

An Overview of Tagore's Approach to Teach English as A Second Language

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Abstract: Rabindranath Tagore, a versatile genius, who put forward his philosophy of education both in paper and in practice, came with an approach, unique in every aspect, to teach budding minds in his asramite school in Santiniketan where Tagore redefined learning goals, learning environment, teaching strategies, curriculum and assessment techniques. During his role as a teacher in this school, Tagore developed course books for the pupils viz., *Enreji Sopan (Steps to English)*, *Enreji Sruti Siksha (Listening & Learning English)*, and *Enreji Sahaj Siksha (Easy Learning English)* to teach English as a second language. These books record Tagore's approach to teach English with necessary instructions for the teachers to follow. This article draws upon theoretical perspectives of learning a language in connection with the strategies adopted by Tagore in English language class.

Keywords- Tagore's Approach, Strategies, Teaching English, Second Language

INTRODUCTION:

Rabindranath Tagore, known for his towering contribution both in theory and practice in the ambit of education, ventured into trying out methods and techniques of teaching English for the beginners with equal emphasis on the development of four-fold language skill, viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing. It has always been a challenging task for the teachers of English as a second language to enable the pupils to acquire the language skills with same rate of success, as is the case with the mother tongue. Tagore, as a teacher in his asramite school at Santiniketan, forayed into the experiment of classroom teaching strategies of English as a second language. Later on Tagore published some books on teaching English namely, *Enreji Sopan (Steps to English)*, *Enreji Sruti Siksha (Listening & Learning English)*, and *Enreji Sahaj Siksha (Easy Learning English)* which records his efforts as a successful teacher of English. Tagore's experiments with the procedural approaches of teaching English worked as a pilot project in his school. Tagore writes in the preface to *Enreji Sopan First Part*:

"Enreji Sopan was written for the Brahmacharyashram at Bolpur. It has not been published to date. I am encouraged to take this book to all after the effect which came out at Bolpur school by following this method for some years".

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The objectives of this study are the following:

1. To explore Tagore's approach to teach English as a second language.
2. To identify the theories of learning a language underlying Tagore's approach to teach English as a second language
3. To analyze the strategies adopted by Tagore to develop students' language skills in English viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing.

METHOD OF THE STUDY:

The study is based on document review and analysis of the books written by Tagore on the approach of teaching English. Tagore's books were used as the primary sources of data for this study. Qualitative data analysis was aimed at for this work.

TEACHING LISTENING AND SPEAKING:

At the initial stage of language development every individual first learns to understand what is spoken around him in the society, and he tries to communicate with the society which he is living in. In case of first language acquisition the child picks up the language from the environment. The child informally acquires the ability in the listening and speaking proficiency in the first language; environment plays an instrumental role here; as the child gets most possible exposure in the first language, he develops listening and speaking abilities in the language without any formal training; whereas regarding second language the scenario is reverse- an individual usually gets least exposure in the new language, only in formal set up, which leads to his difficulty in gaining proficiency in listening and speaking.

Tagore writes in *Sikshakder Prati Nibedan (To the Teachers)* for his book *Enreji Sruti Siksha (Listening & Learning English)*: *"This book has been written to make the pupils, who are at attempts with the recognition of letters, listen and speak English in order to get them accustomed in using English. It is certain that the pupils' reading will be easy if they complete this coursebook"*.

Tagore emphasizes over the development of listening and speaking skill prior to their attempts with the reading and writing, which is theoretically sound and which Tagore experimented with much earlier than the emergence of the Natural Approach in 1983

developed by Krashen and Terrell which lays “*emphasis on exposure, or input, rather than practice; optimizing emotional preparedness for learning; a prolonged period of attention to what the language learners hear before they try to produce language; and a willingness to use written and other materials as a source of comprehensible input*”.

Tagore’s approach to teach English underlies the principles of learning one’s mother tongue or first language that is learning to produce the utterances in the target language by following the language spoken in the speech community in general and by internalizing its underlying grammar. Success in the development of listening and speaking skill is the corollary result of the use of the language in real life situations. Within a few months after birth, a child learns to produce lots of utterances, many of which differ from being exactly the same sentences he heard earlier. By the use of his language aptitude, he frames expressions by the proper arrangement of language input, which he received from the speech community. The child grows from the holophrasestage through the stage of telegraphic speech to gaining ability to express himself in complete sentences. This phenomenal development of the child in term of language skills of the first language occur in the natural set up without any organized mode of instruction; rather through the practical use of the language in everyday life.

