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Teaching English to Rural Learners: Problems, Prospects and Perspectives

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Abstract

In the present scenario the huge importance of English language learning cannot be underrated. The efficiency and competency of English language is the gateway to global employability and the lack of it makes a person crippled in the job market. In this connection an English teacher teaching in rural area or teaching to those students who come from Hindi medium or any regional language medium, confronts many challenges and problems. In this backdrop my paper is an attempt to explore and analyze the problems and prospects of devising and employing some handy tools and techniques in teaching English to rural learners to equip them with the necessary skills required for the job market. My paper also analyses the incredible performance of students during my stint as a teaching assistant in BHU for over one year before and after implementing interactive methods of teaching English and proves that the methods discussed in this paper are immensely beneficial in imparting communicational skills to rural students.

Key Words: Teaching English, Rural Learners, Problems, Prospects, Global Employability

Teaching English to Rural Learners: Problems, Prospects and Perspectives

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Skills and knowledge are the most potent driving forces of economic growth and social development for any country. Country with higher and better levels of skills adjusts more effectively and smoothly to the challenges and opportunities of world of work. In the modern neo-liberal scenario of India, the need of competence of English language skills has become a must have requisite qualification. With the advent of globalization, the learning of English has become an absolute necessity in international perspective. Due to globalization of Indian economy the country has become one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The economy is open to every competent person. The unemployment in our country is more linked with the lack of competency among the prospective candidates than with the lack of job opportunity. So when we talk of core competencies, the knowledge of English language occupies a crucial position. The advance of multinational companies and the availability of the text materials in English and the use of English in other sectors has created situation for students where they either perform or perish. Most of the education in rural India is done in the vernacular language; most of the competitive examinations, higher education and employment require

proficiency in English language. This causes students from rural background being at a disadvantage. In this backdrop the necessity of acquisition and mastery of the functional skills of English language is of paramount importance. David Graddol, a British linguist, discussing about the place and future of English in India says:

“Throughout India, there is an extraordinary belief, among almost all castes and classes, in both rural and urban areas, in the transformative power of English. English is seen not just as a useful skill, but as a symbol of a better life, a pathway out of poverty and oppression. Aspiration of such magnitude is a heavy burden for any language, and for those who have responsibility for teaching it, to bear. The challenges of providing universal access to English are significant, and many are bound to feel frustrated at the speed of progress. But we cannot ignore the way that the English language has emerged as a powerful agent for change in India.” (Graddol 2010:120)

The irony is that the economy is developing with such a galloping pace but the environment around the learner is not conducive or favourable to develop the desired competency in English language. The unfavourable environment around students is the great hurdle to acquire language abilities. At home they always talk in their mother tongue, whatever English they learn at school lie dormant for want of practice.

The entire spectrum of student population can be kept broadly into two categories: rural and urban or marginalized and mainstream students. This labelling or categorization is not confined to geographical locations. It has suggestive meaning. There are urban-rural and vice-versa. By these two terms I mean deprived and disadvantaged in terms of opportunities and infrastructure of all kinds: educational, social-cultural and economical. It is obvious fact that the rural students are marginalized as far as educational opportunities in general and English in particular is concerned. Lack of knowledge of English causes intellectual alienation and isolation. In spite of having concept and understanding of their subject matter they feel something vital and serious is missing. Language barrier is one of the many factors that marginalize rural learners in academic circles. Teaching English to rural learners is challenging yet enjoyable and rewarding job. The challenges I would discuss later, but the reward and enjoy come from the huge respect and reverence an English teacher is accorded. An English teacher is elevated to the status of God.

There are innumerable factors which are accountable for the perpetuation of such deplorable state of English teaching and learning in rural India. My paper is an attempt to explore and investigate the ground realities or root problems concerning the teaching and learning of English language in rural areas. I have tried my utmost to raise practical problems which are generally glossed over by linguistics scholars. In order to substantiate my arguments, I have incorporated some of the personal experiences and incidents as an English learner. Teaching and learning of English in rural India is faced with paradoxical situation. Because there are ample resources and talents, but they are not adequately utilized and exploited. There are enormous challenges and difficulties which rural English learners come across. Some problems do have tangible solutions, whereas some difficulties and obstacles seem to be insurmountable, at least in near future. Some of the problems are as follow:

- **Incompetent, untrained and unqualified teachers:** Majority of English trainers are having theoretical and bookish knowledge and are completely bereft practical knowledge, they tend to employ the same obsolete and outmoded and thus highly ineffective techniques and methods through which they were taught many years ago. The teachers are not conversant with the latest developments in ELT

pedagogy. The thrust of teaching is not on the practical needs of the learners and to make them well-equipped for the job market. Majority of English teachers in rural areas are hopelessly unqualified, untrained and incompetent. They are not conversant with the suitable, scientific and effective methods and techniques of imparting and honing language skills. As the saying goes: How one blind man can show the way to the other blind man? It's not that there is complete dearth of competent teachers. Nepotism and political interference in appointments doesn't let worthy candidates to be selected. That's why I have mentioned that learning and teaching of English is faced with paradoxical situation.

