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ELT in Yemen and India - The Need for Remedial Measures

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Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate the ELT scenario in both Yemen and India at the school level with an aim to project /highlight the problems of both the situations and present some suggestions that, once carried out, can improve the teachers' performance and thereby enhance the standard of teaching of English in the said contexts.

Key words: ELT problems; remedial measures; teachers' performance

Introduction

Yemen is a monolingual country with Arabic as the mother tongue of most of its nationals. English is a foreign language in Yemen. It is taught for three years in preparatory schools (classes 7-9) and for three years more at the secondary stage (classes 10-12) in government schools. Thus, most of the students will have studied English for six years before they enter the tertiary stage.

Like learners in many other countries where English is taught as a foreign language, Yemeni learners of English are exposed to English in the classroom, but communicate in their own language outside. Therefore, they cannot communicate well in English either inside or outside the classroom even after completing the tertiary stage of education. They also find it difficult to cope with lectures given in English in the college.

On the other hand, India is a multilingual country with English as the second language of most of its nationals. English is taught for three years at the upper primary stage (classes 6-8) , and for four more years at the secondary stage (classes 9-10 and +1- +2) in government schools (the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2000, quoted in Aslam 2003). Thus, most of the students will have studied English for seven years before they come to the tertiary stage.

Unlike Yemeni students, Indian students are exposed to English outside the classroom as well. There are many occasions when an Indian student communicates with a shopkeeper, for example, in English. However, students do also communicate among themselves in their mother tongue/ native language outside the classroom.

One problem common to both the situations is that teachers of English teach it in a traditional way, i.e., they just focus on teaching grammatical items in a graded manner. The learners receive knowledge alone of English usage, thus they fail to communicate/ speak fluently in English outside the classroom. The poor linguistic ability of school leavers necessitates a thorough change / improvement in the teaching techniques, among other things at the pre-tertiary stage of education. Concrete efforts for improving the English teaching situation in India have been made.

In the preface of his book *Teaching English in Changing India*, K.P. Thakur states that a “Study group on the teaching of English was appointed by the Ministry of Education, Government of India in 1967 under the chairmanship of Prof. V.K. Gokak to suggest the extent of the knowledge of English which a student should have at the end of the secondary stage with a view to maintaining standards”. However, no committee has been formed /appointed for such a purpose in Yemen. This shows that English is given greater attention in India than in Yemen.

Brief History of English Teaching in Yemen

Yemen: A Historical Overview

The northern part of Yemen was ruled by the Ottomans for four centuries or so. Their rule came to an end in 1914 when the Turks were defeated in the First World War. The Imam's reign of the northern part of the country continued for 44 years (1918-1962). During that time, people were deprived of basic education. A good number of them were illiterate. On the other hand, the southern part of Yemen came under British control in 1839. The British set up some schools to educate the people and teach them English. A good number of Yemenis acquired the language and served as interpreters as well as clerks in the British offices opened in Aden then.

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The northern and southern parts of the country were declared republics after the revolutions that broke out on September 26, 1962 and October 14, 1963 in the northern and southern parts respectively. The two parts i.e. "Yemen Arab Republic" (YAR) or North Yemen, and "People's Democratic Republic of Yemen" (PDROY) or South Yemen, were united on May 22, 1990, which is a historical day for all Yemenis.

Whereas the British introduced the use of English through direct contact and by establishing government schools during their rule of South Yemen, in North Yemen, English was introduced as a school subject only during the school year 1963-1964. Following this, the Yemeni government started hiring teachers from countries like Egypt and Sudan to teach English in both the urban and rural schools.

The Importance of English in Yemen

English is the most widely used medium of communication in higher education, business and medicine at the international level. No developing country can ignore the role of English in improving its international profile and prominence. Yemen is no exception. "From the 80s onwards, the Yemeni government made it a point to provide equal educational opportunities to all Yemenis irrespective of their sex and age" (Al-Ahdal, 2008, p. 3). It established the policy of sending students abroad (Arabic and English-speaking countries). It also experienced the expansion of its business transactions with other countries in the world.

With the advancement in business, science and technology, English has become very important and the number of foreign visitors, teachers and workers in Yemen has kept increasing steadily. Yemenis need English not only when they go abroad for academic and business purposes, but also when they have to interact with non-Arabic speaking visitors for various purposes.