The way a child learns his mother tongue worked as a model for Tagore to teach English. The teacher should make the meaning of the utterances of English clear to the students by placing them in a context and situation which may work to interpret the utterances. Tagore writes in this connection, “*It will be the time for the pupils to practice speaking, when they are able to understand completely a part of this book. It is to be decided how much of listening to be practiced by the learners before moving to speaking*”.

The following portion shows, as a model, how Tagore directs the practice in the class.

“Teacher puts the pupils in a file and calls them one by one

Hari, come to me!

When this sentence is understood by the students, and the student follows the instruction, he should be made to speak, for example-

Hari, come to me!

Sir, I come to you.

Hari, go back!

Sir, I go back”.

These kinds of activities make the classroom meaningful to the pupils and they do what they understand in their performance in the class. Interaction between the teacher and every learner is ensured. Each student work as the motivation to the other to come forward and participate in the classroom activities and this lessens their anxiety in the second language class. More of such practices in the class gains in the self-confidence of the pupils in learning English. Krashen’s Affective –Filter Hypothesis comes into play here, which takes into account three factors of language learning- motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. The Affective-Filter Hypothesis proposes that if a student’s motivation is high, self-confidence is high and anxiety is low, the filter is lowered, that means there is no blockage towards successful language acquisition. Tagore’s procedures to teach listening and speaking eliminates all the possibilities of pupils’ getting anxious in the class by making them a central part of the classroom activities. Pupils find it a fun the way Tagore introduces English to the beginners in *Enreji Suritisiksha (Listening & Learning English)* in the class, as they enjoy different types of language games in it. Pupils’ playful acquaintance with English forms the basis of their positive attitude towards English.

TEACHING READING:

Good readers, as is established by researches, in first language are most often good readers in second language also. Expertise in the first language is transferred positively in the second language. Teachers should make an attempt for this transfer of skills to take place. Though there is the current inclination towards creating English only environment in the class, Tagore’s approach is with the help of the mother tongue. Many language experts critique the interference of mother tongue as a barrier in proficiency development in second language, contrary to which Tagore used the known language as the resources for teaching a new language.

Tagore proceeds gradually with certain words, phrase and sentences on the board with their meaning, and ask the pupils to read those utterances. Teacher will make the pupils put those new words and phrases in sentences of their own. They will also be asked to translate sentences from the new language to the known language, in which they decode the meaning of the English sentences; and to be able to decipher the meaning is one of the main criteria of reading ability. Tagore’s attempt was to place English in Indian milieu, which makes it easier for the pupils’ to develop reading with understanding as they find the unknown language presented in known backdrop of their life.

Tagore’s approaches to train reading include the following:

1. Letter as the unit:

The beginners are acquainted with the letters of English alphabet. Their attempts to recognize letters run in parallel with listening and speaking English. This makes them recognize the letters with less effort as, through oral practice, they are tuned to the sounds that the orthographic letters produce.

2. Word as the unit:

The teacher indicates to different objects seen in the class and provides them with corresponding English vocabulary.. The pupils first orally practice those words and then the teacher writes those words on the board. This way the pupils learn to read the written form of the word also.

3. Phrase as the unit:

The teacher writes the phrases, having common structure, on the board; and makes the pupils practice reading those phrases with explanation of their structure pattern provided by the teacher.

Examples-

“The big man.

The mad dog.

The red cat”.

4. Sentence as the unit

After the stages of words and phrases, complete sentences are presented to the pupils to read and understand.

Examples-

“The man is big.

The dog is mad.

The cat is red”.

Tagore places reading comprehension with immediate explanation of the structure and meaning of the reading input. This builds in pupils' understanding of the difference in structure of the first language and that of the second language. This knowledge of the difference provides them cues to decode the reading input. Tagore's technique in training reading follows the generally accepted order of precedence-LSRW (from listening and speaking to reading and writing). Tagore takes the pupils to the stage of reading after they have learnt orally certain amount of language. This helps them to catch hold of meaning and to avail themselves most of meaningful tasks from the very beginning. Practice of words and phrases enriches pupils' stock of vocabulary, which proves helpful in reading. Tagore provides sample categories of words and sentences that are to be taught first and asks the teachers to add to the categories more such words. Repeated practice in seeing and hearing will gain them mastery in reading. Tagore finds it effective, in the translation lessons, to use learners' ability to read Bengali in enabling them to read English.

