Competence in Language Teaching and Learning : Challenges and Alternatives

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National curriculum framework (2005) states "English in India is a global language in a multilingual country" (p. 38). The reality of this statement cannot be denied or challenged. English proficiency is something that every individual aspires for- be it the corporate sector or government set up. Being a global language, fluency in English is assumed to improve an individual's status, opportunities in education, technology, global trades and business world. However, teaching English is laden with challenges because in most parts of India English is not the first language for the learners and the learning English as the second language becomes a challenge and is restricted to learning it through textbooks instead of real life situations. In a culturally rich country like India the diversity is so great that the country does not have a national language but has 22 'official languages' (including English). Since the states were formed on linguistic lines, each of the 28 states has its native language(s) as the official language(s). English, due to its 'lingua franca' status, is an aspiration language for most Indians .English is viewed as a gateway to economic prosperity and social status. Thus almost all private schools in India are English medium. Many public schools, unfortunately,

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due to political compulsions, have the state's official languages as the primary school language. English is introduced as a second language from grade 5 onwards. Some states also mandate learning of a non-native third language from grade 6. This lack of priority to the lingua franca in public schools is one of the major reasons for high enrolment ratios in private schools (44 per cent in rural areas and 65 per cent in urban areas). Therefore teachers should always look for useful strategies to reduce the difficulties of teaching English language. English language teaching has gone through multiple changes with the advent of communicative methods and several sociological, economic and pedagogical variables in force. The present paper aims to identify the factors that affect language teaching and learning and suggests techniques to enhance language acquisition for second language learners in India. What is clear is that language is the foundation of all other learning. Developing competence in English as second language becomes challenge in a multicultural and multilingual society like India, for both the learner and the teacher. A feeling of uneasiness and reluctance seeps in when it comes to honing skills in English communication. What we need is to identify the reasons for its slow acquisition, especially in the rural pockets, and thereafter device adequate and appropriate remedial measures for successful rectification of these problems. In spite of adequate training and innovation the result reveals that it is not a sufficient condition for effective learning. There are other prevailing conditions that cause impediments in learning.

1.   Introduction

Teaching of English as a second language is a challenging task in a multi cultural and multilingual country like India. The task becomes even more daunting, crucial and painstaking when it is to performed in a place where English as a language serves a limited purpose and when the foundation of the subject is weak because it is only introduced after primary school. It requires good planning, curriculum, text books, qualified teachers and effective teaching learning process so that real time learning and skill development can take place. There has to be a systematic analysis of the factors responsible for low level of performance and new methods, techniques, strategies and pedagogical tools should be developed to cope with the challenges of teaching and learning English language as a skill. The real problem arises because the target learners have little opportunity to practice what they have been taught outside the classroom situation. To strengthen the skill, people are ready to shell out money and invest time and has led to the mushrooming of

English speaking skill centers claiming to teach the language in as short a span as 90-120 hours. Parents are keen to get their children admitted in English/convent schools so that an environment is provided to the learner to develop competency in language. The dilemma lies in bridging the gap between English medium schools and government schools so that the privileges of English language learning are not restricted to a few but has a wider outreach. The burden of reading, writing, speaking, listening and comprehending is due to incompetency - sometimes on part of the learner and sometimes due to lack of proper pedagogical tools for the teachers. English is not a language that can be compartmentalized in rules and formats nor can it be passed as a subject by mugging up rules of grammar. The language has to serve a functional purpose so that basic competency in all language skills can be developed. It has been clearly Stated in National curriculum framework 2005 "the goals for a second language curriculum are twofold : attainment of a basic proficiency such as is acquired in natural learning and the development of language into an instrument for abstract thought and knowledge acquisition through literacy" (p. 39). The crux of the matter is that the teacher education should focus on introducing teachers to newer pedagogical tools so that they can meet the challenges of language teaching. Let us look at the struggles and challenges to develop competency in English language.