There is, indeed, a dire need for teaching and learning English in Yemen for many reasons. Given below are some of these reasons as stated by Bose (2001):

- 1 Yemen with its rich, ancient culture is becoming a major attraction for tourists from all over the world. English will help boost the country's tourism industry.
- 2 Higher Education in Yemen is expanding and there is a need for offering advanced courses in the field of science and technology. This entails the increasing use of English in higher education.
- 3 The number of Yemeni students going to countries like UK, USA, Malaysia and India for higher studies is increasing and they need proficiency in English.
- 4 The trade relations of Yemen with other countries are increasing and there is a

growing need for English in international trade (pp. 15-16).

It is also a fact that the world's most widely surfed or cited journals are either published in English or translated into English. Thus Yemenis, be they inside or outside Yemen, need to access these English sources of knowledge to pursue their self-development.

Problems of Education in Yemen

Sahu (2008) identifies seven components of education; viz., pupils, teachers, parents, classroom, curriculum, textbook and educational institutions. The success of a country's education system depends on how well these components perform together and the degree of integration among them. These concepts provide the frame for this analysis of the educational situation in Yemen.

The economy and education are intimately interlinked. A country's economy, if unstable, will negatively affect various aspects of its education system. This is exactly the case in Yemen. The infrastructure of Yemeni schools and higher academic institutions leaves a lot to be desired. There are no laboratories for scientific experiments in the schools. There are even schools without enough teachers and the teachers available do not have enough teaching aids. Besides, they are low-paid.

All these factors extremely demotivate the teachers. Furthermore, students do not get the necessary encouragement from schools, teachers and parents/ relatives. In most cases, there is no contact between schools and homes. That is, parents do not bother about monitoring the academic progress of their wards. Nor do teachers or school administrators take care to inform parents about the improvement or otherwise of their children. Parents and teachers have to come together and establish a strong bond for the education system to be effective in Yemen.

Other sections of the system, viz., students and parents are also demotivated. The lack of responsiveness of the system to the social and psychological realities of the country is mainly responsible for the increase in cases of drop outs from schools. We see this in many forms:

- 1 Families cannot afford to finance the education of all their children. Some parents cannot afford to give daily pocket money to their children.
- 2 When parents see the phenomenon of the educated unemployed, they start questioning the value of education itself. If spending more than 10 years at school and four years in college does not ensure employment, why not withdraw the child from school?

The mushrooming of expensive private schools in the country too has had a negative impact on the education system. These schools are well-funded and have much better physical infrastructure than government schools. The problem with them is that they are viewed by their

owners only as money spinners not as centres of educational excellence. They extract maximum amounts of money from the parents, but spend a bare minimum on teachers and modern educational equipment. There are even allegations that they encourage corruption in their bid to ensure good results.

Problems of English Education in Yemen

ELT in Yemen has never been a priority item in the educational scheme of things. This is so because of the lack of effective pre-service education (PRESET) and the near non-existence of in-service training of teachers (INSET). In other words, English education at almost all levels in Yemen is facing many problems. The lack of need-based curricula and materials, the shortage of qualified teachers, and the large size and heterogeneity of classes are only some of these. Another problem is the teachers' frequent resort to the students' mother tongue, Arabic, in the English classes.

Lack of Appropriate Instructional Materials

One of the major problems Yemeni teachers and learners of English face at the school level is the non-availability of appropriate materials. Materials in the conventional format like textbooks, supplementary readers, and workbooks are either inadequate or inappropriate. Modern materials like audio-video cassettes, and educational software, the order of the day in advanced countries are not even heard of.

Therefore the teaching and learning of English in Yemen is still at an elementary stage of evolution. English prescribed teaching and learning in Yemen is bound to suffer.

The Crescent English Course

Moreover, the present English textbooks prescribed for Yemeni schools at present, viz., Crescent English Course for Yemen (CECFY), are not exactly altered for the socio-cultural and pedagogic situation in Yemen. Though attractive and well laid-out, the Crescent materials appear to have assumed a level of competence higher than that of the students and teachers. This is because the students' proficiency level continues to be low and the teachers are not trained well enough to adapt the materials at the actual level.

