Challenging but Enjoyable English Language Teaching in Rural Areas: A Case Study of BPS Women University, Khanpur Kalan, Haryana

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Abstract

Teaching English in rural and difficult areas is an unplanned teaching/learning activity. In fact both the teacher and the taught are unaware of the effective pedagogical strategies. The reasons for such an unplanned perpetuation of English language teaching in such areas could be innumerable but a few are enumerated below.

- The teachers entrusted with the teaching of English are untrained and unqualified.
- The training provided is purely theoretical and bookish.
- Minimum intervention of technology and in majority of cases it is not available.
- Basic infrastructure is absent.
- The primary level of schooling is completely mismanaged and ignored.
- Heterogeneous classes.
- Substandard teaching material.
- Hostile socio-cultural factors.

My paper would explore the possibilities of evolving strategies for empowering and equipping the “English teacher” supposed to teach English in rural and difficult areas. In order to substantiate my points, the paper would be based on a case study of undergraduate classes of BPS Women University, which is situated in the most backward and rural part of Haryana State. (165 words)
The British applied linguist David Graddol says in his book *English Next India* (2010) that the official position of English in India remains that of a transitional necessity. But this position has been overtaken by events happening. For growing globalised urban middle class, English is playing a greater role in both their work and personal lives. According to a survey carried out by Indian television channel CNN-IBN in August 2009, 87% people feel that knowledge of English is important to succeed in life but 82% feel that knowing the State language is very important and interestingly 57% feel that English is making us forget our mother tongue. Isn't it a very confusing state of affairs as far as learning of English is concerned? But the fact remains that learning of English is inevitable for prospective job seekers. With this kind of situation, I have drawn my own conclusion that to succeed in life one should know at least three languages; the mother tongue, the national language and an international language. If English is an international language, then we must promote its systematic and planned learning.

**Dalit Goddess**

Here I would like to quote two very important Dalit activists; Meena Kandasamy from Tamil Nadu and Chandra Bhan Prasad from Uttar Pradesh. They argue that English is a key to Dalit emancipation- not just because of the opportunities for social mobility it provides, but because it allows escape from the traditional caste positioning which is encoded into the regional languages themselves. In fact English has been put forth as "Dalit Goddess". With this prologue to the importance of learning English it becomes imperative to evaluate English's status among the prospective work force which is students' community.

**Student Categories**

The whole spectrum of student population can be put under two categories; Dalits and non Dalits. By Dalits, I do not mean caste Dalits; widening the semantics of Dalit, it means deprived ones. We can use simple terms as rural and urban. Again by labeling them as rural and urban, I am not referring to their geographical locations. There are urban-rural and vice-versa. By these two terms again I mean deprived in terms of infrastructure of all kinds; educational, social, economical and familial. It is a known fact that rural students are completely marginalized as far as English is concerned. Cutting across the States and regions of India, students falling under rural category miss career opportunities because of being 'un-English'.

**ASER**

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2010 brought out by community based organization 'Pratham' reveals some startling facts about the poor educational standards in rural India. The report says that 50% of class Vth students find it difficult to read books of class IInd. 36% students of class Ist can not count from 1 to 9. The summary of the report points towards the quality of education being provided to the students of rural areas.

**English / Un-English**

That is the crux of my paper. Who has dalitised the rural students? What are the reasons for this dichotomy? What could be the effective measures to ameliorate and empower such students in terms of the knowledge of English skills? Though, I don't wish to deliberate on the reasons for this problem but candidly and I expect you all to agree with me; the rural society and family backgrounds are held responsible for being un-English of the rural students. Yes, to an extent they are responsible, but are they...
insurmountable? Look at the ambience a student has to encounter once he or she enters an educational institution situated in a rural area. Is the ambience similar in an urban and a rural educational institution? In an urban centre of learning, like teachers, peers, infrastructure, notice board, peon, clerk, sign boards, school bags, covers on the books and the notebooks, slogans written on the walls of the school/college, language of the reprimand by the teacher, homework etc. makes you feel 'English'. On the contrary, look at the paraphernalia in any rural school or college; it make you feel 'un-English' and in fact subaltern. These examples may appear trivial to some of you, but do matter a lot as far as learning or teaching of English is concerned. Almost all the teachers of English themselves admit their own children in the former category of learning centers, those who don't; I call them 'brave hearts'.