2. Multilingualism in Academic Institutes in India

India is a land of multiple languages. According to the 2001 census there are twenty two official languages in India and more than one thousand regional dialects with their further varieties and subdivisions. English is just one of the other subjects introduced in secondary classes in government schools and even then it is not the language of functional domains because that function is performed by the local and regional languages. After struggling, and hefty amounts spent in tuitions, these students somehow manage to pass but by the time they go to institutes of higher learning, everything related to English still remains alien to them. However all of a sudden, English becomes the language of all their functional domains. It becomes the medium of instruction, their discussions, debates, examinations, assignments and all official formalities happen in English and it is at this stage the student realizes what an

impediment it is - the lack of competency in English as a language, not only for education but also for communication.

We know that in a land of multiple languages and socio cultural environments "every child is fluent in her first language" (Chomsky, 1965). The child walks into school with his/her first language but by high school he/she has to switch to English. It may be argued that restricting higher education institutes to English in a multilingual country is unfair. However, debates and discussions may momentarily gather fuel in support of regional languages but there is no denying the fact that English has become a global language and its acquisition and competency is a must for success in both the corporate and government sectors. Even though multilingualism is appreciated in society, it is English which seems to command a higher status. Pseudo as it may sound, dominance of English as a medium of instruction in institutes of higher learning results in poor performance by students living in a linguistically rich environment and with a knowledge of so many other languages. This happens because they are systematically forced in a situation where suddenly English language becomes the parameter for judgment of knowledge and skills and their lack of competency over the subject is the major cause of students dropping out of a course. Even in this era of globalization where educators are motivated to recognize the need for multilingualism as a resource (Agnihotri, 2007) the fact remains that English is not just the language of the world but also dominates all Indian languages in terms of status and technical information. So there is no alternative to learning this language. However to increase engagement and participation a whiff of fresh teaching methodology should be adopted, innovation and interaction should be aimed at easing the discomfort associated with English as a language and language should be used as a tool of communication, thinking and sharing ideas, thoughts and values. Classroom transactions to be meaningful the comfort level of the learners needs to be enhanced.

3.   Revamping Curriculum to achieve Competency

Conceptualization and Implementation : The curriculum for English as a second language needs to be designed in such a way that the outcome is achieved successfully. The first step in this direction is to understand the rationale for teaching and the background of the

learners. Whether revising an old syllabus or creating afresh the aim should be to attempt a critical analysis, to evaluate and justify the texts selected and the bearing it will have on the learner. For this, the profile of the learner and the availability of the infrastructure needed for implementation is equally important. The learning strategies, the motivational level, the socio economic background and the learning environment of the target group is equally important. Next important factor is the teacher's profile - needless to say that language teaching needs a special set of skills and regular up-gradation through ELT training programmes to do justice to the curriculum. While designing the curriculum it is also important to keep in mind the availability of the learning/teaching aids, technology and other resources. The syllabus has to drafted keeping in mind the class size and the instruction time allotted. Next and most importantly the need and objective of learning of the target group needs to be kept in mind while formulating the curriculum. This can be assessed through surveys, questionnaires and interviews and based on the outcome, the framers of the curriculum should work out the content and instruction strategies for the teachers. Language is not an abstract system, it is a tool and, in fact a competent tool for communication. Keeping this is mind, the curriculum should focus on grammatical competence, fluency in speaking, familiarity with rules of writing and social appropriateness of vocabulary. The syllabus should contain teaching of basic courtesies - the function of language in thanking, apologizing and requesting. Activities should be planned keeping in mind contextual learning and situational interactions - For example role play, simulation to give a real life experience of probable interactions which involve conversational analysis. In short, the focus should not be on structure and rules but be directed to sharpen the communication skills of the learners.

Classroom transactions and the exchange of resources between the teachers and learners should be targeted to enhance cognitive learning. The classroom interactions should be participatory and not a one way communication with the learner being a passive recipient. The teacher plays the role of a facilitator where he/she provides curriculum related materials/tasks to the class divided into groups and the mentor just oversees the class, offering opinions and comments as the students handle the resources themselves. Integration of structures and functions approach in curriculum

designing works wonders in achieving targeted goals. Mere sharing of resources does not solve the purpose. The outcome has to be assessed through testing and evaluation. The aim of evaluation should also be clear - whether you intend to test the context or skill learnt. Also, whether you want the evaluation to be a continuous process or end of term assessment. Rubrics also need to be decided for ensuring objectivity and uniformity of assessment. Lastly, in curriculum designing what is of paramount importance is imple-mentation stage and feedback mechanism. Effective implementation involves careful designing of resources, teaching the teachers the techniques of effective delivery and testing and evaluating to see it the outcome is achieved. Feedback will help gauge the loopholes and what is a hit and miss in the curriculum and accordingly revamp it in future, as a cyclic process.

