Teaching of English in India : Problems and prospects

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> Everyone knows that we pursue without admitting it, the
> naked power, the prestige, the two-cars and the air travels.
> Education pointing still, is moving that way to a world
> Where it is better to be envied than ignored, better to be
> Well-paid than happy, better to be successful than good,
> Better to be vile than vile-esteemed. And so, it may be that
> In a hundred years, the ambitions of every sensitive man
> Will be the tranquility of the hermits cell.
>
> (William Golding's *Hot Gates and Other Occasional Pieces*)

English as a potent vehicle of communication serves a link language in a multicultural and multilingual society like India, and also as a global Linguistic mediator. The (un)fortunate historical accident in the form of India's encounter with the British brought English in our country, and its continued presence in our classroom eco-socio-political and cultural discourse for different reasons demands re-thinking of its role and its significations. In this age of rapid, space-borne communications, the relationships of English, in whatever form, to indigenous languages should be of pressing interest : are they always positive or can the cultural

hegemony of any language with any enhanced status ultimately prove creative? This alludes to a need to (re) define or (re) conceptualize the position of English (as part of the language policy) in new ways. India is a vast country, a country of great variations and contrasts.

People from different provinces in India speaks different languages.

Indians have varied forms of social etiquette, religio-philosophic customs, socio-

cultural patterns and socio-linguistic parameters. A multiplicity of language patterns is the hallmark of socio-linguistic reality in India. Language behaviors varies from Socio-geographic group to group, as does the way which languages are officially

Recognized and used for communication purposes. English language (the global code) has been indigenized (in contact with the local codes) in Indian socio-linguistic context. English has been caught in the ceaseless flux of Indian life and thought at the present time. There is a lot of political undercurrent below the championing and opposition to the learning and use of English.

Nevertheless, English is being studied /taught in greater or smaller degree in schools, colleges and the universities all over the country.

Teaching of English suffers from the general malaise that afflict the educational system of India. It has been dawned upon the country's educational policy-makers that if English is at all learnt and taught then it should be learnt and taught well. This implies the learning and teaching of English in terms of the well-known four basic skills of language learning, viz., speaking listening, reading and writing. Listening and speaking are the to neglected skills in classrooms in India. English is spoken variously in different parts of the country, which has 18 officially recognized languages and nearly 1652 dialects , according to the 1991 census of India. We can not expect a uniform standard of pronunciation for a second language in such a vast country, where even the mother tongue is spoken differently by different groups of the people belonging to the same language community. In learning to speak English, the mother tongue generally interferes with its pronunciation. The learners as well as the teachers speak English with regional language habits. Since English is not a medium of instructions in schools and colleges in India, Indian students can not practice and perfect their English pronunciation. Even during the English periods most teachers teach English without giving the students proper practice in speech because they are not properly equipped enough to practice it. The result is that after learning /teaching English for many years at school and college, most people can not speak the language with intelligible accuracy.

Listening is an important language learning skill and yet the most neglected skill in Indian class rooms. It is neglected because the teachers take it for granted that learners automatically acquired this skill without any special training. It is an active process. The skill can be depicted as below :

Input   ->   processing   ->   output.

Good listeners must process good understanding of phonetics and rules of grammar. They must relate the patterns of intonation, weak forms of sounds and rhythm of connected speech.

Sociolinguistic language contact usually results in an uneven distribution of language patterns among the groups involved. Bilingualism is the practice of alternately using two languages. According to Hoffman (1991 : 41), it is a "multi-faceted phenomenon". In India, "English and Indian language   co-exist in a dialossic relationship" (Parasher 1983 : 27). Learning English is an addition to one's first language is becoming the order of the day. 'Second language'

familiarity is a matter of necessity and in sense, a matter of prestige and privilege. In the linguistically and culturally pluralistic Indian subcontinent English is used as the "second language", which is acquired after one has learnt the first language. The difficulties related to bilingualism in India stem from the complex interplay and variability of social, psychological and socio-linguistic factors, which determine individual conduct. On the other hand, individual bilingualism is often experienced as an enriching attribute that facilitate a better understanding of the nature of languages and provides an opportunity for gaining a deeper insight into two cultures.

The most important practical problem related to the teaching of English in India is the presence of large number of learners. All the learners don't come from the same socio-linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Generally, teachers are reluctant to divide the class into groups or teams. Some care has to be taken over the allocation of students to groups (to make things better). It is essential that the members of each group be naturally congenial. The teachers may find that they have to make a few changes before the groups are all happily settled. It is practically impossible in Indian class rooms that the groups are approximately equal in ability. There are many varieties of group and tutorial methods. In arts subjects the tutorial class must take the form of a discussion.

