

## English Language Teaching in rural areas: Threats and Challenges

**Dr. Neelu**

Associate professor  
Aditi Mahavidyalaya  
University of Delhi  
Bawana  
Delhi

### Abstract

“English in India is a global language in a multilingual country” (National Curriculum Framework, 2005: p38). This statement succinctly states the dilemma facing English language teaching and learning in rural India. English, as a language of communication, has played a significant role in being the ladder to success in different stages of life. It is known to open vistas of knowledge and create opportunities of career advancement. It is the language of diplomacy, education, judiciary, administration and information technology. However, if we examine the status of language teaching in India, we realize it is in a deplorable state. The think tanks of the policy making have time and again, emphasized in the importance of inculcating the right skills in rural students so that they become adept at the use of English Language. The present paper is an attempt to study the lacunae in the efforts of the Education Commission and an analysis of the reasons for the follies in implementation. The major roadblocks in conception and execution of policies lie in the high rate of poverty, joint family system, patriarchy, lack of exposure, unavailability of study material, lack of qualified teachers, improper pedagogy, lack of motivation, high teacher student ratio and faulty examination system. On the one hand language learning is a golden opportunity for the lesser privileged rural set of students, but on the other hand this opportunity is wrought with threats and challenges that need urgent attention and intervention so that the gap between planning and action is bridged.

**Keywords:** Language, English, teaching, problem, threats, challenges.

### Introduction: -

Every learner of English language aspires employment after acquisition of this skill. English proficiency, both in speaking and writing, takes you closer to your goal - be it the government sector or private sector. English has assumed a global status because it is the lingua franca of

interaction and communication. No wonder, every student, be it in the rural or urban sector, aspires to learn this language. The problem arises when the learning of English is the second language for students residing in villages to whom English is only introduced in secondary school. With limited access to study material their learning is restricted to text books, the contents of which are usually delivered by teachers who are not properly trained. When these set of rural students are expected to apply their learning in real life situations they fail miserably because their learning is theoretical not practical. The aim should be to develop suitable strategies which can be adapted to suit the requirement of specific student groups. This will not only reduce the difficulties for slow learners but will also help to give a better exposure to students whose learning is dwarfed due to their habitation. The methods of communication have undergone pedagogical transitions with several sociological and economic and variables that have impacted learning English as a language. Efforts need to be made to understand the factors that retard learning and techniques that can hopefully help to overpower the impediments. One needs to keep in mind that language is the foundation of all other learning and if the edifice is strong the building of language around its pillars of reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary will be automatically strong.

### **Developing language Competence: - Issues at hand:**

Developing competence in English, where it is a second language of communication is a big challenge. At a national level, the difficulty increases due to multi-cultural and multilingual society but when it comes to rural-urban divide the problem assumes newer problems. The problem is as great for the learner as it is for the teacher. There is a subtle sense of uneasiness and reluctance in rural students due to inferiority complex. This hinders the learning process and prevents them from honing skills of English language learning and teaching. We need to research the reasons that seep into slow acquisition of language in rural pockets. The next step is to formulate suitable strategies using innovation and experimentation so that students feel adequately motivated to learn. Appropriate remedial measures need to be put in place so that the challenges facing rural language acquisition can be rectified. There need to be proper training programmes and knowledge needs to be constantly updated. In short, suitable conditions need to be cultivated for language learning to bloom and there is effective learning outcome. These techniques help to overcome impediments that come in the way of learning of English for students in rural India. In such areas, English serves a very limited purpose and teaching the language becomes even more challenging. Infrastructure is also sparse adding to the woes. ICT facilities are minimal and teachers cannot innovate and infuse technology into language teaching and learning. Concentration levels are low because rural students are multitasking – education being just one of the many things they do. Their limited exposure to newspapers, magazines and media comes in the way of vocabulary mastery and their word bank remains scarce. Students in

rural areas also lack a sense of discipline compared to their urban counterparts. The reason may be lack of seriousness about learning English because life can go on for them even if this skill is not learnt. Even if they have computers, they are unfamiliar with technology- this applies to both teachers and students. The teachers have not bothered to upgrade their skills ever since they were accorded a cushioned job in government sectors; so professional development is a concept alien to them. Facilities and resources are limited and time is a major constraint because most of the times their services are required for other errands. What is needed is to devise techniques and strategies that can be metamorphosed to suit the proficiency level of the students. Newer ways of teaching must be introduced to reenergize how English language is taught and learn so that the ultimate aim of teaching a language for a lifetime can be achieved. There should be provision for motivational feedback so that the teachers have an opportunity to indulge in self-reflection and they make genuine efforts to revolutionize the ways in which they teach students from rural areas. The task is ever more challenging, painstaking and daunting when your target group require a base on which language needs to be constructed and the foundation is weak. The need of the hour is revive the text books, rejuvenate curriculum, good planning and execution along with training programmes for teachers. This will ensure skill development for English as language and real life learning evolves naturally.

