

Role of English Language in India

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Abstract

There is no doubt in denying the fact that English has become a language of opportunity in these days. It is playing a significant role in the present scenario. While having the complete knowledge of English, all the important aspects are taken in to consideration like psychology of learning and current changes that are occurring surrounding us. At present, English has become an imperative need to go neck and neck with the world around. That is why, the need of the hour is to take the learning of English seriously and on priority.

Paper

In India, English, which started as a historic-political accident, has now become an imperative need. Not only is it an official language but also language of opportunity. Its practical usefulness has become so definite that nobody minds investing substantial amounts of money and energy in seeking coaching and materials for learning

English. Now, in the wake of globalization, English has assumed the character of a world language. Rossner and Bolitho rightly observe: "An international language is a logical requirement in an area of world-wide information sharing and commercial exchange. For better or worse, the role has fallen to English. The result is that its status in education systems and settings is an extraordinary one."¹

Consequently, the teaching of English in India, as also elsewhere, has necessitated rethinking about the existing methods and materials, which now seem inadequate and largely unproductive. For quite sometimes, there has been a noticeable current of change in the field of ELT. Linguists and pedagogues alike have felt the need for improving matters and making them more realistic. In turn, this has assigned a new responsibility to all those who are engaged in the discipline of English studies.

Traditionally, English in India has been recognized as an important and compulsory component of curricula either as a subject of instruction or as a medium. And its continuation till date in that capacity stands more than justified today.

As for the needs that have provided rationale to the continuation of teaching of English in our educational institutions, one can only affirm that they are the most imperative. Since English is accepted as a *window on the world*, learning and mastering it has become an important need. In spite of the cry for and emphasis on the increasing use of the vernacular as medium of instruction, in spite of the rapid growth of translation output, there is a vast fund of information, especially in specialized fields of knowledge, which is available only in English. Therefore, acquiring adequate competence in the use of English has become a necessity. Studies and researches will tend to suffer alike if proficiency in English remains underdeveloped. This points to another important need for learning English competently.

When they note that the "international" language is a logical requirement in an era of worldwide

information-sharing and commercial exchange." They further observe that "As the lingua franca of the twentieth century, English is one of the most important means for acquiring access of Anglo-American technology."² In the world of rapid developments, the aim should therefore, be to encourage the individual's capacity to act on his or her environment to change it for the better. Acquisition of proficiency in the use of English definitely contributes to this process.

The argument for ELT in the preceding units clearly underscores that the need for English is not only because it has instrumental value but also because it has a utilitarian significance. That is why it has continued as an educational subject. That is what still justifies its status as language of administration, etc. The Indian Constitution has granted it the status of the associate official language for inter-state administrative business and also for official communication between the States and the Centre. Most business and official proceedings in banks, courts, export-import trade, and international commerce in India are executed in English. It is a language of instruction in higher studies and research. It is a lingua franca between educated people

all over the country. All these activities of great significance will suffer adversely if English language teaching is not paid timely attention. Radhakrishnan Commission's observation was a word of caution in this regard: 'English is the only means of preventing our isolation from the world and we will act unwisely if we allow ourselves to be enveloped in the folds of a dark curtain of ignorance.'

This tenor of argument for the use of English for intra-national operations also forces us to look beyond, and consider the need for English for international communication. English has always been a vehicle of interaction with the international community, but its need for that purpose has tremendously increased in the wake of more and more critical international relations at all levels---economic, political, diplomatic and strategic.

The rationale for the importance of English and its role in developing countries like India may sound detrimental to the nationalistic sentiments but it does take cognizance of the pragmatics of the situation today. However, for sometimes now there has been an intense rethinking about the need of learning English and the materials

and methods to realize them. This has necessitated a review of the current English teaching practices in schools and colleges. The beginnings in this direction were made by the two study groups on the Teaching of English in 1967 and 1971. Whereas the first group recommended change in the study materials from literature courses to "a course in language skills." (P. 27), the second pleaded for an examination and review of the entire ELT situation. In their distinct ways, both the groups had called for a thoughtful and result-oriented planning of teaching English in India, focusing on developing the learners' communication skills. This forced the minds of the ELT experts---both theorists and pedagogues--- to engage themselves in careful planning of the cardinal factors of education programme---men, materials and methods, that is, according to the needs, objectives and goals of English language teaching in India.