'Peer teaching', 'role play' , 'group activities' are rare in Indian classrooms. In India, lectures speak. The class listens passively. The learners are not encouraged to ask questions. Many lectures are ineffective due to problem of delivery, pace and production. The teachers must involve their students to work in paris , groups and teams and prepare term papers , projects, etc. Even at the PG level, students are not encouraged to go for projects, seminars and conferences. Therefore, in spite of being taught English in school and college for several years, learners fail to learn the language : they cannot write in acceptable English of their own, can not use English appropriately and fluently in speech and often can not understand conversations in English. Why does this happen ? Does it mean that the English teachers in India can not teach ? Or does it mean mean that problem lies elsewhere : in syllabus, text material, methodology of teaching or in evaluation ? The teaching of English in India has been text-oriented since the beginning (colonial times) because the British Government's policy was to create a class of Indians who would act as a buffer between the British and the Indians. Therefore,

elementary knowledge of English was needed for a class of Indians. Objectives of teaching and learning English have undergone a sea-change in the years after Independence. Still English education in India text-oriented . The same continues even after sixty or seventy years of time . Bookish knowledge of English does not help the learners at all . literature can be a means of teaching English . literature should not be taught for the sake of aesthetic purpose only. There are only a few universities in India, which offer a full paper on language or applied linguistics even at the post-graduate level. English hons. And M.A. course are full of literature staff. Course-designer don't understand(or they don't want understand) the fact text –orientation (mainly canonical text) leds to nowhere. A major percentage of English Hons. And M.A.s opt. for teaching job. But how many universities offer full paper or half a paper on English language teaching (ELT)? That means learners become teachers without any knowledge / experience of teaching. Is teaching so easy? Some so-called eminent scholars of English literature are in favour of making linguistics and ELT as optional as in P.G. level in those handful of universities where these subjects are taught. They give long high sounding, verbose lectures on 'post colonialism', 'multiculturalism' 'translation studies', etc. shutting down the doors and windows of the citadel of orthodoxy (where they live in). The context of teaching and learning of English in post-colonial India has changed considerably. Its practice has remained more or less the same as in colonial India.

In the near-total absence of atmosphere for the natural and progressive flourish of English in India, we can not conceive of a situation in which English would be used for verbal communication except big shopping centers in metro-cities, elite clubs and pubs, a few English medium schools and colleges and top level government offices. A handful of status conscious technocrats and bureaucrats speak English as a matter of prestige and pride. Therefore, the learners don't get enough scope for picking up English from society (trough social transmission). Sometimes, for some learners, use of English is limited to class room interactions only. Frequent changes of Govt. policies often result in frustration. These policies often add more complexities to the learners for learning English as a second language. Educational examinations largely "determine the direction of effort" (Maddox 1988 : 147). The basic pattern of educational evaluations in India are 'summative'. Summative evaluation is designed to assess

the total achievement of the learners during the end of a course. The learners go for 'guessing questions' and 'suggestion bank' theory. They cut short their syllabus accordingly and begin preparation only a few months before the examination. One test and that is at the end of the course may fail to judge the competence of the learners. The learners carry their anxiety to the examination hall because they know that the examination is 'do or die' situation for them. Is it valid and reliable? Is it a mark of progressive growth of education? On the country, 'formative evaluation' is the process of giving/taking regular feedback to both the teachers and learners.

Formative testing system sounds more reliable and valid from a naked eye. How many universities in india use 'formative evaluation' to test their learners' competence (of English language)? Then we are not confident of the function of Executive Councils, Boards of/Councils of Studies and UG/PG studies of the universities. Sometimes, creative thoughts are hindered by rigid habits of thoughts and overconformity to established routines. In the stage of illumination conscious   thoughts "capture elusive new ideas" (Maddox 1988 : 183). Inordinate delays in the publication of results, prolonged legal wranflings over the disparity in marking answer scripts, an archaic and somewhat 'repressive' system of operation are the basic features of the evaluation process (at different levels) in india. In some place 'winds of change' seem to be blowing.

'Study skills' are important for language learning. Note-taking, note-making and information transfer are the three predominant study skills. Indian teachers of English are reluctant to reach these study in the classroom. Lecture notes range all the way from the verbatim account to the barest of outlines. The learners must note down the content of the lecture. To take down every word is impossible unless the learners know shorthand. They must be selective in note taking. Generally, broad-based long question are set at the Undergraduate and Post-Graduate levels. Therefore the learners must master the art of note making. The learners oftn fail to the task. Therefore, they opt for marketable 'ready' notes available n the 'study shopes' is not at all healthy for any educational system. The may be little flexible and set questions, which are not predictable.

Teaching second language is a highly skilled job. With the progressive advancement of technology traditional classrooms have been supplemented by the

blessings of educational technology. Televised lectures, audiotapes, computers, programmed text and language laboratories are not dream now. These languages – teaching aids can be used in the classroom process. Only the continuous flow of lecture by the teacher in the classroom may prove to be monotonous for the learners. The learners may look for the something exciting and motivating. But, how many teachers take the help of these aids? Are these teaching aids available everywhere in India? Learners in the schools of many remote villages (in India) still learn without a roof. Therefore, the age old fashion of black board and the chalk prove to be enduring , endearing and versatile in teaching of English in Indian classrooms .

Teachers always play the most significant role in the teaching of English in bilingual patterns of contemporary in India. Decision makers should make things flexible for the teacher. The success of teaching /learning depends on the performance (and the willingness to perform) of the teachers and the availability of teaching/learning climate. It should be free from politics and other issues of distraction. Things are changing fast. Teachers should be upgraded and trained to meet the changing needs of the learners. Teacher training institutions need to be a platform for exchange of ideas.We must come out of the stereotype model: let it be another programme without judging the objecting to do that.Most of the states in India has adopted functional communicative approach to teach English at the secondary level. Interactions in English is the motif of this approach . There is a big gulf between the desired goal and the present practice in Indian classrooms. Only a creative mind free from all prejudices can change things for a 'better tomorrow'.