students towards the language, the teacher and the learning of it poses challenge to the teacher.

### **Good News! Attitudes Can Be Changed!**

However, nothing is impossible. Attitude is a modifiable factor. Negative attitude of the students can be changed if proper attempts are made. The teacher has to develop a friendly attitude and be kind towards the students. This will make the students develop a positive attitude towards the teacher. If a healthy relationship is maintained between the teacher and the students, then the students' negative attitude towards the teacher would change to a positive one.

Learners come to the English classes with a positive attitude to English. It is the duty of the teachers to encourage and sustain this attitude. Very often teachers are responsible for changing such positive attitudes, through their excessive zeal for discipline, perfection and accuracy. Perhaps here they need to take a cue from human nature psychology which regards a relaxed atmosphere as a pre-condition for any learning to take place. A healthy change in teacher's attitude to the learners will go a long way in promoting second language acquisition.

### **Lack of Motivation**

Lack of motivation is another major challenge. In an English language class room in rural areas motivating the learners is the most challenging aspect. If students don't have motivation, then the teaching-learning process becomes a one-sided show. It is the sole responsibility of the teacher to motivate the students. One way to motivate them is through a gentle and firm emphasis of the importance English in the present day world.

Students do not invest as much time in learning English as they do in learning their specialist subjects. One of the reasons is that they don't see English playing a significant role to major in a certain discipline. Any time the students are asked why they are not making effort to improve their English performance; they usually say English is not included for the calculation of percentage of marks for entry into professional colleges, etc. What is missing here is a realization that although performance in English may not be a deciding factor into well paying professional subjects such IT, medicine and other engineering fields, their subsequent success depends upon how well they are skilled in English, the major language of communication around the world in all well paying jobs and careers. In addition, acquisition of additional knowledge depends on the comfort with which a student is able to use English. So, a futuristic perspective is called for here, and the teachers have the responsibility to inculcate this sense in their students.

Separation of knowledge into major and minor or major and support courses in our curriculum adds to the current situation among students for their lack of serious efforts to improve their

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performance in English. As curriculum is also a political tool to achieve preset goals for a society and nation, we may not have much control over the situation here. However, there are some who always seem to have a better vision of themselves of using English in their future career and they try to learn and improve their English. But, then, they are discouraged by the students' culture (of the majority). Any time these students make effort, you can hear others teasing them or laughing at them trying to express their ideas in English. Adult students are particularly too sensitive about their image, so they abandon their goals under the pressure of the inhibitive students' culture.

The solution for this is to adopt a more integrationist approach in offering courses. Specialist subject lecturers, departments and the universities should see clearly the role English plays in their students' academic and professional development.

### **Lack of Aptitude**

There is certainly room to help improve the aptitude of rural students. Most of these may be first-generation college entrants; they have had little real exposure to English in the social context in which they live. Another reason is that the level of English learning/teaching is not adequate in their schools. In some schools, the students are never taught English at the lower classes (up to VII or VIII standard).

In order to promote the aptitude of the students proper steps can be taken. Students' ability to discriminate the sounds of the new language, the ability to break the stream of speech into constituents and to generalize about its structure, and the ability to remember its words are some of the aspects that need to be taken care of. Auditory discrimination is an important element here since the phonology of Indian languages, such as Tamil, including their supra-segmental features are quite different from English features. Without some core minimum ability, no second language learning is possible; from this point of view everyone has basic aptitude. The inherent propensity can be further developed in a learner in order to have better control over the language being learned. So the students need to be given enough opportunity to develop their capability.

### **Teaching Pronunciation**

One of the biggest difficulties a teacher faces when teaching English as a second language is to inculcate proper pronunciation in the speakers. The English language has a number of characteristic features which most foreign speakers do not imbibe readily. Though teaching of pronunciation is a complicated task, it is one of the most significant features of English Language Teaching.

The first and foremost thing is that teachers should be conscious of their own pronunciation. Teachers should describe the pronunciation and tell the learners what are the places and manner of articulation involved in the production of speech sounds and show how those sounds are

physically articulated. In higher classes, teachers can give the learners the phonetic or phonemic symbols. But often mimicry and imitation play a crucial role in achieving success in pronunciation. The sound system of each of the world's languages is quite distinct, yet each language shares universal sound features with all the other languages of the world.

Learners should be exposed to a wide variety of dialects and different pronunciations. Learners must be given enough opportunity to produce large quantities of sentences by themselves. Learners' speech must be recorded and they should be made to listen to the recordings. This provides the learner an opportunity to listen to his own pronunciation and make it possible for him to identify for himself where he goes wrong and enables him to correct himself.

At the college level, before teaching the sounds, the teacher can give an idea to the students about the sound system of English and the areas of difficulty in learning English pronunciation as follows:

- English is not spelt phonetically. There is an exceptional disparity between spelling and pronunciation.
- Assimilation: A sound is influenced and changed by a neighbouring sound.
- Word accent and rhythm
- Silent letters
- Homophones.
- Change of pronunciation with the change in number, i.e. singular and plural.
- Onomatopoeia: combinations of sounds in words that resemble or suggest what words really refer to.

