

## Teaching English in Rural Areas of Haryana: Challenges and Approach

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### Abstract

Teaching English in a small town of Haryana where a majority of students hail from rural backgrounds is a challenging task, some of the challenges being insurmountable and sometimes disheartening. The only saving grace is the curious, innocent faces of the students who are eager to learn and hold their English teacher in high esteem, which prompts us, as teachers, to find ways to get better of the problems being faced by us and make teaching of English interesting and pleasurable.

The present paper is a modest attempt, based on my own experiences, to understand and analyze the challenges and roadblocks coming in the way of our teaching of English as a second language in a classroom of Haryana, where students often resort to Haryanvi dialect to communicate. It also offers some approaches to the teaching of English which make the language come alive in classrooms, making teaching and learning a lasting, enriching and enjoyable experience.

Keywords: English, English Language teaching, Rural students, CLT, Approaches, ESL, EFL

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There are enormous challenges before the teacher of English in a regional area like a small town of Haryana. The first and foremost is the socio cultural and linguistic background of the students who hail from the rural areas, which makes them a “non English” per se. Having said that, I would like to clarify that I don’t mean to undermine their limited knowledge of English owing to their background but putting it in perspective that they have not been privileged enough to have studied in an urban school which would have given some foundation to their English language skills. For a major chunk of this student body, the only motivation to study English is to pass the examination and not learn the basic communication skills. Unfortunately, some teachers are also driven to their classes with the same purpose of preparing the students for exams and hence, completing the prescribed syllabus in the most orthodox way, lecture method. They are given limited number of hours in the class and the cherry on the cake is the large classrooms, the strength reaching upto more than hundred also in some cases. Dilapidated infrastructure and lack of technologically sound classrooms add to the woes of teachers, who are already in soup as regards the teaching of a ‘foreign’ language to innocent simpletons of Haryana. Also, there is no facility provided by the institution to provide some kind of extra resources/materials to students, if required. If the teachers wish to do so, they have to make arrangements on their own, at their own expense. One more and very serious challenge is the lack of training for college teachers to equip them better to teach and meet the required standards of teaching English. All these and more “affective factors”<sup>i</sup> are impediments to learning English language.

However, amidst these dark clouds of challenges, I see a silver lining and that is the curiosity and sense of wonder in the students for whom English is a muse which they want to evoke and please. Internally, they want to learn the language and achieve mastery over its basic skills but because they have been so deprived of this privilege ever since their academic journey started, and are now clearly lagging behind in its knowledge, they have now started shying away from making any perceptible attempts to learn it. As mentioned earlier, their motivation is just to write a few answers and get qualifying marks in the exams. Students are well aware of the inevitability of English language learning for contending in the outside world, especially the job market and they want to learn means and ways to achieve this end. Here, the role of the teacher becomes very important. A teacher who is empathetic and sensitive towards the needs of the

students, finds ways to surmount these challenges and work for the benefit of the students. Apart from being sensitive, the teacher should also be able to understand the heterogeneity of the class and devise strategies suiting the needs of everyone involved in the learning process. Another requisite of good teachers is their resourcefulness. I have always believed that this quality outshines all others, in a teacher. By being resourceful, it means that the teacher should be able to procure related material and literature and other useful resources to the classroom to make learning multi dimensional, interesting and enjoyable. I shall dwell on this point further a little later in my paper.

### Approach

George Yule in his book *The Study of Language* divides the motivation to learn the language in two categories: instrumental motivation, i.e. willingness to “learn the second language in order to achieve some other goal, such as completing a school graduation” (passing the exams in Indian context) etc but “not really for any social purposes”, and integrative motivation i.e. to “learn the language for social purposes, in order to take part in the social life of a community using that language and to become an accepted member of the community.”<sup>iii</sup> (a kind of acquiring proficiency in the language). Majority of students and teachers tend to fall into the first category, teaching and learning for the sake of passing exams, without making any efforts for the second category. I can say that my approach to teaching these rural students of Haryana is based on the combination of the above mentioned two types of motivation. We study our prescribed syllabi and also learn English outside that along the way, always keeping the students at the centre of the process.

While dealing with the prescribed texts, I try to teach in context and situation. I divide the teaching process of a particular piece in three parts--pre reading, while reading and post reading. For all the three parts, I try to devise methods and activities which make the student feel a part of the teaching learning process by being equally involved in it. Rather, it wouldn't be wrong to say that a major percentage of the lessons starts with the inputs that the students are made to give, related to the topic under discussion and I take off from there, gradually soaring with their ideas and finally connecting them to the text which is underway. For example, before starting a

poem/prose/drama, I would ask them to guess what could that be about by looking at the title. Allowing them to brainstorm (sometimes as individuals and sometimes as small groups), I write their ideas on the chalkboard, to be deliberated on, after a while. Sometimes I write the title on the board and ask them to give me one word that comes to their mind after looking at the title. Creating a semantic web on the board around the title, I make broad categories of the words, (such as five words that are similar in meaning and context would be put together) and then finally arriving at the category which is closest in its meaning and relevant to the text under discussion. *All* the words given by the students find a space on the board and there are no rights or wrongs. This exercise automatically leads us to the theme of the text rather than the exhausted teacher narrating it to the yawning students. Another way to do pre reading is to ask pre reading questions from the students. For example, before starting the story, “Am I Blue” by Alice Walker I would ask the students a series of questions to put things in context and situation. The questions like--- do they know anything about animal language, have they ever wished they could communicate with or understand animal language, do they have any experience of keeping a pet animal and what kind of experience do they think the animal is having with them—would help me arrive at introducing the theme of the story—animal cruelty. The story is also about Alice Walker converting to vegetarianism from non vegetarianism on account of her disgust over the horrendous treatment of animals in her neighborhood, so I could also speak to the students about their choices to remain vegetarian or non vegetarian and what is the deciding factor for them, which would take us to Alice Walker’s decision to choose vegetarianism as a way of life after this incident in the story. There are no right and wrong answers and each answer finds a way to the teacher.