As a result of studies and researches into the relevance and continuity of English language teaching in India, and also of the huge expansion in ELT worldwide, there has been a strong plea for reshuffling of language learning priorities. The purpose all along has been to make language teaching and learning as relevant and effective as

possible. The emerging thrust area today is that of communicative skills. The first study group in 1967 had, in fact, long ago identified this new emphasis when it recommended introduction of a “course in language skills”. It averred the need for 'special emphasis on the cultivation of language skills rather than a study of literature as such. ' (p30). Such a recommendation indeed had far reaching implications : it brought into focus the role of English as library language: it required development of reading skills as the main objective: it also implied use of literary texts for language learning: it necessitated change of methodology, in tune with the learner and his needs; finally, it gave new responsibilities to all those who contribute to the development of teaching and learning programmes.

Such a new philosophy was not an abrupt development: it was a part of the change that was happening in all the fields of human activity---scientific, philosophical, psychological, and academic. The edifice of education too was influenced by the currents of change, factors change, conditions change and needs and requirements undergo major shifts, and the 'structure of education which

is not a monolith, to keep pace with the change, moves on, providing for growth.

This process of change necessitated the reshuffling of the cardinal factors of teaching/learning of English language, that is, the teacher, the methods and the materials. The entire pedagogy has so far been informed by Behavioural psychology, underscoring the premise that behaviour is governed by stimulus-response process. A stimulus, it laid down, would elicit response naturally. A teacher would explain rules, and thereby impart knowledge which would not only be received but also in the process would produce learning as a matter of response.

In the entire proposition, the learner's role has been that of a passive recipient. The stimulus-response theory provided for this inactive role to the learner. Learning was more a habit forming rather than a shared experience, more a mechanical exercise than an organic one. The materials for teaching have also been more or less static and content-based. Even if the needs were changing, the level of cognition was dynamic, the contents would change little. The methods accordingly remained

unchanged. The whole situation produced stasis and status quo. Over the years it has been felt that the entire exercise of teaching English was less satisfying. This feeling for change was lent further impetus by a revolutionary change in the field of psychology. The behavioural psychology of learning was supplanted by a more cognitive approach of Noam Chomsky in 1960s and 70s. It pointed out that learning was not a simple matter of habit forming. Learning was a more complex process. Response was not always in the same proportion to the stimulus:

Input → mind → Output

The input could always be finite but the response was infinite. A limited number of grammatical rules, for example, could produce unlimited sentences from the mind. Even if a limited view of a subject was presented to the learners, the cognitive response would not be confined to just receiving it passively. The cognition could be activated by the stimulus to further extend itself – it may reject the view, it may transform it, it may accept it as it is or bring to bear upon it a new thought. So many possibilities could be granted. So even when

the learner appears to be a passive recipient, he actually is not. The stimulus--- a thought, for example, might have exercised his cognition so that he was engaged in what may be called 'chewing the cud.' Such a scientific understanding had a strong bearing upon the psychology of learning and thus necessitated reconsideration of the roles of cardinal factors involved in teaching of a language. Thus was highlighted the need for development of skills so as to use the knowledge gained usefully and productively.

This need for proper development of language skills has been further intensified by professionalism & specialization, and also by fast emerging international trends in science, commerce, and technology. In response to this global revolution, the entire ELT structure in India has called for a sort of a renovation. Taking cognizance of this need for change. Rossner and Bolitho observe that "Methodologists, materials writers and publishers in ELT --- now find themselves working in an international arena that is unique in the history of education."³ This has indeed exercised the minds of theorists, planners, pedagogues, and practising teachers to replenish the discipline of English language teaching by

newer and more relevant strategies. That is what induced Richards & Rodgers to note that "proliferation of approaches and methods is a prominent characteristic of contemporary second and foreign language teaching."⁴ It is this important subject of ELT methods and approaches, therefore, that we propose to consider in some detail in the next chapter.

References

- [1] Richard Rossner & Rod Bolitho (eds.), *Currents of Change in English Language Teaching*. (London: Oxford University Press. 1990). 5
- [2] *Ibid.* 21
- [3] *Ibid.* 5
- [4] Jack C. Richards & Theodore S. Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). 7