4. Learning Strategies : A time for reshuffling to facilitate Outcome - Oriented approach

A large number of research studies have hinted at the ambiguity entrenched in the learning pedagogy which interferes with true learning and the need to pull ELT out of this quagmire. I am tempted to share an analogy which is a fitting comment on the condition of language teaching in India.

A teacher taught his student, a parrot three languages. Once, his linguist friend visited him. In a show of pride, the teacher said that he would like his linguistic friend to meet his student, the parrot whom he had taught three languages. When the linguist met the parrot, the parrot did not speak and remained silent. When asked, the teacher said "I told you that I had taught three languages , I did not say the parrot had learned three languages" (anecdote used by Professor Penny, in a workshop for teachers of University of Delhi).

The above anecdote beautifully sums up the disconnect between teaching and learning process and the urgent need to bridge this gap.

Learning strategies is generally defined as "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help learners comprehend, learn or retain new information". O'malley and Chamot (as cited in Ganbarzehi, 2014 : 385); Light Bown (as cited in Nassaji, 2012 : 385) stated, 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. She argued that "second language research does not tell teachers what to teach and what it says about how to teach they had already figured out" (p. 385). So there has to be relevance between language pedagogy and the research associated with language oriented research. Ghanbarzehi (2014) merged learning strategies with communicative strategies and introduced her six segmented classification of learning strategies. The following language strategies are suggested :

1. Cognitive Strategies *i.e.* helping the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways,
2. Meta Cognitive strategies *i.e.* helping learners to manage the learning process overall,
3. Memory related Strategies *i.e.* helping learners link on L2 item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding,
4. Compensatory Strategies *i.e.* helping make up for missing knowledge,
5. Affective Strategies *i.e.* helping learners manage their emotions and motivation level and
6. Social Strategies *i.e.* helping the learner to learn via interacting with others and understanding the target culture.

The above strategies prove as a useful resource for teachers in a classroom situation and facilitates adopting a strategy according to the need. No one strategy can be termed best because it is not a question of "one size fits all" kind of scenario. Conflicts occur based on the categorization and classification of the learner group and what might be greatly beneficial for one may be a complete failure for the other. It is the wisdom of the teacher to pick and choose according to the need of the group keeping in mind the end objective of teaching and developing competency in English as a language. The primitive mindset that only experience can tell what works best in a language class needs to be changed and teachers need to have a more open approach and adaptability to newer research models. It is only when co-operation co-exists between researcher and teacher that desired results can be yielded .Implementation, in fact successful implemen-tation of well researched learning strategies in a class replete with a

target group of diverse needs is the true test of research. The judicious selection of the apt learning strategy will go a long way in addressing the challenges faced by teachers and learners of English language.

5.   Blending   Information   and   Communication Technology to Revamp Teaching Methodologies in a Language Class

The emergence of information and communication technologies has bombarded the Indian classrooms and the teaching methodologies across the globe. The ELT field has had a great impact of ICT as well, to the advantage of both the teachers and learners. The impact of audio visual input on the learning paradigms cannot be underestimated. English language teaching needs dynamism and continuous evolution to cope with changing times. Thankfully, ELT has come out of its static and cocooned existence and continuously evolving newer materials, resources, tests and the entire ELT has undergone multiple changes brought about the innovation and technology. All these changes have brought about adjustments in the areas of teacher training and development, curriculum design and material production. It should be borne in mind that any decision made regarding the methodology to be used in the classroom or innovation introduced in the curriculum trigger ongoing alterations in the general context of the language teaching and learning process (White, 1998; Johnson, 1989).