For the ‘while reading’ category, I ask short, simple questions in between to facilitate comprehension and break the monotony in between sometimes relating the text with real life situations as mentioned earlier and also finding reasons to talk outside the text but within the context. The purpose of asking questions is to involve and encourage more and more students to be forthcoming in giving answers. ‘Post reading’ finds ways to conclude the chapter by giving some extra reading to students which is related to the chapter recently completed; sometimes I make thematic units (two or three short, simple pieces of literature with the related theme to read and reflect and discuss). Sometimes, if there’s a scope, I show them visual representations of the theme of the text in English language and leave it to them to make sense and meaning of it , not

translating it in their mother tongue. This exercise has always worked well as it gives them exposure to the language—reading and listening skills.

Apart from teaching in context and making the students relate to the text and characters by making connections, intensive oral interaction in English is also important but we all know it is not possible in a regional classroom owing to the students from non English background. We simply cant be monolingual in a regional English class. At the same time, one way to to teach students the language is to give them maximum exposure of it and the teacher can do it by being a standard modal of spoken English for students. L. Sauveur said that ‘a foreign language could be taught without translation if meaning was conveyed directly through demonstration and action. we can certainly make a difference by using the language effectively in a classroom<sup>iii</sup>.

We live in a technologically advanced world, we see its usage and effects everywhere and all around us but unfortunately, it is still far away from being used in the classrooms. Why cant we show our students an episode of Malgudi days before teaching the text prescribed? Why cant we simply make the students hear the phonetic sounds on an audio device rather than teaching by pronouncing these sounds which have an influence of our native accent. For example, many students of Haryana find problem is pronouncing ‘s’ and ‘sh’ , they would call a seat a sheet and vice versa. Similarly, students in UP would call a school an ‘iskool’ and similarly some teachers have that accent too. What would be better than Hearing the sounds as native say them ? I particularly remember playing ‘pleasure’ vision’ and similar words again and again to make my students learn the sound /3/..... . similar is the case with/ z/ , and. /d3/, if it was not for a loud and clear audio device , I wouldn’t have been able to make my students ever say ,’pleasure’.

Many critics have put several theoretical formulations about the learning and acquisition of English language. Some others have laid emphasis on a pragmatic approach and criticized the teaching of heavy structures of grammar and rules saying that “language is a set of habits and we should teach the language not about the language.”<sup>iv</sup> Mubina Fazili also says in her book *Communicative Methods in ELT* , that “students should be concerned with “using” language rather than the “usage”.<sup>v</sup> This is true of a classroom situation too. Apart from their prescribed grammar topics, we should give the students ample opportunity to explore the language in various ways. Planning simple activities around the four basic skills can make teaching and learning so enjoyable and lasting. I start my classes with a “warm up” exercise , to set the tone

and mood for an English class. In the warm up, we just look at some fun with English. Doing anagrams, palindromes, fun facts, unusual words, contradictions in the language and have fun doing it. As soon as I enter, the class is beaming with excitement and anticipation of what “fun” awaits them. For example— to facilitate listening , I play songs on the audio system and give students handouts with lyrics of the song, omitting a few words/phrases. Students are asked to listen and fill in the blanks with what they understood. This activity is an instant hit with the students and they keep asking for more and more songs. The songs can be chosen depending upon the level of the students, from beginners to advanced. I also show a lot of videos related to the chapters or otherwise, which would evoke the interest of students and leave it to them to understand. For speaking—an all time favorite is “who am I” ? we write names of some famous people on slips of paper and ask students to pick one randomly, they have to assume themselves to be that person and describe him/her so that others could guess the correct name. another one is “two truths and a lie” in which students take turns to stand up and say three sentences about themselves, two of them would be true and one false, the others who are sitting have to guess which one that is. For reading skills, I provide them lot of parallel thematic units, as mentioned earlier , to silently read, reflect upon and discuss in the class. This activity has worked really well with students as they are given exposure to literature other than the prescribed units, which they would themselves never turn to. It can be anything—a piece of news report, an article in a bollywood magazine, a story from children’s literature etc—anything and everything that generates the interest of the students in the class. This is where the resourceful teacher comes to the scene, who widens and broadens their horizons finding any useful material and bring it to the class. As far as writing is concerned, I generally ask the students to assume themselves to be the protagonist from the text under discussion, and write the story from their point of view. For example, I ask them to assume that they are Blue, the horse from the story “Am I Blue” and write his feelings. I also then relate it with the classic *Black Beauty* to give them more exposure and more chance to explore literature. I agree that The students do commit errors and are far from being proficient in the respective skills and many of us, and I am not excluding myself, feel disheartened by those errors but, as Yule says in *The Study of Language*, “an error is not something that hinders a student’s progress, but is probably a clue to the active learning progress being made by the students as she or he tries out ways of communicating in the new language. The example of ‘womans’ rather than ‘woman’ might be seen as a type of overgeneralization of

‘s’ as the plural maker, used by the learner in accordance with the most common way of making plural forms in English.”<sup>vi</sup> So we should not regard errors in a negative manner and show acceptance, and we can subtly correct them too.

In short, the prescribed texts themselves give us many chances to make the language come alive in the classroom. The need is to look for those chances and capitalize on them for the benefit of students. Complaining and moaning about problems and challenges is not going to take us anywhere, we need to conquer those challenges, for they are not insurmountable and do justice to the keenness and enthusiasm that the students have, the hope that they entrust upon us and the seeds of faith that they sow in our hearts and mind.

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