### **Unpredictability of Pronunciation in English**

These areas of difficulty in English pronunciation show that pronunciation in English is unpredictable. There are many areas like this which pose no less confusion to the speaker of English for whom it is not the mother tongue. That makes the job of the English teacher more challenging. However, a teacher with a sound knowledge about English pronunciation can teach sounds effectively. All that you need is a sound knowledge of sounds, special training in phonetics and, of course, and a little patience.

### **Teaching Grammar**

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The fact that English grammar has its own set of complicated rules and regulations makes it a tough language to conquer. A good number of students struggle with these rules, and cannot really understand many of the principles on first or second reading. To make matters worse, English itself has several varieties. Therefore, students may find the Queen's English quite different from American English.

### **Physical Condition of the Class Room**

Another major challenge is the physical condition of the class room. Whatever method is used or technique followed, good learning would not take place and the teacher could not attain her goal, unless the physical condition of the learning content is favourable. Classrooms rural schools in rural areas are not well lit or spacious enough to accommodate the students and the seating arrangement too is not adequate when compared to the situation urban schools. This bad condition of the classrooms in these schools de-motivates the learners and this, in turn, becomes a challenge to the teachers.

A good learning atmosphere would result in good and quick learning of the language. So it is important that the classrooms are spacious enough, well-lit, airy and healthy. The stake holders, educationists and the administrators should be ready to take up the issue and allot funds to keep the classrooms in rural schools in good condition. Government of India has recently made constitutional amendment making education one of the fundamental rights. So, hopefully, the present situation will soon change in a noticeable way.

### **Large Class**

Another major challenge is the strength of the class. In many schools in rural areas the classes are quite big, having more than forty students. Besides, sometimes due to lack of sufficient number of teachers, the classes are combined and the number of students in a class goes up to seventy or eighty. Those teachers who have to cope with classes that contain 50 or more learners are, therefore, often ill-prepared to deal with the situation in which they find themselves in schools.

Students in any class fall under different levels of achievement relating to English speakers, and this is applicable almost every subject. Mixed ability class is our typical class situation in India. These categories can be classified into the below average, average and above average students. All these groups have to be considered in the teaching processes so that no one is left behind.

Teacher would agree that teaching a small class is easier and more efficient than teaching a large class. Teachers can overcome the challenges posed by large size of their classes if they engage the students in activities that keep all of the students interested and participating with the goal of improving their communication skills. Activities like small group discussions, debates, and

language games can be conducted in large classes in order to make the class both lively and interesting.

### **Lack of Exposure**

The students from the rural back ground do not interact in English. Most of them have been studying in Tamil medium schools. In their lower classes they have studied English as a subject and have never made use of it for communication. Their exposure to the English language is very little. This limited exposure to the second language poses a big challenge to the teacher. The only source of English for them is their teacher. The teacher too makes use of L1 often, in order to enable the student understand the contents she presents to the class.

The students find themselves lacking in confidence and courage to stand on their own. They feel shy and are hesitant to actively participate in the class. The reason for the students' shyness to speak a second language with their peers actually emanates from their recognition that they may commit errors. We need to make them realize that none ever speaks any language perfectly without errors all the time. All those, including their teachers, who now speak English, have committed and still commit errors in English. Their recognition is a good asset, but their failure to overcome their shortcoming is a disincentive to learn to speak and write the language without many errors. As they are not ready to interact in the class without hesitation, the English classes become a monologue with the teacher as the performer and the students become inactive and bored spectators.

There is no good interaction between the teacher and the learners and this is one of the limitations that challenges the English teacher and prevents the teacher from being successful in her attempt to enable the students master English.

### **Other Challenges that are Encountered in Teaching English in Rural Areas**

Some teachers are unable to translate English words into students' local language for good understanding. There is also lack of good and graded translation materials as teaching aids. To tackle this challenge the teachers need to improve their vocabulary in the local language. In addition they can give simple explanation to those words instead of trying to give exact meanings in the mother tongue. Teachers can even use certain objects, actions and activities in class to explain certain words and phrases. Pictures and other visual materials like photographs can also be used to overcome this problem. Teaching language through visual aids is one of the innovative methods used by the teacher to teach language in class room.

Teachers can distribute visual aids to students by dividing them into various groups. The students can then be given stipulated time to extract relevant information from the given object/visual. After that, these learners can be called upon to speak about the visual aids given to them.

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This method expands the analyzing capacity of the students. By looking at the picture, the learner should think and come out with innovative thoughts which also help in learning language by creating fun-filled environment around them. The teacher acts as facilitator who motivates the students to talk freely.