Sahu (2005) points out the following problems with the CECFY:

The books have many shortcomings, which render them unsuitable for most Yemeni learners of English. They are not properly graded for teaching vocabulary and structures; do not take into cognizance the entry behavior (EB) or the 'schema' (background knowledge) of the learners for whom they are intended. There are not enough communicative activities to encourage the learners to participate in

language games involving productive and receptive language skills. The books abound in words like 'air-hostess,' 'otter' and 'emergency' which most learners are not likely to encounter in their immediate environment. This is sure to hinder their ability to make profitable use of the teaching materials and achieve an effective transfer of language skills.

There are also cases of cultural incomprehensibility and inappropriateness in the content of some materials.

Inadequacy of Teachers

Most teachers of English with relevant qualifications enter the profession without adequate training. They are not aware of current trends in ELT. In very many cases, they lack not only the teaching skills, but even basic English language proficiency. Thus, they fail to help their students to speak good English. “Yemeni teachers of English at preparatory and secondary schools face serious problems in Spoken English and therefore they may not be able to teach this skill to their students effectively” (Bernard (1988), cited in Al-Shamiry (2000, p.19).

The teaching profession is at the lower end of career choice in Yemen. Teachers are not given incentives like awards for the “Best Teacher”. A teacher’s salary is just enough to pay rent for a flat, so a teacher’s concern/ priority will be to find an additional job to pay for their living. Education for a higher qualification or training for better on-job performance is not likely to appear important in such a situation. Thus, going to school every day turns to be a chore to be performed. They do not look forward to the class, do not enjoy teaching, nor reflect with pleasure on the class after it is over. Teachers in such a frame of mind will hardly be able to shape the minds and lives of young pupils.

The teacher plays a pivotal role in any system of education. The destiny of any country is largely shaped in its classrooms. Prof. Humayun Kabir rightly observes, “Without good teachers even the best of systems is bound to fail but with good teachers, the defects of the system can largely be overcome.” Hence the need for conducting need-based CPD programmes on a regular basis.

Large and Heterogeneous Classes

What makes the matter worse is that the number of students in a typical class is about 80 or more. The teacher finds it extremely difficult to pay individual attention to students in such a heterogeneous class. Nor does any student get the opportunity to use the language for communication. Below are some of the challenges usually posed by large classes:

- It is extremely difficult if not impossible to remember the names of all students.
- A teacher, if untrained for the situation, may fail to communicate to students or make himself or herself clear to them.

- Marking students' attendance can be very time-consuming and therefore teachers tend to skip it; this can encourage students to escape classes.
- Marking assignments and answer-scripts is usually time –taking.
- Large classes can be hard to control and a teacher may feel more like a bystander than a classroom manager. It is equally hard to give individual attention to students.
- Textbooks and other supplementary materials may not be available in sufficient quantities.

Excessive Resort to the Mother Tongue (MT)

In a situation where teachers are ill-trained, unmotivated, resources are inadequate, and classes are very large, teachers tend to use the MT in the English classroom as it is an option for students' comprehension of teacher talk.

Defective Examination System

There is little interest in base testing and evaluation on a firm scientific foundation in Yemen. For example, the four-year Under-graduate Course of the Faculty of Education, Hodeidah University offers only one paper on “Testing and Evaluation”. No in-service training on Testing and Evaluation has been conducted for teachers. Thus, teachers depend only on their experience and intuitive knowledge of testing and evaluation in developing tests or preparing question-papers.

The tests developed by the teachers are often a reflection of the methods of testing of their teachers. The question-papers they prepare usually test the students' ability to reproduce memorized information. Thus, testing encourages rote-learning.

According to a report submitted by the Cambridge University Local Examination Syndicate (CULES) in 1985, the English examination papers in Yemen are “seriously restricted in the range of skills tested, concentrating mainly on the factual recall of textbook information and sometimes encouraging the repetition of learned model answers based on textbook exercises” (Al-Hamzi ,1999, p.15).

The questions turn out to be quite predictable as well, so the students scour old question papers, prepare answers to them and learn the answers by heart. There is nothing that engages or stimulates the students' mind.

Policy makers should take urgent steps to improve the Yemeni education system. Education is an investment for the progress of future generations, and laying a sound foundation for education in English language is a pressing practical requirement for Yemen's national development. One of the first steps in this direction is to lower the age at which children are introduced to English.

At present, children in government schools start learning English at about the age of 13. There are neurological and psychological reasons why it is advantageous to start FL/SL education much before that age. Standard 3, at which the children will be around 8-years of age seems to be both pedagogically desirable and practically feasible as a starting point for learning EFL/ESL.