We need to introspect as to why the level of performance is low in rural areas. This systemic analysis will help to identify the problem and seek solutions to overcome them lack of exposure in real life situation and lack of practice worsens the cause. The rural upbringing and surrounding and interaction in locale and society where a particular dialect dominates further pushes English to the status of a second language. This also deprives them of the opportunity to practice because they have no hands- on situation and occasion to practice what they have learnt in a classroom. However the desire to speak and write fluent English is latent and the English language learning centres bring out this dormant wish and students are ready to shell out huge sums of money for rapid to mastery over the language. They mushrooming of such centres claim to teach flawless speaking skills within a span of few hours. The newest trend in villages in the race to get children admitted in convent schools so that the seeds of learning are sown early. Sadly, however, there is little help because problems like inadequate practice and insufficient training of teachers in handling pedagogy and apply necessary transitions defeats the purpose. Thus, in spite of best of efforts such English medium schools fail to bridge the gap between government and private schools specially where English language learning and teaching is concerned. Another major mental block in rural areas is that teachers try to compartmentalize language into isolated parts – grammar is harped on and there is minimal focus on listening and vocabulary building.

Mugging up rules of grammar leads to rote learning which is detrimental to sustained learning. English is not a subject that can be learnt by such part learning methods. There has be integration

of reading, writing speaking, listening, grammar and vocabulary – but rarely does it happen in rural India. The result is that language fails to serve any functional purpose and competency is a rare dream. National curriculum framework 2005 clearly states, “the goals for a second language curriculum are twofold: attainment of basic proficiency such as is acquired in natural language learning and the development of language into an instrument for abstract thought and knowledge acquisition through literacy.”

Another challenge rural academic institutes are that there are multiple dialects that are so ingrained in individuals that learning and teaching new language poses a serious threat. These dialects have further regional dialects. The role and function assumed by English in urban areas is played by regional languages in rural areas. The result is that after limping through staggered learning and memorizing to pass the examination but when they move into institutes of higher learning they have little or nothing to identify with the language because their learning had been compartmentalized. “We know that in a land of multiple languages and socio-cultural environments every child is fluent in her first language.” (Chomsky, 1995). The general trend is that in rural areas a student walks into school with his / her native language and after the initial few classes is forced to switch to English. The New Education Policy does aim to address this anomaly. Sudden transition leads to the language remaining alien to the learner. As they progress higher in education, English becomes the language of instruction- debates and discussion happen in English and all official formalities are pre-dominantly in English. Now, the student suddenly realizes that he / she is at loss because there is neither competency in the language nor can the student handle the language for the purpose of communication. In spite of all our appreciation for regional languages the fact remains that English has become a global language and we do need competency in English for success. It commands a higher status over other languages. We may bask in the glory of our regional dialects but suddenly life throws us in a situation where our comfort and command over English become the benchmark of our knowledge. “Even in this era of globalization where educators are motivated to recognize the need for multilingualism as a resource.” (Agnihotri, 2007). Keeping in mind this enhanced important it can be assumed that there is no alternative to learning this language. The aim of the teacher should be to increase the engagement and participation in the entire process of learning and teaching so that all the discomfort associated with the subject are eased. It should naturally transform into the language of communication, sharing ideas and thoughts. If the teacher wishes that his / her discourses in class are meaningful, the transaction has to be seamless and the comfort level of the student must be maximized.

### **Rejuvenating language learning for rural learners: From Flawless planning to seamless implementation: -**

The first and most impactful strategy to revitalize deliverance of English language in rural institutions of higher education is to revamp the curriculum. If the desired result is to be

accelerated the curriculum should be designed in such a way that the learner is able to understand the rationale of the objectives of teaching.

