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English Teaching in Colleges: The Ideal and the Real

Abstract

English language teaching has been going on for centuries. However, not much has been achieved as far as the methods and materials to be followed for teaching this language are concerned. English language has been taught to students for 12-14 years in schools. Even after having learnt English for twelve years in high school, students do not seem to have acquired the ability to use the language appropriate in different contexts. They are not able to listen and comprehend lectures delivered in college classrooms and they are also not able to communicate effectively with others in English. They are not able to write or speak in flawless English. The moot questions are where lies the problem and who are to be blamed - teachers, students, curriculum, teaching methodology or evaluation patterns.

Keywords: teachers, students, curriculum

1. Introduction

The classical assumption that academic knowledge is an end in itself has undergone a tremendous change in the present global scenario where proficiency in Spoken English has acquired enormous importance. The market is always flooded with people possessing

knowledge in Medicine, Engineering, Architecture, Accountancy etc. But the person who has knowledge plus ability to express his ideas coherently in English is undoubtedly headed for higher success rate. But in the present Indian context, the lack of proficiency in Spoken English among youngsters is the biggest lacuna in their personalities. Despite the realization of the government and the academicians across the country of the growing need of communication skills in the present era, there are numerous stumbling blocks which are responsible for the lackadaisical approach towards English. The ingrained prejudice towards English normally begins at the secondary and higher secondary level when majority of the students are torn between the traditional career choices – to be doctor or to be engineer. At this stage majority of the students neglect the importance of English which ultimately results in their inability to communicate and write effectively. They realize the importance of this language when they graduate and enter the world of breakneck competition. So, here begins their realization and struggle for enhancing the art of presenting themselves effectively in English which lands them in the coaching classes for English improvement. God knows how successfully they come out of these institutes within a short span of 2-3 months when they have been neglecting the integral aspect for years!

2. Objectives of Teaching English at the University Level

The main purpose of teaching English at the university level is in acquiring by the learner of facility in the use of English in situations demanding great degree of control. The facility in the use of English should be in speaking, reading and writing, although in each of these aspects the marks of attainment assume different and distinct dimensions. For example, in oral expression, the form, manner, and theme matter. In reading, from deep comprehension, a keener appreciation has to be developed. Writing calls for from simple presentation of matter to creative and original expression. There are degrees of attainment

that can be set forth as goal as there are kinds of attainers. The need to stress the teaching of the skill of communication at the college level was highlighted in the reports of the two Study Groups of University Grants Commission in 1977. The situation has not altered substantially since then - nor is it likely to. The first study group recommended the reorientation of the compulsory English course 'literature' to a course in language skills, and the introduction of 'two-tier courses' in English at the degree level. It desired a skill-based teaching with emphasis on comprehension for the lower level, and greater emphasis on written and Spoken English for the higher level. The second Study Group also followed suit by proposing the diversification of courses. Though there were not many proposals made for courses to be offered at the college level, as part of the degree requirement, it was suggested that the principle of diversification was to be extended to the regular courses offered by colleges. It was assumed that the students at the first year degree level would have had about seven (5+2) years of exposure to English learning, and at the intermediate level it would have been largely remedial, and that at this level, the student would have acquired a minimal proficiency in the fundamental skills of 'general service' English. The suggestion was, beyond this point, teaching should aim at:

- a) Equipping the student with the communication skills necessary to cope with the situation he is likely to encounter; and
- b) Providing the kind of 'information content which is relevant to contemporary culture'.

The first aim points at teaching skills related to areas of occupational specialization, whereas the second aim involves the study of texts of general, contemporary nature which will lead to the students' awareness of the day-today social and cultural issues. This brings in the question of considering specialized versus general needs. The B.A./ B.Sc./ B.Com.

Students may need a sort of general English, because the types of occupation they are likely to acquire are government posts (both administrative and clerical), banking employments, teaching, and private business and industrial undertakings.

Students who opt for specialized careers like engineering, information technology, medicine, law etc, on the other hand, need a programme closely related to their specific disciplines.