Brief History of English Education in India

India: A Historical Overview

When the British arrived in India in the eighteenth century, there were two systems of education, viz., the Tols and the Madrasas. The former was meant for the learning and teaching of the Sanskrit language and the latter for the learning and teaching of Arabic and Persian.

There was a shortage of teachers then. One teacher would teach all the classes in a school, as almost all schools were single-teacher schools. It was in 1813 when English education was first introduced in India. Bose (2005: 2) states that “a section of the British pleaded for English education for various reasons viz. propagating Christianity, regenerating the Hindu society and the introduction of art and sciences of Europe in India”.

The Need for English in India

Due to globalization, the world is becoming narrow and different countries of the world are coming nearer and nearer to each other in many aspects. There is so much scientific and technological advancement in today's world and new technology is coming out in the field of education, science, communication, etc. Literature concerning new innovations and discoveries in all branches of human knowledge is abundantly available in English. In the present scenario, if scientists, engineers, educationists, etc., wish to easily access the various developments taking place in different countries, they have to be proficient in English. Hence, the need for English in India and elsewhere.

English is also the language of opportunity in India. People with good communication skills in India are more welcome to join any sector than those who are not proficient in the language. In other words, proficiency in English has become a prerequisite for employment in any organisation. This is felt by many job seekers /applicants. There is also a high demand for English-knowing people in the Indian market.

Gupta, in her article *ELT in India: A Brief Historical and Current View*, speaks of the need for English and the avenues where ELT is required. To cite her, “There are now call centres that need trainers to equip their employees with communication skills, there are multinationals who have been recruiting marketing staff who needed to be taught Spoken English, there are medical transcription centres which need efficient translators and reporters. Those desirous of immigration to the west need professional help for clearing tests like the IELTS.”

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English in India does also serve a very important social purpose. As India is a multi-lingual country, it is not uncommon / unusual to come across two non- English speaking people from different parts of the country communicating with each other using gestures or body language. In a funny situation like this, English would play a vital role as a link language; thus it is an effective means of social communication.

Chandra (1992) states the following reasons for the continuance of English in India:

1. English is the Lingua Franca of the world;
2. English is the only link language with different parts within the country;
3. English has been declared the State Language in some of the states like Nagaland, Mizoram in the North-East India;
4. English is preferred for inter-state communication particularly in the southern India where linguistic diversities are greater than in any other part of the country;
5. Knowledge of advancements in the fields of Science and Technology made by the western countries is available in English;
6. It is the only language of Trade and Commerce within and without the country ;
7. The west has passed through various revolutions, upheavals and crises whereas the East has remained comparatively static and stagnant, hence backward;
8. English links the Western Thought and Ideas with the East-it is an intellectual link with the West;
9. Knowledge of English enhances status and prospects;
10. India's historical association with England;
11. English-speaking countries' activities and programmes for the promotion of the cause of English in India;
12. A section of Indians, although very small, committed to the cause of English in India;
13. Development of Indian English and the availability of a sizeable literature written in English by Indians. (p 83).]

Problems of English Education in India

Since the Independence Day of India, English has become the official language of the country. Therefore, there has been a lot of expansion of education at all levels. Yet, there are so many problems in the methods of teaching English, among other things, which have resulted in an obvious decline in the standard of teaching English in schools.

Aslam (2003) identifies six problems in effective teaching of English in India, viz.:

- 1- Large classes: The size of our classes at the secondary level (it is true of lower levels also) has now become quite unmanageable. The number of students admitted to class XI and XII ranges from 60 to 100. It becomes very difficult to manage such a class in terms of discipline and teaching.
- 2- Classrooms: The physical condition of the classrooms poses a serious problem. It is closely related to 1 above. Accommodating a huge number of students in a small room does not in any way motivate students to learn. Often they are huddled up together with very little space to sit. At the lower level, the condition is even worse. There are single room schools with a single teacher but five classes (I to V primary). Learning in such situations is highly de-motivating for students; it is equally frustrating for the teacher.
- 3- Lack of facilities: Most of our schools (secondary as well as lower) are terribly ill-equipped in terms of necessary teaching aids-audio and video.
- 4- Trained teachers: There are no or very little opportunities for teachers' in-service training except for occasional seminars and workshops which virtually serve no purpose in their professional development.
- 5- Outdated methods of teaching: This is related to point 4. A large number of teachers are still using traditional methods of teaching. Especially, Grammar-Translation Method is present in one form or the other in schools. Grammar teaching takes much of school timing and the four language skills receive little attention. Oral work is ignored and the whole session is devoted to preparing students for the annual examination. By and large, teachers refuse to change; they resent it, too.
- 6- Textbooks: Until recently majority of schools used unsuitable textbooks. Most of these textbooks contained prose texts, stories and poems written by native speakers of English. They were linguistically difficult and culturally alien. (pp 20-22).]