Grey Areas

Teaching of English in rural or difficult areas is definitely a challenge. It's a challenge in the sense that all theoretical knowledge acquired as part of ELT training goes haywire in the classroom. A teacher has to evolve strategies at every step and sometimes 'juggad' has to be used. Before I deliberate on the remedial measures, let us take an overview of the grey areas as far as teaching of English in rural areas is concerned.

- English as a phobia
- English treated as elite over other languages
- English as an indicator of social status
- taught like any other subject
- notional introduction of technology
- incompetent teachers
- jingoism
- substandard teaching material
- non-availability of basic infrastructure
- hostile socio-cultural factors

Important Parameters

There could be many more other reasons and are well known to all. This paper has been deliberately titled as 'challenging but enjoyable teaching of English in rural areas'. The process of English language teaching in rural areas is enjoyable because it involves innocent learners who look forward to an English teacher as God. I have narrowed down to three important parameters as far as teaching of English in rural areas is concerned.

- role of a teacher
- role of an institution
- role of technology

Role of a Teacher: Theories of language learning and even the great philosopher Aristotle have said that human beings are imitative by nature. A learner imitates a teacher's every utterance and gestures. The students in rural areas, who are very ignorant and first generation learners of English, treat a teacher's voice as sacrosanct. So it is very important that a teacher teaching English at any level; primary,
secondary or tertiary has to have a very good command over all the skills of English language. Unfortunately, cutting across the States of India, this is not so. In fact the situation at primary and secondary level is pathetic. Moreover in a State like Haryana there are no English teachers to teach English at primary level. Any Social Studies' teacher teaches English, assuming all is well. It is known to all those who are in the business of teaching language that critical age to learn a language is up to 04-05 years. One can imagine the intensity of damage done to a young learner. On the contrary I propose to the extent that there is no need to have exclusive English teachers at primary level at least. The logic is very simple; if teachers of all the subjects are very good at English, a learner masters the language automatically. On the contrary if non English teachers teach and communicate in vernacular (as most of the teachers do in rural areas), how could an English class of 45 minutes prove effective. The role of teacher becomes more challenging and demanding in rural areas because in such areas it is the teacher who is the model, to whom a student looks for all learning needs.

**Pedagogy**

As far as pedagogy is concerned, it is not simple to answer the question, 'how to teach?' In spite of the fact that there are various methods of teaching English, but practically none of the methods works effectively. In this age of communicative language teaching (CLT), we really can't discard Grammar Translation method. In case of rural students, mother tongue is one of the very effective tools of ELT. Translation into the mother tongue also helps a teacher in simplifying the nuances of English. Of course the limit or extent of translation has to be determined by the teacher. No method will tell a teacher, when and how much of translation has to be used; it is the teacher's discretion. E.g. while teaching pronunciation of words like TOMB, SEWER and CHORES, mother tongue like Hindi or Haryanvi is of great use. In Haryana traditional ornaments are called as toom........, rural students of Haryana instantly understand it, similarly Hindi words..............&................ can be used to make them understand the pronunciation of such words. The pair of phonetic sounds like............&.........., ......&........ are very problematic. Hindi can be very well used to clear this subtle difference in pronunciation by quoting Hindi words like................&................and................&................ There could be many more instances. And this way class becomes humorous too. Even while teaching the grammar topics like subject-verb concord or construction of a sentence, mother tongue can be of use. Any English sentence follows SVO pattern but a language like Hindi, sentence pattern followed is SOV. E.g. .................................................. Such instances of mother tongue use can help a student in avoiding mistakes in sentence patterning. Because rural students are first generation learners of English, an English teacher has to be very innovative in using mother tongue. In case of such students none of the theoretical frameworks of any of the ELT methods work foolproof.