3. The Place of English Teaching in Colleges

Tradition has generally accepted that the teacher, like the poet, is born not made; that the college professor is scholar with a good command of his subject; that the college professor of English has not only a broad knowledge of his subject and related fields, but also can express himself clearly and fluently in English. This image of college teacher is perhaps responsible for his acceptability into the profession without any professional training, although the high school teacher cannot enter his profession unless he obtains a diploma or degree from a training college. The work of the English lecturer is, thus, fundamental, and is now regarded as being so by most educationalists. The premium being placed currently on the teaching of English at the college level may be taken to indicate the following:

1. Whatever the attitudes to English might have been in the past, learning the language seems now to be a widely accepted objective.
2. Some proficiency in English is considered essential for higher professional and vocational education. Since the college level is the transitional stage between school and university, it is important that the student be helped at this stage to acquire the English which he needs to continue his studies in any chosen field of either a general or professional nature.

3. It is becoming increasingly difficult to provide the student with the required command of the language at the school level. Already, there are students who come to college with almost no command of English. In other case, the length of prior exposure to English varies from three to six years which doesn't make it easy to assume any common level for them. For practical purposes, the effective learning of English may well begin in college for many.

The deterioration in the teaching of English at the school level is another reason for emphasizing the need for a new methodology in the college level teaching. The majority of teachers in schools are not adequately equipped to teach English. Attempts are continually being made to improve their professional competence, but sheer numbers work against success. It may, however, be possible to achieve better results with teachers at the college level since (i) there are fewer of them; (ii) they generally have the basic competence in English that teachers of the school level often lack; and (iii) they are required to teach only English – unlike the teachers in school and can be trained to become specialists.

Students entering colleges often fall short of the standards expected of them. The college teacher now has to provide much of the elementary learning which should have taken place at school. Worse still, he has to wipe out the effects of bad learning which, if allowed to linger, would militate against further learning. Clearly, the college teacher cannot do in a year or two everything that is supposed to be done in six years at school. He cannot be expected to give all his students a thorough mastery of the English language.

He has to limit the scope of his teaching, to confine it to what is absolutely essential. If limited objectives are chosen, it may be possible to produce some results.

But basically, the reason for insisting on more efficient teaching at the college level is that there seems to be a tendency, in some states of delaying the teaching of English in schools. Pedagogically, it is better to start the teaching of languages early. Most experts recommend that the teaching of English should begin in the fifth or sixth class. But the

different states, each with its own pattern of education, have different views on this. There are some which have decreed that the study of English be made optimal at the school level.

This doesn't, however, prevent the student from experiencing need for English when he comes to college.

4. The Comprehension of Oral English in the U.G Classes

The large number of failures in the external examinations in English and in other subjects taught in English prompts the question of the levels of achievement in oral comprehension at the university level. In universities, where lectures are the chief means of instruction, many failures can be traced to the inability of the student to comprehend Spoken English. Many of them are virtually shut out from a vital source of information and learning because they are unable to understand English when it is spoken.

In India, English is taught as a second language for utilitarian purposes. Comprehension should be the first step to language learning in the classroom because reading and listening without comprehension is a useless activity. Better comprehension takes place when the reader has overcome the difficulties of a vocabulary of unfamiliar words, grammatical structures, concepts and ideas, and precisely this is what does not happen in the Under-Graduate classes today. Comprehension deficiency is regarded as a matter of concern by the teachers of English because the communication activities of most of the students today exhibit a severe dearth of language skills. They lack comprehension of the subject, either the matter or the manner, or both. If ever they comprehend anything they are not able to express it as they are deficient in the communication skills. Therefore, it is essential to place greater emphasis on the understanding of what they read, and the communication of what they understand. Some training in the comprehension of written material is given in the work on course books and readers and the examination has a section

to test this skill. However, oral comprehension is not examined at the exam. It has not yet been recognised as a skill to be carefully cultivated. The neglect of comprehension aspect of language learning is seen in:

- (a) a lack of effort on the part of the teacher to train his pupils in the skills required for oral comprehension, and a corresponding lack of interest on the part of the pupil;
- (b) an inability to understand Spoken English even after six or seven years of study;
- (c) waste of time and energy by students and teachers in university classes where ability to follow lectures is a condition for success;
- (d) a lack of working efficiency in those who take up jobs after college caused by inability to understand instructions and follow them;
- (e) a general falling away in the habits of attention, analysis and organization of material, when listening to a conversation, a lecture or any other mode of oral communication.

