

TEACHING ENGLISH IN TODAY'S WORLD

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Abstract

The teaching of English as a second/foreign language in the world at large has taken a new turn in the context of globalization. In accordance with the changing needs, materials for use in language teaching and strategies adopted have also seen substantial change.

The present paper discusses the principal reasons for English acquiring a global status. With such change coming over, there has been a proliferation of Englishes and every country teaching this language has the difficult decision to make a choice of the variety. Besides the variety, the academic interests are also at stake.

Another change that concerns the academics in the field of English language teaching pertains to harness English across curriculum. This aspect of language teaching needs to focus on specialized vocabulary. Facilities to identify the words required for special branches of study and their uses are available through corpus analysis.

How do we capture such diverse needs and harness the facilities available in our daily teaching forms the theme of this presentation.

Keyword : Language Teaching and Strategies, English Acquisition, English Curriculum.

Teaching English outside England is not a recent phenomenon. It can be traced back to early fourteenth or fifteenth century when the Anglo Saxons began to move out of England and people from other parts of the world started migrating to England in search of jobs and prosperity. It is not possible for us to state with any precision if any identifiable approach/method to ELT was practised till the onset of Grammar Translation Method in the mid nineteenth century. Kelley recognizes this as a classical method which was in existence to teach Latin to Greek aristocrats (Kelley L G 1969). Since then a variety of methods and approaches have been in vogue and the evolution of ELT can be traced to the changes that have occurred. In the last twenty five years, we have seen Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerging as a major approach across the world and stabilizing itself.

The changes in ELT methodology can be systematically linked to the changes in the societal needs, philosophies of learning in vogue and also to our own understanding of the language and its learning processes. To cite a few examples, the Structural Approach had all its moorings in Behaviorism. With the dismissal of Behaviorism by the Cognitivists, the Situational and Functional approaches were ushered in. With a better understanding of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories and the Classical Humanism the CLT has acquired a place of prominence. What is in store for us tomorrow with the booming cyber world, we need to wait and see.

The topic of our discussion today is 'Teaching English in Today's World'. We need to understand the term 'Today's World' in the proposition. Terms such as 'globalization' 'global village' are now household terms, and they attempt to capture the concept of the world we are living in. We need to understand this further, and here is an attempt to do so.

Crystal in his book *English as a Global Language* says:

A language becomes global when it is made the official language of a country, to be used as a medium of communication in such domains as government, the law courts, the media and educational system. To get in these societies, it is essential to master the official language as early in life as possible. Such a language is often described as 'second language' because it is seen as a complement to a person's mother tongue or 'first language'.

(Crystal, D 2003 pp 4-5)

To add to what Crystal has said, globalization has become a reality for the following four reasons. (There are many more reasons, but I prefer to choose these four as the main reasons)

- a. Travel and tourism: Today, travel and tourism have become easier, cheaper and accessible to the common man. People travel across the world and reach places that were once remote and unreachable. Virtually all corners in the world have become accessible. The increased affluence and availability of money among the common people has given an impetus to the tourism industry as well. With English it is easier for people to meet and converse with others. Since English is used virtually in all countries of the world to different degrees of competence, it is an added reason for us to know English to facilitate our travel.
- b. Trade and Commerce: Products available across the world today are homogeneous. What were once exclusive have lost their identity thus making Pepsi and Coco Cola a drink available anywhere in the world. International malls stock goods manufactured in one part of the world and sell them in every other part of the world.
- c. Internet and Web based Communication: With the advent of internet, communication or transmitting information across the world in real time has become a possibility. Besides internet, we have tools such as mobile phones, and satellite broadcast which have made transmission of information possible in real time. The need to wait for a newspaper early in the morning to update ourselves is no longer a necessity – though this has remained as an undying habit with a few.
- d. Education: The teaching learning process has found a warm recess in English all over the world. Today, the language of higher and technical education all over the world is English. This is because of the availability in abundance of reference books in English. English is therefore rightly called the library language facilitating students to get more information.

