

Impediments in Learning English as Second Language in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

English as a dominant language of wider communication fulfills a variety of roles the world over: be it a national language or an official language or an administrative language. The learning of English as second language has been a mammoth task and an intricate, stressful undertaking for the learners in Tamil Nadu. Though it is a compulsory subject of study from the very primary level of education, it is learnt with a sort of trepidation and tension and the learners are afraid of committing mistakes in the process of communication. According to many linguists, the way English has been taught at educational institutions is, to a great extent, accountable for the deteriorating level of communicative proficiency in the learners. There are various impediments that seldom allow the Tamil learners from acquiring the English tongue. An ideal teacher must be able to perceive those impediments in advance and to attempt on finding out solutions so that language learning becomes an enjoyable and zealous activity without anxiety or stress.

Keywords: literary milestones, poignant trend, compassionate affective atmosphere, rat race, tiresome attempt, socio-cultural factors

Introduction

Language is the dress of thoughts. The ultimate goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes referred to as 'communicative competence'. He has aptly remarked that the rules of grammar will be useless without the rules of use. Savignon rejects the notion that the learners must achieve competence in grammar and vocabulary before taking up communicative activities (Savignon, 1983). Speech patterns, rather than grammar, are the fundamental elements of language. What teaching methods are apt in fulfilling this target is to be adopted and followed seriously instead of clinging on to the ineffective, conventional methods that have not succeeded so far in equipping the learners with communicative skill. The impediments, major or minor, that pose as challenges to the learners in the process of acquisition of communicative proficiency must be identified and explored. This paper sums up the findings which are quite concerning that needs immediate attention and grave remedial measures.

Major Problems of the Learners

The teaching of English has been, by and large, confined to a ‘teacher-text book-classroom affair’ in India. Most of the learners inside classrooms remain mute and the language teachers take control of the entire classroom and, hence, learning a second language has become a phobia and a complex challenge for the taught. A language teacher must know for sure what his target is and what he has to achieve by dint of teaching English language. It is highly impossible to discover a new concept everyday but we can teach the same concept in an innovative way with advanced technology and tools. The major impediments that pose as challenges to the learners, especially Tamil learners, in the process of learning are briefly discussed under the following headings.

a. Little Understanding of the Aim

The ultimate target of teaching a language must be nothing other than achieving the communicative proficiency. It is unfortunate that English language has been taught like subjects such as Physics, Chemistry, not like a language. In fact, we, the language teachers, do not succeed in our efforts as most of us don’t know our target of teaching English. Even after learning English for a decade or more, the learners of English still remain mute spectators, not active participants in classrooms. In case the purpose of teaching a language is realised enough, then teaching English as a second language will really become a fun. And it will certainly become a fun for our learners too – that’s the way they will learn better, enjoying the language.

b. Differences between Tamil and English

Every language is unique in many aspects. It differs from other languages with regard to syntax, morphology, phonology, lexicon etc that serve as barriers against the second language learners. Tamil is a ‘syllable-bound’ language whereas English is ‘stress-bound’. English vocabulary besets the learners to a great extent though they look same. Similarly, auxiliaries, modals, articles, phrasal verbs and idiomatic usage of words bewilder not only the learners but also the teachers.

c. Defective text books and curriculum.

Textbooks and curriculum are another hurdle responsible for the deterioration of communicative proficiency. The prescribed textbooks contain themes and topics which are really beyond the knowledge and comprehending level of the learners. The unfamiliar literary milestones and poetic masterpieces do nothing in developing communicative skill in the learners. The curriculum adopted in schools and colleges does not meet the required level of the learners. It is unfortunate that the syllabus designers think little about Tamil Nadu or its linguistic, socio-cultural and traditional background of the learners and incorporate the texts set on other alien cultures and practices. For example, the prescription of William Shakespeare’s plays, or Geoffrey Chaucer’s poetry, or Francis Bacon’s essays at school or college level may seem highly qualitative but unjust, because to teach these literary giants to the students who are mediocre in linguistic skill is, in reality, nothing but attempting to build castles in air.