Teaching of English in rural areas is like grand nanny's traditional prescriptions for routine ailments. Allopathic medicines may not work effectively with rural patients. I will come back to the point that in rural areas, each teacher irrespective of the subject of teaching must be good at the use of English so that maximum exposure to English could be rendered to a learner. A teacher's role in rural areas is immense as compared to urban areas because in an urban setting a learner has other models like family, peers, society, technology etc to imitate. A rural student has only a teacher to imitate and learn from.

**Role of an Institution:** The Educational institutions in rural areas are considered as temples of learning. That means school or college is considered a very sacrosanct, ideal place. Unfortunately the reality is not
so. In Hindi there is a saying which if translated in English, means 'hungry stomachs can not chant hymns'. The government construed this hunger literally and introduced 'mid-day meals scheme'. At least in Haryana this has proved a flop show. Schools have become eateries, and school teachers have become hotel (Dhaba) managers. On a serious note, who will provide ambience for English? A good ambience facilitates effective learning. The rural students come from poor families; they come to schools with lot of expectations. The shabby ambience in the school doubles their pangs of poverty. Having said that in rural areas majority of schools/ colleges are government run, but should it be assumed or accepted that government run institutes have to be shabby. How can you expect a learner to learn a language with out the basic needs like chalk, duster, blackboard, classrooms, fans, lights, clean drinking water etc? I am very sure, money is not a constraint. National schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) have lot of funds, so the minimum required ambience can be created. How can one implement uniform syllabus at two places like a school in Delhi and a school in a backward village of Haryana or Jharkhand. Uniformity in syllabus wants uniformity in infrastructure. So when I say role of an institution, I am urging policymakers, syllabus designers to take into consideration the ground realities and work towards bridging the wide gap. A rural student has to be given a special treatment in every sense.

To me any institution can play an important role in three key areas, namely:
a. providing qualitative learner friendly infrastructure.
b. recruitment of good English teachers: this is an inflammable issue. Look at the kind of teachers appointed by various State governments in rural areas. Considering their incompetence at using English or Will to use English, why should one expect miraculous results from them? Appointments are highly political and mere possession of degrees like Diploma in Education (D.Ed), Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) is sufficient to label somebody as an English teacher. I don't want to comment on the quality of D.Ed/B.Ed courses which are shamelessly theoretical and completely redundant.
c. Avenues for socio-cultural opportunities: in a rural school or college one hardly finds a chance to interact with the society/ community. The institutes should organize interactive activities to ensure participation of learners.

**Role of Technology:** 21st century is witnessing tremendous impact of technology on educational activities. The whole process of teaching and learning has been digitalized. Because of technology, language teaching has undergone a complete transformation. May it be Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Language Laboratories, use of CDs & Cassettes, Internet etc, a modern learner has all the technology to learn not only English but any foreign language provided he/ she has the money to buy this. But it is very painful that a rural learner is still in those dark ages and is completely marginalized as far as technological exposure is concerned. When even chalk, duster and black board are missing, expecting technology will be asking for sky. With this I am not saying that English language can't be taught without technology. No body can undermine the value and effectiveness of human interaction/ interface and moreover we all have learnt English without using technology. But that is no excuse to deprive rural learners of the basic technological devices like TV, Tape recorders, Computer etc. I would like to bring in EDUSAT, which is an educational satellite launched across the country to provide qualitative and uniform education particularly communication skills to rural students or students residing in difficult areas. If I am correct, except the State of Kerala, EDUSAT has failed in its objectives; at least
in a State like Haryana; in fact it has been withdrawn. The equipment worth Crores of rupees is gaining dust in various schools/colleges. The reasons for its failure lie with the administrators, schools, and teachers but certainly not with the innocent students. Now the question is what should an English teacher do in such an unsupportive situation? The only solution left is face to face interaction in form of debates, discussions etc. Using a traditional cassette player could do wonders as far as listening and speaking skills are concerned. Having said that technology can not substitute a teacher, it can definitely act like an effective teaching aide making the whole process of language teaching and learning faster and easier.