Given these four reasons, we can see that English has a major role to play in all these four situations. We need a common language to facilitate our travel, a language used by most people to advertise our products, and a language to key in our information for transmission across the world. For all these purposes, English emerges as a single language to cope with the demands of each situation. Besides these we find that though English is not the official language in many countries, it is taught in most countries either as a second or foreign language. It is also the official language of maritime and aviation communication and also that of international treaty, Olympics etc. (Fluery, M 2011)

Though we may decide on English as a common language, the question we need to ask is ‘Do we need one variety of English for purposes of communication and teaching?’ The answer to this question can be a firm ‘no’. We have several reasons to put forth in support of our stand. Almost all languages have dialects and they co-exist peacefully. Similarly, several varieties of English used in different parts of the globe may co-exist peacefully. Like dialects that are mutually intelligible, different varieties of English (*the educated varieties at least*) are also mutually intelligible and serve the purposes of communication fairly efficiently. I have more arguments to put forth in support of my stand.

It is no longer necessary to look up to the British or the American variety as our models to be followed. We may have our own indigenous varieties that suit our purposes. Such varieties make it easy for our teachers to teach and learners to learn this language.

When we take a broader perspective, today we have varieties such as South-Asian Variety, Indian English, Pakistan English, Bangladeshi English, Sri Lankan English, Singapore English, and Philippines English etc. Each variety has its own features. Though these varieties may not have any tangible codified descriptions, they are accepted in their own regions and elsewhere and have made a dent in the academic world. We have scholars from each of these varieties lecturing in Universities either in their own countries or in other countries of the world. In this context it is appropriate to quote Verma:

We must note that English does not necessarily mean British English or American English. There are a number of standard Englishes, for there are several English-speaking countries in each of which there is a Standard English peculiar to that country.

(Verma S K 1982. P.175)

With so many varieties co-existing, and each aiming to acquire the status of standard, some scholars have expressed a fear that each variety may acquire an identity as an independent language. Though this is a natural process of creolization, there is still a unifying factor. All varieties look up to either the British or American variety as standard. There is some type of gravitational pull that these two varieties exert which can be compared to the sun exerting pull on all the planets and keeping them in place revolving around him. Crystal expresses this concept as follows:

... New Englishes could move in different directions at the same time. The pull imposed by the need for identity, which has been making New Englishes increasingly dissimilar from British English, could be balanced by a pull imposed by need for intelligibility. On a world scale which will make them increasingly similar, through the continued use of standard English.

(Crystal D 2003 p.178)

It is in this context of wide variety that English exhibits that we need to pay attention to objectives of teaching English in our own situations. English has been the language of teaching in the classroom at tertiary level of education in most countries of the world today.

One of the functions of spoken language (*Spoken English in this case*) in a classroom is for teachers to direct and control pupils' activities: they can tell pupils what they are to do, how they are to do it, when to start and when to stop. [emphasis mine]

(Mercer N 1996 p.119)

This statement from Mercer clearly indicates the role of language in the classroom. Going back to our argument that English is today the medium of instruction at the tertiary level in most countries of the world, we reaffirm that English has certain purposes to serve. The language instruction is restricted not to language classes alone. The role of English spreads across curriculum which the teachers need to transact and the learners need to comprehend. In other words, our learners learn English to cope with the demands made by the content subjects. The question our learners ask is, "How well do I understand History, Science, and Mathematics etc? I need to study all these subjects in English." The problems a learner of English as second or foreign language classroom faces is captured by Hull in his book *The Language Gap*.

'Animals harbor insects' meant they ate them. 'The lowest bridge-town' was a slum on or under a bridge. Terms like 'molten iron' 'physical features' 'relief map' 'subtraction' 'parasite' etc were *extraordinary* obstacles' [emphasis mine]

(Hull R 1985 p.xi)

[It needs to be mentioned here expressly that promoting English language education is not without its attended woes. In countries like India and Indonesia, spread in the use of English in education is further widening the gap that already exists between English language rich and English language poor children. (Meganathan R 2011) This is besides a similar divide that exists between the rural and urban children. But we should not be deterred by this fact and give up the teaching of English for the advantages outweigh the problems.]