If a student is able to comprehend a passage in English by himself, his comprehending ability can be rated as good, and his sense of target language as adequate to assist him in comprehending the documents given in the target language. What happens in the U.G classroom today is not an attempt to improve the comprehension skills. Because of one constraint or other, the teacher, instead of becoming a facilitator of comprehension competence, serves as a crutch for comprehension. Once the crutch is removed, the learner is unable to comprehend on his own.

The present system of the teachers providing in capsule form the content of the text books, and the students memorizing the text as given by the teacher, is a hindrance to developing the comprehension competence. The learning of the target language in a more fruitful way can be promoted only if this system is changed and the learners are made to comprehend the text on their own, the teacher aiding them in the process and instilling the

confidence to reinforce the language use. In the present system, the language doesn't register itself naturally in the learner's mind because the text book is not used to learn the language, but only as a means to pass the examination. Paraphrasing and translation cannot produce much learning. The texts have to be used to create some interaction in the classroom, the reader has to visualize an experience of his own while dealing with particular text.

Stressing the study of English for purpose of comprehension in the U.G class, V.K. Gokak recommends the study of one non – detailed text in the form of book of one – act plays or short stories or a short unabridged novel, with simplified or abridged novels provided for supplementary reading. The English Review Committee too, stressed the improvement of passive vocabulary and reading ability of the U.G student, by stressing the following study material i) passages of modern English prose simplified in vocabulary; (ii) a book of short stories or plays or a short novel – again in simplified language – to be used as supplementary reading material; and (iii) adaptation of interesting stories written in controlled vocabulary of nearly three thousand words to be read under supervision during one tutorial period.

5. The Difficulties of the College Lecturer of English

The problems that a lecturer of English in a college classroom faces are manifold. Among them are:

- (a) large, frequently unmanageable numbers of students;
- (b) the lack of interest in English, sometimes bordering in hostility ;
- (c) the heavy burden of an unrealistic syllabus;
- (d) the sheer difficulty, for most students, in understanding the prescribed texts;

(d) the unsuitability of most of these texts for the purposes of teaching the language;

(f) the lack of physical facilities which could make intensive teaching possible;(e.g., smaller groups, libraries, language laboratories, etc.);

(g) the outmoded system of examination which tests memory rather than control of language and makes it possible for students to 'pass' in English with the help of cribs, without having learnt the language.

The standard of English among college students may vary from excellent to poor – some college students seem to have arrived at college without ever hearing spoken as many as two English words together. And very often they cannot write as many as two words without making the most elementary mistakes. The students themselves are not to be blamed. Often they began to learn English late in life. Sometimes they have learned – or failed to learn – from teachers who were badly equipped to teaching English, badly equipped because their own English was not very good and also they learned antiquated and cumbrous methods of teaching language that are impossible to apply in modern conditions in India. There is also passivity about many students that makes the tasks of teaching difficult; this may be the result of the traditional master and disciple method of teaching. The passivity is the result of bad classroom discipline, of large classes, of teachers whose English was not very good, and of methods that were boring, badly applied and not understood by pupils and a disinclination on the part of disheartened teacher to get down to the real work of teaching of English language.

Faced with these difficulties, deterred by the conditions imposed upon them, the college lecturers take refuge in lecturing. Individual attention seems to be out of question; mistakes and misunderstandings are too numerous to correct; written work would appear to be an impossible chore. So the lecturer chooses the method that seems to him to go some way to achieving the goals of examination: he lectures. He holds forth on the beauties and

nobilities of the texts he has to teach; he expounds at length the notes. But when he finishes the period he has taught no English, nor has he taught the students to read textbooks for themselves.

Conclusion

All these have the effect of making the teacher and his efforts in the class somewhat irrelevant. But it would be unfair to blame the teacher for this as many of these problems relate to matters of organization and administration over which the teacher may have little control. This difficulty can be overcome to a great extent by understanding what exactly the lecturer is expected to do, what it is possible for him to achieve, and how he might go about it.

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