d. Faulty Methods of Teaching

The teaching learning process inside classrooms is performed by ineffective and faulty methods conventionally passed on from generation to generation. Good teachers are, beyond doubt, more important than good methods or approaches but an effective teacher can enhance remarkably the quality of language teaching by employing one or more effective methods. It is today's poignant trend that most of the language teachers prefer the Grammar-Translation method to other methods. For instance, a language teacher steps into the classroom, picks up the prescribed text book, opens it and starts reading on himself and, then, he translates the meaning of those lines into Tamil loudly. Some others adopt the lecture method in language classrooms. They are quite content with the traditional methods imposed on them and therefore, they take no notice of other methods of teaching, albeit how effective they are. While anxiety and lack of inspiration can hinder language learning by acting as filters blocking understanding, technology can help instructors in creating a compassionate affective atmosphere in the classroom. (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979).

e. Faulty Examination System

Teaching and testing are two important components of language. Hughes remarks that 'a great deal of language testing is of very poor quality' (Hughes, 1989). India is said to have an examination system, not an education system. The present examination system is fully memory-oriented, not skill-oriented. This system promotes rat race, but no analytical skills and does not develop the communicative proficiency of the taught. The teachers keep on teaching, keeping the urgency of examination in mind - nothing cared beyond it. The learners, on their part, blindly rely on cheap bazaar guides or teachers' notes which they learn by rote like kindergarten tiny tots and reproduce it in the answer scripts unaltered. The learners' communicative skill or creativity is put aside. In fact, the present examination system only boosts up the percentage of literacy – that's all!

f. Lack of Competent Teachers with Adequate Training

The sufficient competent teachers with adequate training are not available both at government schools and at privately-owned schools in the state of Tamil Nadu. It is a painful fact that these teachers know what to teach but they don't know how to teach. Besides, most of the language teachers are not good at English communication excluding a few found at privately-owned schools in urban areas. Even refresher courses or orientation courses conducted now and then by the experts fail in turning out the teaching learning process a successful one. This pitiable situation of lack of competent teachers is reflected badly in the learners.

g. Inadequate Provision of Audio-visual Aids

In the teaching of language, the main purpose of the use of audio visual aids is to enable the teachers to make their lessons effective and interesting. The language teachers use the direct method in the teaching of English. Therefore, it is for the teachers to give a distinct idea to the learners through audio visual aids. The teachers are struggling hard to handle English effectively because they counter umpteen impediments in the teaching learning process due to the lack of effective aids. There are a very few such aids available at educational institutions and some of them are so costly that the educational institutions seldom make them available for the use of learners.

h. Lack of Motivation

It is true that English language is valued high as an international dominant language, but there is neither societal motivation nor parental motivation to the learners in the learning process. The common attitude of an average Tamil learner is that learning another language like English or Hindi distorts the importance of his mother tongue, Tamil. Besides, most of the parents are well-satisfied with the marks scored by their children in their examinations but their communicative or linguistic proficiency is an unnecessary affair to them. In case there is no necessity, usually no learning language takes place.

i. Influence of Mother Tongue

Tamil language plays a dominant role in Tamil society, meeting all the necessities of all the people. An average Tamil child learns his mother tongue by the time he/she is five or six without formal classroom teaching under the wings of the parents and other kinsmen. But in the case of learning English, it is viewed as an additional attempt, a tiresome attempt of learning a foreign tongue. The illiterate parents who know nothing about the importance of English language do not care about their children learning English. In some other cases, the influence of mother tongue doesn't allow the learners to learn or speak the target language well. Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning (Johnson, 1982).

j. Language Variation

Language variation, a core concept in sociolinguistics, means more than one way of saying the same thing. Speakers may vary accent, lexicon or morphology or syntax not only from one individual to the next but also from one section of speech community such as family, village, town etc to another. Then language varies in social and geographical space. Indian way of speaking English differs in many aspects like stress and intonation. The rhythm of Indian English depends on long and short syllables rather than on stressed syllables. Hence, Indian English can be described as a 'syllable-timed' language, consisting of 'sing-song' characteristics. Such variation of language really besets the learners and creates a learning problem in the process of learning English.

k. Lack of Exposure

Tamil language under rulers' patronage satiates all the necessities of the people in the Tamil land. No doubt, English is the medium of instruction at a large number of schools and colleges, yet communication takes place nowhere in English in the entire state except in a very few urban schools. Apart from classroom activities, the learners seldom get opportunity of either listening to English or communicating in English. Even if they sit before T.V. sets, they prefer Tamil channels, neither English programmes nor English channels. Thus, lack of exposure to English language hinders the progress of teaching learning process to a great extent.

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