- **Inadequacy and impoverishment of infrastructure is another great deterrent in English teaching and learning:** How can we expect a learner to learn a language without the rudimentary facilities like chalk, duster, blackboard, fans, lights, clean drinking water etc? I am pretty sure that for these basic needs money is not main deterrent. Because, there are various schemes of government like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) which have sufficient funds to meet the minimum requirements. The most shameful and lamentable problem is the apathy and indifference of those people who are entrusted with the sacred responsibility of looking after education department. I think education and health are the most neglected areas in our country. Corruption is the greatest stumbling block in proper implementation of government funds.
- **Place of English in school curriculum:** Another subtle problem is the marginal place accorded to English in school curriculum. In many schools it's optional, not a mandatory subject. Marks don't count in the overall merit index. So, the students don't get the incentive to read English with thorough attention.
- **The prevalence of culture of more talk less work:** There is utter lack of professionalism in work culture which encourages more talk and less work.
- **Rigidity and obstinacy of teacher:** Many times obstinacy of teachers doesn't allow them to make the needed modifications in their teaching methods and techniques. They are not prepared to adopt and implement the recent advancements in teaching methodologies.
- **Unfavourable and hostile socio-cultural factors which discourage practice:** The mastery of any language demands constant practice of all four skills viz. listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The rural surrounding does not provide congenial environment to the learners to hone these skills. Even if some students, with whatever little knowledge they try to converse in English, they have face so much taunts, comments and criticism that they stop speaking English. Another unfavourable or inimical factor is safety and security of schools. In rural areas electronic gadgets and other teaching aids are stolen most of the times.
- **Psychological problems which cause English phobia:** The belief that English is a very tough and difficult language is deeply ingrained in the minds of rural learners. As once we dreaded the colonial masters so is the case with English language now. It has created a kind havoc among rural learners, they consider learning English as up hill and Himalayan task, and there is deep rooted phobia in them about English. Mostly it is found that they are able to solve even the most

complex and intricate problems in mathematics quite easily and comfortably. It is a child's play for them. But when it comes to English they find themselves utterly helpless. My experience as a teaching assistant at BHU tells me that, in compulsory language classes students can discuss other subjects at great length, but when it comes to English, the very idea intimidates them and makes them shudder. Teaching and learning English in India is considered as a tedious, intimidating and herculean task. With the mushrooming of convent schools this seemingly imposing and daunting task of learning and teaching English has been made easier and effortless. The awe once associated with learning English has minimized and mitigated. This is only true with urban learners. In rural areas proficiency in English language skills still remains profusely dismal and disheartening.

- **Apathy and indifference of authority:** The authority that is entrusted with the job of looking after framing and execution of educational policies seem utterly devoid of reformist zeal.
- **Faulty methodologies of teaching used in classes:** They stuff the minds of students with the grammatical rules and structures, but are not capable of making them familiar with the functional aspects of those rules and structures.
- **Disproportionate student-teacher ratio/ crowded classes:** The size of the classes everywhere is considerably large and thus student's participation in the class work is quite impossible. An overly packed class room leads to distorted teacher-student ratio. The ratio of students in relation to teachers is not proportional. In such a situation even the teacher is willing to help he cannot. This is one of the reasons why individual attention is not possible to the students. For individual attention, there should be provision of Tutorial classes.
- **Lack of motivation/ lack of will to change and contribute something to society:** Motivation is the core of learning. Perhaps, no other principle is so important as motivation because a student motivated to learn a foreign language, can himself manage to learn the language somehow or the other.
- **Outmoded syllabus and Malpractices in examination:** Our examination system is also responsible for this pathetic condition of rural learners in terms of English language skills. The syllabus designed decades back is being taught even today. There should be periodic revision of syllabus and it should be framed to suit the requirements of the changing times.
- **Minimum or no intervention or involvement of technology:** Technology can be an effective aid for teachers if used in the right way; its use makes the learning process more convenient, reliable, productive, interesting and enjoyable. Electricity supply is erratic or non-existent. The low energy consumption equipment should be made available. Connectivity to urban centres can be another major challenge. So we need a system which can ensure even material available without connectivity of internet. Power scarcity is still a challenge in rural areas. If feasible, we can look at the option of using solar panels and other renewable source. Mobiles can be a good alternative.

There is an immediate and urgent need of radical overhauling in education system. We need an educational revolution. The teacher has to blend both traditional and modern methods of

teaching and work out a method which is suitable to learners. The prevailing methods of teaching are not conducive and congenial for effective learning of English because they haven't yielded the desired outcome. So, it's high time to adopt and implement some different strategies for imparting effective teaching of English. The following methods applied with meticulous care and attention could help to a great extent in solving the difficulties and problems of rural English learners.