TEACHING WRITING:

The objectives to develop writing skill at the elementary level are to enable the pupils to communicate in English and to express their feelings and emotions in writing. Tagore, at the initial stage of teaching writing, makes pupils practice from writing letters through words to sentences. Tagore plans to enable pupils to attain the ability of creative writing at the terminal stage where pupils express their original thoughts and ideas in written form. Repeated practice in writing sentences attains them perfection in correct forms of different types of sentence patterns. Reasonable amount of translation works lead the pupils to realize how the expressions in Bengali can be put in English, by avoiding verbatim translation and by taking resort to translating the essence of the expression. Though there is the criticism against using translation as the means to teach a new language, Tagore consciously applies it- *“There is a distinctive difference in expressions in Bengali and English and it is impossible to have a word in a language and its corresponding word in another; this gets clearer through translation. For that I find there a good scope of teaching English through translation”.*

In a foreign language class, where time is a prime concern, teacher must invest in teaching the syntax and discourse of a text-type, where translations prove to build solid foundation of writing ability. Tagore sets the context of translation central to pupils' life and world. They relate to the task which takes in things and events they go around. When pupils translate a paragraph, they should be supplied with the words they need. Tagore asserts that teachers should assess pupils' progress in writing by taking test at regular intervals. Thus Tagore upholds formative assessment as a means to get feedback on the development of writing proficiency.

Tagore approaches with the following techniques for the beginners to teach writing:

1. Copying:

Pupils copy the words written on the board. They learn to copy letters, words and sentences.

2. Framing sentence:

Pupils frame sentences of their own with words given by the teacher.

3. Transforming sentences:

Pupils change a given sentence into different forms of it (positive to negative or interrogative).

4. Writing composition

Pupils write composition with the help of words supplied to them. Teacher has to observe that there is cohesion in writing.

5. Translation practice

Pupils practice translating composition in Bengali like letters, paragraph, and narratives into English.

In case of practice of guided writing teachers need to bear in mind pupils' feedback like their use of tenses, word order and punctuation. Immediate feedback is suggested by Tagore, which allows pupils to identify the errors committed by them- *“Initially it is convenient to consider one single sentence at a time. Pupils will commit mistakes, which should be explained to the pupils, and then they may proceed further”.* Teacher intervention at the early stage helps to attain autonomy in writing, which Tagore aims to develop among pupils. As writing demands on vocabulary, teachers should provide pupils with appropriate words for writing composition and translation practice. Teacher needs to take care of pupils individually on each point- content, unity, fluency and grammar. Every type of writing has some of its rules and conventions be it a personal letter, a story, or a paragraph. Teachers must make pupils aware of it and help them attain perfection in it to make their writing acceptable one.

Striking point in Tagore's approach to teaching writing is that at the final stage the pupils are given to translate pieces which are very common and free flowing in nature. Tagore gives such types of writing practices as translating a poem, describing the beauty of a twilight scene, narrating an event, and task of everyday necessity like writing a letter. These tasks volunteer the pupils to develop

the ability of free writing, where pupils are not much worried about the form or grammar. They write about their ideas on a topic which may be given by the teacher or which they may choose themselves. Writing requires a lot of teacher inputs. Teachers have to have ready materials on which writing practice will be followed. Sociolinguistic competence is a major consideration with Tagore. Each piece of writing tasks that he presents to the pupils relates language to the society and people they look around. This makes pupils feel at ease when they practice writing, and, in turn, it also enhances their writing ability.

TEACHING GRAMMAR:

Individual differences plays instrumental role in learning; pupils' individual language learning aptitude affects the prospect of their success in language acquisition. All the pupils in a language class do not perform equally in term of the output in the target language, and this necessitates individual attention in the class. Those learners who lag behind need to be specially taken care of by the teacher. The teacher must attempt to put every learner in a class at the same stage of language proficiency. After successful completion of each task by every single learner, the teacher should take the learners to the next stage of language input. Tagore, thus, instructs the teachers: *"The teachers should work as per the intelligence and aptitude of the learners...if it is found that some part is being difficult for a learner, the teacher should make it easier for the learner, or he should avoid it"*.

The Input Hypothesis proposed by Krashen, that came later in time in 1980s, underpins Tagore's assertion. Krashen claims that a learner acquires the language best if he gets exposure to the comprehensible input to the maximum extent. The teacher must ensure that the language input is slightly beyond the learner's current level of competence. As Krashen and Terrell put it: *An acquirer can 'move' from stage i (where i is the acquirer's level of competence) to a stage i+1 (where i+1 is the stage immediately following I along some natural order) by understanding language containing i+1.*

Tagore illustrates, in the following segment, which is an interaction between the teacher and the student Hari, quoted earlier also, where the teacher instructs Hari to perform some task and Hari follows it, how the language input can be made comprehensible to the learners.

"Hari, come to me!

Sir, I come to you.

Hari, go back!

Sir, I go back.

When Hari goes back, the teacher asks Madhu, Madhu, who came to me? Madhu answers, Hari came to you.

