

IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING SPOKEN ENGLISH IN INDIA

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Abstract : This paper discusses the importance of spoken English in India. English plays a very vital role in the field of learning the world over. English language communication skills are the most important job skills sought by the employers. This paper highlights how spoken English is a neglected aspect of English language teaching and the objectives of teaching spoken English are discussed elaborately. The success of any educational system depends largely on the quality of teachers. The teachers must realize the importance of teaching spoken English and should treat English as a life skill rather than for mere academic life. If the youth of our country is expected to play a meaningful role in science and technology, commerce, industry etc., Spoken English must and should be taught in schools and colleges.

Introduction

It is a very well known fact that the spoken form of the language travels very fast. It is the spoken form of any language which facilitates the core activities involving personal and public interaction. Coming to the place of English, it is an undeniable fact that English gives an edge over other Indian languages, especially in business interaction with people from other states or nationalities. It is also an unquestionable fact that English has a key role to play in India's enterprises in the global scenario. English is not alien to Indians and Indians have been using it for long. English has already consolidated its position as a perfect global language.

English dominates such fields as the media, politics, economics, science, technology, business etc. At present English is spread and used largely in the mass media. Due to the technological supremacy of the English speaking countries, English continues to be the chief *lingua franca* of the Internet. The statistics collected by David Crystal (2003) shows that nearly 670 million people use English with fluency and competency. In other words, English is the language, not of westernization, but of modernization.

The Use of English in India

India, a land of a very ancient civilization, is also the land of some of the oldest surviving languages of the world like Sanskrit which is considered the mother of many Indo-European languages. Indians used English for the first time to ask the English to quit. According to N.Krishnaswamy & Lalitha Krishnaswamy (2006), English strengthened India in its fight against the English. The struggle went on for decades. Many English educated people led the movement and their efforts bore fruit. The English left and India retained English, a language that unified a vast population speaking hundreds of languages. So, India had very long social and cultural contacts with English for over 500 years. The Indian Education Commission (1964-66) has also recommended the continuance of English in the interest of national integration and for higher academic work.

The Present Scenario of English in India

English is the language of international trade and commerce; most business transactions within the country and between countries are conducted in English. Presently, English is the gateway to higher education because of the fact that specialized and technical courses are generally conducted in English. Those who aspire for foreign degrees in English speaking countries should possess a good command of English. This great popularity is due to its economic, political, scientific and technological strengths. English has the pre-eminent claim to be the medium of international communication. The largest number of reference books on almost every subject is available in English.

The Indian Education Commission (1964-66), popularly known as the Kothari Commission, agreed that the mother-tongue is the best medium of instruction to spread literacy faster. So, the Commission had recommended the use of mother-tongue as the medium of instruction up to the higher level of education. But the Commission had also said that no student should be awarded a university degree unless he has acquired considerable proficiency in English. The Education Policy of 1968 had examined the question of the development of languages in great detail; but the implementation of this part of the 1968 Policy has, however,

been uneven. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 decided to give more importance to English language learning and implement it more energetically and purposefully.

The Present Status of Teaching of English in Colleges

Senior Secondary or +2 level is the most important stage in a student's education. After this stage, the students diversify into various professional courses or to General Academic Courses. In this course English is being taught at the first year and also in the second year. Students usually have sections on prose, poetry, drama, non-detailed texts and grammar. In the recent past some information on phonetics and phonetic transcription are introduced into the Intermediate course. But it has not proved very useful as concentrating on the symbols, instead of English sounds, is not helpful to the students to improve their speaking or pronunciation. The transcription is learnt in isolation and forgotten after the examination. In the absence of "comprehensiveness" no syllabus could yield satisfactory results. Traditionally, English has been taught in colleges as a literary and humanistic discipline. English is a compulsory course in the first year of all the professional courses. English is prescribed as a compulsory language to the degree students during the first two years. The English courses offered at the undergraduate level are General English for B.A./B.Sc./B.com. students (compulsory). In General English courses for B.A./B.Sc./B.com students usually have sections on prose, poetry, drama, non-detailed texts and some grammar. The teaching is done through lecture mode and tested through written examination, on the content of the prescribed books.

A few years back a radical change was brought about in the delivery of the English component at Undergraduate level. The Andhra Pradesh State Council of Higher Education (APSCHE) considered the serious allegation that more than 93% of the graduates lack communication skills in English and hence remain "unemployable," with some concern and directed the State Universities to do the needful. A decision was taken to introduce the listening and speaking components. Material was produced to teach these two components and a Computer Based Test (CBT) was introduced for the students to be conducted at the end of the annual examinations. Training programmes were introduced for the UG teachers of all the universities. Directorate of Higher Education also simultaneously conducted an English Language Teaching Fellow Programme for the teachers. In continuation of the programme, DHE started Jawahar Knowledge Centres to give extra training to the outgoing students to make them employable. The authorities, thus, have put in their maximum efforts to improve the English standards of the students in the state. However, it should be accepted that the intended results were not achieved by all the above efforts. The actual course has not yielded the expected result owing to the following reasons.