- **Empowering or Training the Trainers:** The need of training for the trainers is quite obvious, but the most pertinent question arises how to achieve it? It should be made mandatory for every professor to adopt a few primary, middle and high schools. Why mandatory, why not optional and voluntary? Because, sluggishness or inertia prevails in the very atmosphere, as I have mentioned above there is utter lack of professionalism. The majority of teachers are not willing to engage classes assigned to them, so how can they be expected to engage extra classes. Of course, the teachers must be given some incentive. Incentive may be in terms of monetary reward and other rewards. The involvement of government machinery is must in that case because it has the power to build a positive pressure on professors. The government should leverage all academic and other resources to facilitate the training programme. If one professor, out of one sixty eight hours in a week devotes two-three hours to give training to teachers from rural schools in English language skills then it's not a big deal. He/ she must remember that his/her education has given him/her an opportunity to make a difference in society by contributing something for academically marginalized and less privileged. That's how a person can lead a complete and fulfilled life.
- **Building Rapport with the class/ Creating Cordial and Conducive Class Environment:**
- **Using the Humour in the Classroom:** Most of the teachers are parochial minded who consider cracking jokes and indulging in humour as threat to their authority and sheer dissipation of time. Its consequence is that the English language class becomes monotonous, tiresome and uninteresting. So the humour should be used as a strategy in classroom. Humour helps in lightening the psychological burden created by English phobia. Anderson (1985) says that humour can increase attention and interest and help to illustrate and reinforce what is being taught. Humour can be effectively used for increasing group dynamics, better class management, practical grammatical structures, increasing vocabulary and learning about the culture of the English people. Humour diffuses stress and establishes conducive atmosphere for discussion.
- **The development of excellent infrastructure**
- **Motivating and Building Confidence among Student that would also result in the end of Socio-Psychological Problems:** The teacher should handle the mistakes of students with utmost care, the modifications and suggestions should be given in friendly way without hurting and damaging the inquisitiveness of learners. Learning should be made fun and enjoyment. Another important step which can be taken to boost the confidence level of students is that every school and college must have an alumni association which can organize lectures of alumni. Because there are some alumni of every school and college of even rural

areas who have achieved great heights in their respective careers. They should be invited to deliver talk. When the students find one among them successful he/she can easily connect and get motivated and inspired. Social networking sites like FB, Twitter and WhatsApp can be used for this purpose

- **Implementing Effective Method of Teaching:** The teacher while teaching English should use different methods of teaching. The different methods will make his teaching effective and interesting. No single method of teaching is self-sufficient. Every method has its merits and demerits, advantages and disadvantages.
- **Making Interactive classes and involving students in group discussion:** This is very unfortunate that most of the time there is one way traffic in class rooms where the teacher holds a very authoritative position. Skills can be achieved and mastered only through practice. No amount of theoretical knowledge is going to give learners performance. The teacher can help in having discussion and debates in class. Group discussion is unfailing and reliable method of teaching and learning.
- **The promotion of a work culture that discourages more talk and less work**
- **Balanced use of technology:** Technology can be an effective aid for teachers and students if used in the right way. The use of technology makes the learning process more convenient, reliable and productive. The audio-visual tools used not only provide students with the supplementary aid to improve their language skills but also helps in igniting and maintaining a keen interest in reading. The effectiveness of technology as an aid to learning is undeniable. But, it's credible and trustworthy solution that must be applied with discipline and determination. Technology, however, simple can be can be a daunting prospect in many classrooms, some teachers have never moved a mouse. Across the country there are schools where computers with projection ad installed under various schemes are unused – money and opportunity dissipated. The schemes initiated by the government don't yield the desired outcome for a number of reasons including poor teacher training and enablement. So, the government needs to take a thoughtful approach. The contracts can be awarded to bidders who can provide and operate computer labs over a certain period of time. The providers must deploy qualified personnel at each school and ensure the maintenance of equipment.)
- **Keeping in Mind the Aims and Objectives of Teaching:** Most of the times the objectives of teaching English are not well-defined and clear. If the 'why' is not clear then 'how' cannot be clear. The clarity of purpose will give the teacher direction. These aims are: 1. To enable the students to comprehend English when spoken. 2. To enable the students speak in English. 3. To enable students to read English 4. To enable students to write English. These primary aims must be clear.

To conclude, I would say in education the government has the focus on some basics providing bicycles for kids at secondary levels to go to schools, school uniforms, school lunch, but the government hasn't been able to deal with quality in the classroom. The quality of education is not to be measured by its length and breadth, but only by its depth. (Vinoba) Other important steps which can be taken to obtain the satisfactory outcome in English teaching to rural students

are: there must be regular test of teachers' progress and students should be given equal opportunities in terms of education. The most firm pillar which promoted the transformation of Singapore from a Third World country to a First World nation is equality of educational opportunity. The "Equality of educational opportunity in Singapore has helped the nation climb the world rankings in education" (The Hindu 30 March 2015) There must not be disparity and discrimination in educational opportunity. Now, the pertinent question arises how Singapore could succeed in ensuring the equality of educational opportunity and that country like India must emulate. The establishment of excellent government schools catering to the first twelve years of education is one of them. The teacher should strive to arouse in students thirst for knowledge. They should be taught how to acquire knowledge independently for themselves. "Let us teach them how to teach themselves."

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