The past form of the verb can be practiced this way by the class. When Hari is walking to the teacher, the teacher may ask Madhu, Madhu, who is coming to me? Madhu answers, Sir, Hari is coming to you. When Hari reaches him, the teacher may ask, Has Hari come to me? Response from the class will be, Yes, Hari has come to you. Then Hari can be asked, Hari, have you come to me? Answer will be, Yes sir, I have come to you. If the learners practice this way all the activities designed in the book, they will comprehend different forms of verb".

Though the learners are at the initial stage of competency in English, they are able to follow their teacher's instructions and perform what the teacher asks them to do. This is possible because the activities are set in a meaningful and situational context, which makes the underlying grammar comprehensible to the learners, that is, they get at the new structures of different types of sentences through the use of the language. When the teacher instructs the class and the class grabs the message, the teacher scaffolds the classroom interaction as a prop to enable the learners to access beyond their current level of competence, as The Input Hypothesis claims that *"if input is understood and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided". The language teacher need not attempt deliberately to teach the next structure along the natural order...input is the essential environmental ingredient (Krashen 1985:2)"*

PATTERN DRILLS IN CLASSROOM:

Enreji Srutisiksha covers a wide range of speech practice in English. This facilitates pupils' vocabulary and their knowledge of grammar rules of the language. Pattern drills help the pupils to focus on gaining mastery of language use in speech situation. Tagore put the language items in a cultural context, and this clearly conveys the aspects of the language. Drills enable the learners to induce the patterns of different types of sentence structures without demanding on teacher's explicit explanation of it. Pattern drills minimize the chances of making mistakes in using the language.. Tagore proposes to get the learners habituated in listening comprehension and speaking proficiency before they are expected to read English and write in English. *Enreji Srutisiksha* is a comprehensive work to facilitate the process of habit formation. This coursebook puts the pattern drills in graded order, which ensures any chances of the language class far from being confusing to the beginners. Dialogues and drills form the activities in *Enreji Srutisiksha*. Dialogues contextualize key structures and illustrate the situation. Specific grammar rules are the focus of drills in classroom practices.

Enreji Srutisiksha without being mechanical any way in pattern practices shows how language drills can be practiced in playful situations by making the learning experiences in social contexts. This helps the pupils to build positive attitude towards learning English, and also to develop integrative motivation, which encourages the learners to use the language.

Variation in activities in drill practices keep the learners engaged. These tasks and activities shows the importance of the teacher in a drill session. The teacher has to have ready plan of the relevant situations which he is to create for pupils to practice structures. The teacher has to put life into a drill class and he needs to be very clear in ideas regarding what point he attempts to drive home through meaningful practice of language. The section below can be cited here.

1. Replacement: where one word in a sentence is replaced with another.

Examples:

“Taking the pupils outside the class:

<i>Dig here.</i>	<i>Dig there.</i>
<i>Dig with this spade.</i>	<i>Dig with that spade.</i>
<i>Dig in the sand.</i>	<i>Dig in the garden.</i>
<i>Dig here with this knife”.</i>	

2. Inflection: where one word in a sentence takes another form when reproduced.

Examples:

“Give me one marble.

Give me two marbles”.

3. Transformation: where the pupils transform a sentence by making it negative or interrogative, or by changing its tense.

Examples:

“The servant closes the doors.

The servant doe not close the doors.

Does the servant close the doors?

The servant is closing the doors”.

Tagore’s approach to teach English came much earlier than the emergence of The Oral Approaches in the 1950s which like lessons in Tagore’s books on teaching English “... *involved systematic principles of selection (the procedures by which lexical and grammatical content was chosen), gradation (principles by which the organization and sequencing of content were determined, presentation (techniques used for presentation and practice of items in a course)*”.

CONCLUSION:

Though Tagore did not formulate any concrete theory on language teaching, his procedures to teach a second language is found scientific by the researches later on by such authorities in language teaching as Palmer, Hornby, Brooks and Krashen. The hypotheses in Krashen’s Monitor Model (1983) supports that the techniques Tagore adopted in Enreji Srutisiksha to adapt the pupils, who encounters English from scratch, to listen and understand English, and to speak English with sufficient amount of oral exposure before they step forward to master reading and writing. Tagore’s experiment with the procedures of teaching English gains sustenance by the works of applied linguists like Harold Palmer and A.S.Hornby who points to the importance of oral practice for the pupils to internalize the grammar rules of English sentence patterns. Tagore’s methodology of teaching English, in tandem with current communicative approaches, that focus on communicative functions of the language, sets forth the contents, with necessary instructions for the teachers, that will bring the pupils success in learning English as a language other than one’s mother tongue or first language.

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