Critically the designers of the framework of learning should examine the texts prescribed and check if they are learner centric and the learning is not limited to analysis of the text in hand, but be able to carry their learning in real life situations. Merely suggesting texts with which the students cannot relate to, are a waste of time and will yield no result. The infrastructure availability and the motivation level of the student are equally important; so is the socio-economic level and the mindset of the target group. The environment in which the student is learning serves as a breeding ground for language learning. The profile of the instructor needs to be monitored and upskilling needs to be done through ELT training programmes. Workshops specially designed to handle rural background students need to be conducted. The class size i.e the teacher student ratio should be rational so that teaching can be implemented effectively. The instruction time should be planned keeping in mind the concentration span of the learners. The activities should be locally based and conversation practice, too, should happen for situations with which students can identify with. In short, the strategies for learning should revolve around outcome. Learning strategies is generally defined “as the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help learners comprehend, learn or ration new information.” (O’ Malley and Chamot, 204 pg. 385) This clearly indicates that if the learning pedagogy is enveloped in ambiguity there will never be real learning and outcome desired will be defeated. “Although researchers assume that many studies in second language acquisition are fruitful for language teaching but the implications of such strategies should be done judiciously” (Lightbown as cited in Nassaji 2012, pg 385)

The number of students desirous of learning and mastering English as a language is increasing in rural belts and creating a challenge for in-service teachers and questioning the general education setting. Research based best practices that encompass all the problems and identify the challenges facing these students need to be devised. The fact that teachers lack the basic preparation and training should be recognized and worked on. Their limited exposure and information on pedagogical practices should be improved through ELT master’s training programmes. Even the quality of such programmes should be verified and implementation in real classroom situations must be observed.

### **Conclusion: -**

A lot of strategies are available for language teaching but there is no “One size fit all” approach. The old notion that only a teacher knows best or only experience can teach what works well in class need to be changed. A more open approach that is based on experimentation and innovation

needs to be adopted and refined to match the changing scenarios. There is a dire need to blend information and communication technology to revamp the way language is taught in a class. However, the use of ICT in rural areas should be made judiciously. The students have little or no exposure to technology so it should not come as a bombardment but gently integrated in the curriculum. The teachers need to come out of their shells and show dynamism to evolve newer ways of handling English Language to rural learners so that their motivation levels can be enhanced. "It should be borne in mind that any decision made regarding the Methodology to be used in classroom or any innovation introduced in the curriculum trigger ongoing alterations in the general context of the language teaching and learning process." (White, 1998; Johnson 1989). The changes introduced should be such that they impart the much needed momentum to the teaching of English and simultaneously enrich the ideological and practical gain and relevance of learning. Since, in rural areas, there is no active role of English outside the classroom, the first and foremost aim should be to merge teaching and learning in such a way that the teacher is just a facilitator in the process and the emphasis is on the outcome. The psychological barrier and reluctance to learn in rural areas also see do to be addressed.

English cannot and should not be compartmentalized into bogies of information; rather it is a set of skills to be learned and must be handled accordingly. Overcrowded classrooms hamper learning, so the size of the classroom should be ideal to optimize proficiency in language and allow opportunity for discussion and active participation and learning. The aim should not be to "prepare" for examination and "pass" but "prepare" for life situations and "pass" the test in real situations demanding knowledge of subject. Boring, outdated, mundane texts should be done away with newer lively texts must be introduced.

To conclude, the paper has highlighted the challenges and issues facing teachers and students in learning English as a language in rural areas. What we need are newer strategies to overcome these threats posed so that there is a change in attitude and an impetus to learning can be given. "A quick switch in the pendulum from the teacher to the learner took place with the learner becoming a pivotal element in the learning process and the teacher adopting new roles apart from the traditional ones as animator, collaborator, dynamiser, mentor, assessor and facilitator." (Wright, 1987).

## References

- Baker, C. (2000) the care and education of young bilinguals : An introduction to professionals, Tonawanda. N.Y.
- Oxford. R. (2001) Integrated skills in ESL /EFL classroom eric digest ED456670.
- Alam, Q.Z. (2016) issues : linguistic and pedagogic, New Delhi sterling.

- Brown, H.D. (2008) Principles of language learning and teaching, New York Pearson.
- Chamsky (1987) Syntatic structures Mouton
- Eaglestone, R (2006) Doing English, Great Britain Rontledge.
- Crystal David, English as a global language, second edition 2003, Cambridge university press new york.
- Teaching English org. the British council accessed on 11 Sept. 2020.
- Light bown. P. (2004) classroom SLA research and second language teaching <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3586098>.
- Kannan R (2009) Difficulties in learning English as a second language ESP world.