- The material prepared for the UG I and II year Listening and speaking components is substandard, unhelpful and unteachable in the class.
- Comprehensiveness of all the language skills is glaringly missing.
- The book does not give any direction on the methodology of teaching it in the class.
- The entire syllabus is neither fully ELT oriented nor fully content based.

However, as the idea of teaching English as a language has percolated into the minds of all the people concerned, the following measures could be taken to ensure success in the teaching of English at UG level:

- Real experts should be involved in designing the course, preparation of materials and fixing the evaluation pattern.
- If possible, there should be co-ordination between the English syllabuses of Intermediate and undergraduate courses to avoid the present overlapping of even the basic features.
- A comprehensive course imparting the basic skills of LSRW, vocabulary and grammar at the Intermediate level and advanced skills at undergraduate level should be developed.
- The evaluation pattern should be on the lines of IELTS / TOEFL system of testing the skills.

Spoken English: A Neglected Aspect of ELT

Gillian Brown and George Yule (2003) writes that the serious consideration of the spoken language as a subject for teaching has a long history, but only made a decisive impact on foreign language teaching in general after the end of the second world war. The teaching of English in schools and colleges was scarcely ever intended to provide language instruction. While experts recognize four basic skills in language teaching, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing, the fact remains that in most of Indian schools and colleges, the only two skills given importance are Reading and Writing, though these two are also never taught explicitly. Listening and Speaking rarely figure in the syllabus, even though these are much needed language skills among the student population. Though English is taught for nearly ten years in school and another four years at the college level, by the time a student graduates, speech is rarely evaluated. Almost all the examinations are in the written mode. Students, especially those who had been educated in non-English medium schools, are driven with a strong urge to speak English as fluently as their counterparts from English medium schools. But unfortunately for such students, Spoken English is one area which is hardly dealt with in the syllabus. But the fact that the outside world is aware of this lacuna is evident from the fact that there is a mushroom growth of flourishing private institutions offering courses in Spoken English. Certain factors like the large number of students in the classrooms, untrained teachers, students coming from rural background and lack of audio-visual aids add to the problem of teaching and learning spoken English. Literature based materials do not help to develop the spoken language of present day

language learners. The learners cannot put the language obtained by such materials to active use in everyday situations as any language changes over years. The spoken form of English language is relegated to the bottom. Importance is given to the written form of the language and evaluation is based on the written examination only. Those students who study in schools and colleges where the medium of instruction is the regional language are unable to communicate well in English as they are mostly taught through Bilingual method. For example, in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states, Telugu is the medium of instruction in almost all schools and colleges in villages, towns and some cities. English is taught in most of the state schools, but due to a lack of resources, well-trained teachers and sometimes motivation, the majority of students fail to gain proficiency. Many learners are not able to converse well in English. Some reasons can be attributed to the following:

- The inadequate teaching methods and materials
- The relegated position of Spoken or Functional English
- The lack of linguistic knowledge, especially, the sound system of English, on the part of many English teachers in schools and colleges

There are different teaching methods such as the Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audio-lingual Method, and some of these involve all the four language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. The teaching method used in Indian schools and colleges is the same old teacher-centered one which follows only the lecture method. The teacher is the active participant, and the student, the passive listener. Since teaching Spoken English is not given importance in colleges, most of the learners join private institutes for learning it.

The Role of Language in Communication

Language is a systematic means of communication by the use of sounds represented by conventional symbols. It is the code that is used to express themselves and communicate with others. It is a system for communicating ideas and feelings using sounds, gestures, signs or marks. A language has two modes of communication: the written and the spoken. A language forms through the method of combining words to create meanings used by a particular group of people. Speech plays a very important role in life. An overwhelming large proportion of the daily exchanges are in the spoken form. Language, therefore, is primarily a spoken affair. Since language learning involves the learning of four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing, the learning process is not complete if any of these skills is omitted completely. Language is primarily a means of communication and one needs both oral and written communication, though the relative emphasis will depend on the different needs of the students. Generally speaking, it is emphasized that first listening is taught, then speaking, then reading and writing.

Objectives of Teaching Spoken English in India

Man has rightly been called “a talking animal.” It is the gift of speech which differentiates a man from other living beings. A student’s command of spoken English is just as much the responsibility of the educational system as his command of the written form of the language. (Brown, Anderson, Shillock and Yule, 1984). English in India has been playing multiple roles. A major part of the official transactions take place in English in India. Ever since India adopted the liberalized economic policy the gates were opened for many multinational corporations in various businesses to set up their operations in India. Foreign investments in the field of Banking, Insurance, Telecom, Automobiles etc. have led to the burgeoning of employment opportunities. There was a gradual surge in the employment. The job market was buoyant with opportunities for skilled work force. One of the vital skills every employer demanded in the prospective employee was the ability to communicate well in English. The employers wanted people who can work in a multicultural environment and can converse with clientele from various backgrounds.

Though English has been a binding language for a very long period in India, it is after the liberalization, privatization and globalization of Indian economy that there was a significant shift among the educators about the need to focus on English as an important factor that influences the job market and subsequently the economy of India.