Coleman while discussing the situation in Indonesia and the establishment of International Standard Schools [ISS] says:

... English is to be used as the medium of instruction for science, mathematics and core vocational subjects from year 4 of primary school and throughout junior secondary school, senior secondary school and vocational secondary school. Meanwhile, teachers must possess the competence required to teach their subjects through English while head teachers are required to have 'active' mastery of the language.

(Coleman, H 2011)

In taking a decision on the strategy, it is necessary for us to take into account the conditions in which our learners are learning English. Most of our learners today live in bilingual or multilingual societies. Though there was a time when the use of mother tongue was frowned upon, today we feel that code switching by non-native teachers of English is more a norm than an exception. This not only facilitates better comprehension among learners but also provides a greater sense of confidence to use English. The appropriate code switching strategy also enhances teacher quality thus paving way for good professional development.

These examples help us make a fairly clear assessment of the need to teach English for academic purposes, and in particular vocabulary required for understanding such discourse. It is established by linguists that English today has the largest vocabulary among all languages and that 95% of scientific writing produced in the world is in English. (Fluery, M 2011) This further confirms the need for familiarizing our learners with specialized vocabulary. A lot of work has already happened in this area in the recent past. I S P Nation has contributed in a big way with his research on corpus studies and also vocabulary teaching. The research in this direction has given rise to publication of new varieties of dictionaries – Academic Content Dictionaries, Technical Dictionaries etc.

In the light of these innovations it is necessary for us to rethink on our teaching strategies and materials. Our materials, at the school and college levels should be directed towards developing reasonably good vocabulary (recent estimates show that an average university learner today should possess vocabulary in the range of 8000 – 12000 word families) with all its collocations and contexts. Contexts can be obtained from corpora generated/created from a wide variety of discourses or fields of study. The strategies of teaching should focus on using the vocabulary so gained

through listening and reading both in speaking and writing. This will account for approximately 95% of the vocabulary in an authentic text (Nation 2001)

Besides teaching vocabulary, English for Academic purposes should also provide the learners with good study skills. Since much literature is available in this area, I prefer to skip discussing this aspect by making just one statement. Equipping our learners with study skills is like teaching someone to fish rather than providing him/her with food for one day.

There is yet another aspect we need to focus on in today's competitive world – the employability skills. English is also seen as a language of empowerment because of this reason. English is compared to the milk of a lioness. Only those who drink it can roar. (Pandey 2011) In this connection I would like to take an example from the Indian context. The language of instruction at the university level and technical and higher education in India is English. Several graduates who qualify from technical schools every year are interviewed for jobs by corporate bodies and industries. A survey conducted by an independent body National Association of Software and Services Company (NASSCOM) found out that only 25% of the young engineering graduates are employable. Although the rest of them possess good professional skills, are not employable as they lack good communication skills. This in particular means that the graduates do not possess a good command of English language. NASSCOM has also made an inventory of employable skills which is provided here:

The candidates should have the ability to:

1. Speak confidently and clearly
2. Listen to a set of instructions/lectures etc.
3. Make presentations on a given topic coherently
4. Read and understand books of reference independently
5. Analyse and organize matter (problem solving skills) and
6. Write coherently

Our classes in English should take care of these features. To sum up our attempt in teaching English can be captured in three phases as follows:

- a. Classroom teaching should facilitate learning English through judicious use of bilingual methods.
- b. Learners need to acquire proficiency to begin with and then move towards precision. The precision can be in terms of choice of words, expressions etc.
- c. Once adequate precision is achieved they should attempt to attain professionalism in the work they do.

Proficiency promotes precision and precision promotes professionalism. By this, I do not mean to argue that proficiency or precision alone will promote professionalism; but rather suggest that there is a positive correlation between proficiency and professionalism.

Teaching English today is no longer an isolated task but a cooperative venture. This cooperation can be perceived as collaboration between teachers teaching English and other subjects. If an English teacher can rub shoulders with his colleagues, and keep an open mind to learn he/she can become a better and a meaningful teacher.

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