The introduction of ICT in ELT has proved to be the turning point in the development of English as a language. The insights obtained and the innovations introduced by technology when incorporated into classroom teaching prove extremely useful. It has lead to a complete transformation of a classroom experience. "A quick switch in the pendulum from the teacher to the learner took place with the leaner becoming the 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).

ICT has imparted the much needed momentum to the teaching of the English as a language and enhanced the ideological and practical relevance of the language. There already are, rapid changes

in training ELT programmers and emphasis on ICT is the need of ELT professionals.

6. Handling Infrastructural Issues, Psychological Concerns and Sociological Barriers : Challenges and the Road Ahead

Language learning is said to be the foundation of all other learning. Teaching of English as a second language is a challenging task specially in developing countries like India, where, in spite of the huge amount of resources being pumped into the education sector, availability of basic infrastructural facilities is still a challenge. The biggest problem is that there is no active role of English outside the classroom because in most government schools it is introduced at a much later stage. Hence the learners see little immediate need to learn English. To overcome this, the education system should firstly work on creating such a need. It has been argued that learning how to learn i.e. Self Directed Learning would be of utmost importance for language learners for three reasons. First, because of the complexity of the task which learning presents there is never enough time for a formal scheme of instruction to ensure mastery on part of the students, and if the learner has not been prepared within the classroom to take responsibility to learn autonomously outside, it is unlikely that learning will take place (Carver and Dickenson , 1980). The second reason is the belief that engaging students in the process of learning and assessment will encourage their learning efficiency (Naiman et al 1975, Stern, 1983) Thirdly in a Self Directed Scheme through reducing the distance between the learner and the teacher, feeling of anxiety, frustration and alienation decrease and consequently the leaner becomes more receptive to the learning process. (Brown 1973, Schumann 1975) Another psychological barrier to learning English is the students' beliefs about the nature of learning English as a subject, consisting of a list of words and a set of grammatical rules which are to be memorized and separable skills to be acquired rather than a set of integrated skills and sub skills. Adding further to the problem is the issue of lack of common background knowledge because they come from diverse backgrounds - mostly rural and even ICT facilities access is variable in rural and urban context.

Another challenging factor is overcrowded classrooms leaving no room for practice of the language. This leads to learning problems because students do not get an opportunity to gain proficiency. Over crowded classes leave little scope for group discussions and the need to engage actively in participative learning is ignored. Lack of motivation amongst students, is also a challenge. Most of them look at English as just another course that they need to pass and do not understand its importance as a tool of communication. Then there is reluctance to adopt technology on part of the teachers and learners, at times. Even when it comes to the components of English language i.e. reading, writing, speaking, listening grammar and vocabulary, it has been found that students usually target a grasp over vocabulary and grammar and bit of writing skills that they might find useful from examination point of view; listening , speaking and reading occupy back seat. The mistake is in educational system itself as the teacher's target is to prepare students for examination and not to make them skilled in the use of language they are learning. Sadly the mission is better grades not better knowledge. Textbooks prescribed in the courses is another challenge - focus is on content to be covered and even evaluation is done in accordance to the text prescribed. There is little opportunity to practice the skill and emphasis is more on rote learning. So what is most important is that course books should constitute an effective resource for Self Directed Learning and presentation of material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objective, and support for less experienced teachers who may be lacking in confidence. (Cunnigsworth, 1995) Unattractive, boring, outdated and incoherent text needs to done away with and newer, innovative material must be introduced.

7.   Conclusion

The paper has highlighted a wide range of issues faced by teachers in teaching English as a language of communication. The challenges range from inadequate curriculum designing, to lack of training. The limited mastery over newer teaching methodologies and reluctance to adopt technology as a tool of empowerment in language teaching also prevents achievement of the objectives associated with teaching English. On the learners part the major challenges include lack of motivation, limited infrastructure, low

concentration and poor discipline coupled with boredom associated with rules and structure in language learning. What we need to overcome the challenges is adopting strategies and research to revamp the system. The attitude towards language learning on part of the teacher and taught needs to be reformed. Improved training programmes and better infrastructural facilities will further give an impetus and help in enhancing proficiency in the language.

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