Based on the researcher's observation of the Indian ELT situation and his informal discussion with some Indian ELT professionals, below are four other problems in the said ELT scenario.

Teachers' Unawareness of ELT Aims

The researcher has had an informal discussion with 5 teachers of English working in a government school in Chandigarh. They all stated that their aim of teaching English is to enable their pupils to get through the final-year examination.

This brings us back to the point of methodology. From the teachers' responses, it is clear that the teachers teach English as a content subject and not as a skill subject. Sharma (2005) rightly observed "The teachers of English should better realise the need and significance of English in the new perspective and should devise means to teach it most effectively within a short time". Teachers should teach English as communicatively as possible and try to improve their students' language skills. They should also keep their students' needs in mind while teaching and not act as examination coaches only.

Defective Examination System

This point is related to the preceding one. In many cases, it is observed that a student can pass the examination without having practical command over the language. Students also ascertain that they need not even read the prescribed textbooks to be able to qualify/ clear the exams. With a faulty examination system, the examination questions are easily predictable and students are in a relaxed state of mind during the examination. Such a "student-friendly" examination system must change if the standard of teaching English in India is to improve. An examination should contain questions that test the students' proficiency in using English and their comprehension of the prescribed topics; less attention should be given to examining the students' content knowledge of the prescribed texts.

School Leavers' Low Proficiency in English.

School leavers in many EFL and ESL countries, and India is no exception, are unable to speak English fluently. The standard of Spoken English of school leavers is deplorably low; this is because no oral tests are conducted in schools, and students are not encouraged to practise English or make oral presentations, nor do teachers involve them in group discussion activities in class.

Teachers' Neglect of Correction Work

When asked about the reason why they pay little attention to the correction of students' work, teachers put the blame on the huge number of students in a class. In fact, this is a very big problem. When students' mistakes remain unchecked/ uncorrected, students continue to be

unaware of these language-related mistakes even after moving to the next standard. Teachers should devote some time for the correction of their students' work. Whenever possible, teachers can give model answers to students to check each others' work. This, in turn, can motivate the students and help them learn from their mistakes. It can also enhance the spirit of peer correction and competition in them.

Conclusion

There are certain measures that ought to be considered for improving the effectiveness of ELT in both Yemen and India. These are:

- I. sensitizing teachers to the harsh realities of the educational environment through appropriate Pre-service training (PRESET) and In-service training (INSET) programmes for aspiring and practicing teachers respectively,
- II. quality control at the recruitment level of English teachers through rigorous proficiency testing,
- III. augmenting physical infrastructure and pedagogic resources in the form of books, cassettes , computers, etc.
- IV. encouraging non-formal means of teacher development through voluntary teacher organisations and , most importantly providing for continuing education and qualification improvement programmes for practicing teachers,
- V. the stage at which English is first introduced in schools should be lowered. English can thus be introduced in class 3 i.e. when the student is at the age of 7 or 8.
- VI. schools should adopt the streaming system .That is , above-average students should be put in one group and average as well as below-average students in another. This can solve the problem of large and mixed-ability classes.
- VII. teachers should be familiarized with action research so that they can , on their own, solve the problems that might crop up in the class in the course of their teaching,
- VIII. teachers must correct the homework and class-work of the students on a regular basis,
- IX. for classroom teaching to improve, good and suitable methods should be devised. Teachers should be trained to adopt learner-centredness through the use of pair work and group work activities,

- X. examination system should be improved and not only be theory-based. Examinations should not enhance rote-learning.
- XI. to improve the students' language skills, teachers and whenever possible parents should be encouraged to speak to their students /children in English,
- XII. existing textbooks should be revised from time to time in such a way that they remain linguistically tackleable and culturally suitable to the learners.

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