It can be said that the employment scenario in India influences the Universities to rethink and redesign their English Language Curriculums. There is a distinct shift; it was mainly observed when the universities started adopting syllabus with communicative approach for the undergraduate courses. Another important development is the establishment of Computer Aided Language Learning Labs in the colleges. These indicate the paradigm shift from the literature oriented language learning approach to the communicative language teaching approach.

Though there is considerable importance for reading and writing skills spoken skills is given primordial importance. The objective has been to enable the students to converse well in English. But the implementation of teaching techniques that enhance the spoken skills of the students has been the area which gave many challenges to the teachers. The biggest challenge has been to conduct speaking skills training in large classrooms. The second biggest challenge is to motivate the students to converse in English. An environment where there is minimal sources for listening and lack of motivation among students to converse in English are the other important factors that influence the acquisitions of spoken skills among the adolescent students.

Research is due to explore new and innovative ways to impart the spoken skills among the students of the professional courses like Engineering, Pharma, Management etc. Students who pass out of such courses are the potential job seekers. Good English speaking skills will enable these students to be successful employment seekers. Ability to speak in English certainly enhances the employability levels of the aspirants. So, serious research studies are needed to develop effective English speaking methods.

Conclusion

Though learning is happening at a great extent in the content subjects, the English teaching outcome is not very encouraging. It is high time the methods adopted to teach English should be reviewed, analyzed and amended with a special focus on spoken skills.

It is certainly not beyond anybody's understanding or imagination how English achieved a domineering position it enjoys globally. It seems that for ages to come, English will play a very vital role in the field of learning the world over. As an erstwhile British Colony, though India inherited English as parting gift from the rulers, it gradually shed all its colonial underpinnings and got internalized into the Indian psyche. India's march into the global arena as a burgeoning economy is made easy by its Trans National relationships powered by English Link. Opportunity to more people to become thorough professionals and work on a global platform will fortify India's position among the competing nations in its pursuit of wealth generation.

The number of professionals passing out of the Universities and various institutes is steadily increasing every year, so too the employment opportunities. But one still finds people complaining about the paucity in the employment opportunities. According to the observations made by The National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) only 25% of the qualified professionals passing out of the institutes have got the required job skills. English Language Communication Skills is one of the most important job skill sought by the employers where a majority of the present day job seekers are not strong. It is really paradoxical that a considerable number of young professionals are not getting jobs just because of a language that they learned for not less than 10 years.

In the light of these facts it becomes easy for anyone to reason it out that a very credible and very effective process should be chosen to counter this problem. As the language of science and technology, English will be important for industrial and economic development. English will function as the 'language of development'. Indian scientists, technologists, engineers, doctors, etc. must be able not only to have access to professional literature in English but also to contribute to it, and communicate with their counterparts in other parts of the world. What began in the early days as a foreign language learnt and used by a handful of Indians, has now become a wide-spread and powerful presence in India. English will serve as 'the language of opportunity' any individual seeking socio-economic advancement will find the ability in English an asset. It is important, however, that one should be able to identify the English requirements of various groups of students precisely, and try to provide for each such group the pattern of instruction which will be relevant to its needs. The teaching of English should aim at equipping the student with communication skills necessary to cope with the situations he is likely to encounter. The student must be provided the kind of information content which is relevant to contemporary culture. The importance of spoken English is widely recognized now. English for professional purposes, like facing interviews, writing resumes, writing reports, conducting campaigns, writing letters, participating in meetings, seminars, conferences, and discussions, is demanded. English for social roles and interacting in social contexts is considered essential. If one is proficient in communicative English and if one's accent is internationally intelligible, the job market is wide open. English for communication is the mantra everywhere. The gift of gab in English can take one to all corners of the world. Outsourcing, it is said, is going to create millions of jobs in the near future for English-knowing educated Indians. English is necessary for mobility, career advancement, opportunities and social and economic purposes. For some time to come, one must depend on English to have an access to the growing fund of knowledge in science, technology and humanities. Measures must be taken to introduce courses to suit the needs of students at different levels of attainment and help them attain command whereby they can use English as a 'library language'.

The success of any educational system depends largely on the quality of teachers. There is a severe scarcity of trained and qualified teachers in India. The result is that, even where English is taught in school, its teaching is not done by teachers who have an adequate knowledge of the language and of language teaching methods. The teacher in English methodology is hardly ever a subject specialist; in addition to English, he/she is required to teach one or more pedagogical subjects. The English teachers must specialize exclusively in English. They should also be equipped with techniques to teach spoken English to students. The primary objective of a teacher of English should be to have a commitment to the speech needs of the students and a serious study of the role of oral language in learning. More intensive courses must be introduced at the school level-both in English and Telugu medium schools. For the first few years oral work should receive full attention both for its own sake and for the support it gives to reading and writing. Although oral preparation may be necessary in later years also, teachers should give progressively more attention to other skills. Testing should focus on the student's ability to communicate effectively in the spoken mode, with due credit given for accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, grammar and presentation. Hence, there is a greater necessity at present to teach English as a life skill than for mere academic life.

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