Case study of BPSMV: Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidayalaya, Khanpur Kalan (Sonipat), is a women's university, established by the government of Haryana in August 2006. The prime motto, rather the fundamental vision of the university is to empower and add value to the lives of women/girl students. Like any other rural institute of learning, BPSMV too suffers from various constraints. Majority of the learners in BPSMV are first generation learners and unlike the heterogeneous English classes elsewhere, English classes in BPSMV are by and large homogenous, because of the similar socio-cultural, economical and IQ status of learners. In order to empower the rural girls, the university has laid remarkable emphasis on enhancing the communication competence of all the enrolled students. The university has established Learning Resource Centre primarily to hone their communication abilities, to prepare the target learners for job market and to prepare the target learners for international certificate courses like Business English Certificate.

The difference between the two stages i.e. pre and post learning resource centre is quite obvious. Learning Resource Centre gives a tremendous ignition to the desire of a learner to speak English and provides the ambience of English. The learner's accent, pronunciation, stress, tone etc are controlled and modified according to the standard pattern. In order to analyze the effectiveness of a learning resource centre, I have collected the data of 30 students. These 30 students were selected at random and they were observed over a period of 15 hours. The comparison was made between the stage when they just started using the learning resource centre and the stage they reached at the end of the 15th hour. The procedure adopted for collecting data is as following:

1. Listening for specific information test was administered.
2. Students were asked to listen and were made to respond to the questions given.
3. A list of words spoken by native speakers was transmitted to the target learners.
4. Then they were asked to repeat the pronunciation.
5. Whatever was spoken by the learners, it was recorded and listened by the teacher.
6. The tests were repeated once again, the responses were once again recorded and corrected.
7. This way all the responses were compared over a period of time.
8. It was found that there was a marked change in the pronunciation, stress and intonation. Based on the above test, it can be concluded that even the slow learners perform very well when they are exposed to learning resource centre. Because in a learning resource centre the individual space allotted to each student gives enough opportunity to a learner to feel confident to make mistakes with out being ridiculed by others.
9. Though, initially the students are hesitant and afraid of even touching the state of the art learning resource centre paraphernalia, but gradually it was observed that the learners adopt the technology and
started participating in the process of learning English. They respond and reciprocate favorably to the demands of the learning material. The learners show a marked change in their behavior towards learning of English skills, especially listening and speaking.

I am not saying that language labs have done wonders, the point being made is the ambience and technological intervention has facilitated communicative competence of learners at BPSMV. Besides establishing LRC, the teachers have themselves authored books for undergraduate students keeping in mind their rural status. The results have been remarkable. Definitely good English gives confidence to any learner. My personal experience at BPSMV has proved one thing that no learner is poor at learning a language including English. A teacher's attitude and Will makes a difference even without technology at hand.

**Conventional / Technological ELT**

Definitely there are certain advantages of conventional teaching which are really not covered under teaching through learning resource centre or any kind of technological aides.

Advantages of conventional teaching:

1. Eye contact is maintained between the teacher and the student. Teaching is synchronized with the student's mind. Immediate remedial action such as repeating the material already taught or altering the pace of teaching can be executed.

2. Doubts on the part of the student are immediately cleared by the teacher.

3. The teacher does not spend time grappling with technology.

4. Rapport and bonding develops between the teacher and the student through regular face to face interactions in class. The teacher acts as a role model for the student, thereby enhancing the learning process.

**Conclusion**

Having known that 70% of India lives in villages, majority of the work force comes from rural areas. It becomes imperative that students of such areas are given equal opportunities to learn English. The urban-rural divide in teaching of English has to be bridged. It is possible only if a committed & honest approach is adopted. Having said that a rural student is equally competent to learn English, an English teacher has to adopt innovative strategies in the classroom. One has to go for action research to find the solutions on the spot. A few measures like appointment of skilled & committed teachers of English at primary level, effective implementation of technological schemes like EDUSAT, zero tolerance on the quality of both human and infrastructural resources, provision of minimum technological aids like TV, LCD Projectors, Computers, Stereos, weekly film shows, facelift to the general ambience in schools and colleges, etc should be put in place to arrest the dwindling standards of teaching/ learning of English in rural areas. The said measures may appear far fetched but will certainly help in better teaching and learning of English language in rural areas. (3339 words)