### **Formal, Informal and Non-formal Training for Teachers**

These exacting and tricky challenges make it necessary for any teacher of English to have a formal training in teaching practices and methods. It is not enough to have sufficient skills in listening and understanding the language. Even a native speaker of the English language requires methodical and intensive training program to qualify as a good teacher of English as a first/second/foreign language. Many of the skills like understanding specific problems related to particular regions and building basic communication skills in students, etc., can only be acquired through formal learning. At the same time, informal and non-formal learning also have their own relevance and teachers should see such self-training on their own. Teachers have to be prepared for the most bizarre mistakes, and need to know how to handle these delicate situations without affecting their own self-esteem.

Teacher's inability to take full charge of the class especially in unruly situations is another aspect that we need to deal with.

### **Hours of Instruction in English**

In addition to the above constraints, teachers have very limited teaching hours, mostly from three to six hours per week. This is not enough to teach the language elaborately giving emphasis for the basic elements of the language. This is a problem that has to be tackled very carefully. Of course, extra classes can be taken but this is not always feasible and advisable, since it depends on the convenience and wish of the teacher as well as the students. College authorities also have a say in organizing such extra class work!

By using conventional methods, maximum portion of class time will be wasted in exercises and drilling, dealing with grammar and pronunciation which take away a large portion of class time. These methods were mostly used to develop basic skills of language learning such as Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing as independent skills. By following these methods listening and speaking skills were neglected as students could not put their oral language in practice.

Another best advice could be that teachers can teach the students how to learn on their own. The best teacher always inspires. So, the teacher should inspire the students to learn on her own and especially language can be learnt anywhere outside the class too. This possibility should be emphasized.



## Several Other Issues and Challenges

One more challenge: Majority of the teachers are unfamiliar with the latest developments in ELT pedagogy. To overcome this problem teachers development programmes should be conducted at regular intervals. Teachers can be kept informed continuously of the latest and recent developments in ELT pedagogy through newsletters, notices, and brochures of different forums for teachers. Educational institutions must subscribe to journals on teaching pedagogy and teacher development. Teachers of English should be encouraged to become members of Teacher Associations which function to provide initial and in-service teacher training, to promote high professional standards, offer opportunities for personal language development, and establish professional journals for members. Such associations offer a forum for the exchange of ideas, resources and information and this would keep the English teachers informed of new techniques, theories and approaches of teaching English as a Second Language.

It is important that ESL teachers have a formal training in teaching practices and methods. It is not enough to have sufficient skills in listening and understanding the language. A methodical and intensive training program is necessary for a good teacher of English as a second language.

One more challenge relates to the suitability of the syllabus. Teachers have voiced concern relating the mismatch between students' level of understanding, teaching context, available resource materials and aids in relation to requirements and goals of the syllabus they are asked to implement. The syllabus is always prepared by a committee the members of which may not be usually the ones who handle these classes. Teachers feel that the involvement of teachers who handle the classes in the process of designing teaching and testing materials is a necessary condition for effecting meaningful changes in curricula. A curriculum is eventually what is practiced in the classroom. It is the mass of teachers who give the document called 'syllabus' a reality and it is they who convey to students an attitude towards learning and impart strategies for studying and preparing for examinations. Teachers who actually handle the classes, therefore, need to be involved in the curriculum and development process. This requires that the authorities should scout around a lot through the districts to identify qualified and skilled teachers from the large population of teachers who actually handle a specific class for which the curriculum and syllabus are being developed.

Since teaching of English, or any subject for that matter, is examination-oriented, students learn English only as a subject rather than as a language. They are also unable to put their learning into practice due to lack of a favorable environment. The best solution to this could be to make the students aware of the fact that languages are not to be learnt as other subjects but have to be learnt in order to use them in day to day life in a comfortable manner. Teaching methods that could help the students improve their communicative skills have to be adopted in the classrooms. Now, due to the world wide growing trends in English, teachers should give more emphasis to

the communicative approach rather than the lecture mode. Their main goal is to make the students effective communicators in English, both inside and outside of the class room.

To achieve this, they should involve the students to participate more in classroom activities so that they will acquire adequate command over speaking skills. To create this environment, teachers can conduct group discussions, where students are supposed to speak only in English. Here, they can give their views, ideas and thoughts in English due to which they develop the habit of speaking fluently in English like they do in their mother tongue. Debates too play an important role to improve the speaking ability of the students, both at school and at higher level. This also helps them to organize their thoughts and ideas in a specific way while speaking.

Role-plays are another important task that can improve the students' performance in English. To make English classes more lively and interesting, teachers can make use of activities like group discussion, debates, and role plays and use computers and other electronic gadgets in the ESL classrooms. This would also help them to overcome some of the challenges they face in the ESL classroom and enable successful teaching.

At present the challenges visible before the English language teachers at the higher secondary level in rural areas are diverse and it is necessary for the teachers and students to meet the demands of the day in creative ways.

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