

ESL TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM: MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Jyothi Sadasivam

Nes Ratnam College,
Bhandup (W), Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract

This paper is based on the findings of a survey conducted on select state run educational institutes in Bhandup to comprehend the objectives of introducing English at the primary level where the mother tongue would be presumed to be the ideal mode of instruction and probe the problems inherent in catering to the diverse needs of English language learners with varying levels of competence and from vastly different socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The findings, while reaffirming the significance of the English language as a practical tool in the pursuit of lucrative employment and upward social mobility in India, underscore the challenges faced by educational institutions in adopting appropriate methodologies that would enable second language learners to acquire mastery over the English Language.

Keywords: *English Language, Objectives, Challenges, Methodology, Second Language Learners.*

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ESL TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM: MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES- **Jyothi Sadasivam**

In today's era of globalization and the internet, English language has emerged as the passport to better career, advanced knowledge and effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration in the new rising economies like India. The widespread appeal of English in India is part of the colonial legacy inherited from the British. Today, however, the English language has progressed far beyond its status as an instrument of power and domination of the educated elite to become a practical tool in the pursuit of lucrative employment and upward social mobility among the middle and lower income groups. The universal preference for the language is evidently related to the "enormous cultural diversity of the speakers who use it and the infinitely varied domains in which it is found and the purposes it serves" as Martin Dewey observes. The use of the language cuts across all disciplines- it is the language of trade, commerce, science and the IT world.

In the multicultural social fabric of Indian democracy English is a tool for administrative cohesiveness of the country and is the linguistic bridge among various states. Its significance is attested by the fact that our constitution is written in English which is also the language of the parliament the judiciary and of higher education. Higher education in India, in all the streams is mostly imparted in English. This phenomenon has gained staggering momentum in the last decade making it imperative for more and more state governments to adopt English as the medium of instruction in state run educational institutes.

The Maharashtra Government responded by introducing English language from first standard in some of the schools and by starting English medium schools. In 2011 the Maharashtra Government signed a memorandum of understanding with the British Council to implement the English language initiative for primary schools. The ELIPS project was intended to develop both language proficiency and methodological skills of 67000 primary teachers in Maharashtra to enhance the level of English taught in state-run schools.

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The study seeks to examine the aims and objectives of introducing English at the primary level where the mother tongue would be the ideal medium of instruction and to understand the challenges confronting the teacher catering to the diverse needs of second language learners with varying levels of competence and from vastly different socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The paper is based on the findings of a survey conducted on select state run schools in Bhandup, one of the oldest suburbs in Mumbai that has, in recent years galvanized into a worthwhile real estate investment destination attracting a major share of the immigrant population that believes English education translates into greater upward mobility and social prestige..

The survey was conducted in the proposed area and at different institutions through questionnaires to different groups and in-depth interviews of all stakeholders including parents, students, and teachers. Most of the respondents were from low income groups. Primary data was supplemented by literature review and data from journals, books, magazines, electronic media etc. A total of 150 questionnaires was distributed among the students of 14 English Medium Schools in and around the Bhandup suburb in Mumbai. The students were drawn from Class III to Class IX. The questions were prepared with the intention of identifying and comprehending the factors governing the rapid popularity of English language as a medium of instruction among lower income groups (earnings less than Rs. 10000 per month) and lower middle income groups (earnings between Rs. 10000 to Rs. 25000 per month), in the said suburb. 40 of the 150 recipients come from families where the monthly income is less than 10,000 and where the family has to pay school fees ranging from Rs. 185 to Rs. 300 per month per child to ensure English medium instructions. 46 of the recipients come from families of lower middle income group. Only about 14 of the above 150 recipients benefit from a monthly income ranging between Rs. 25000 to Rs. 50000 per month and a meagre seven recipients enjoy an monthly income above Rs. 50000 out of which only 4 recipients earn above Rs. 1,00,000 per month.

In most of the families surveyed the income is sourced by a single earning member. Ninety of the 150 student respondents come from such families while 30 respondents come from families which have two earning members. Most of these families have just one or two children studying in English medium schools. However, it is significant to note that gender

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bias does not stand in the way of acquisition of English language proficiency as 77 of the respondent are girls and 73 are boys.

While examining the reasons that prompted the increasing demand for learning English, it emerged from the survey that English is undisputedly seen as crucial to job prospects within the country and outside. About 80% of the respondents identified lucrative employment opportunities as the principle reason for learning the language. The realisation that the English language has now become a necessary passport to a well paid job, cuts across religious, gender and income barriers. Further, as per the survey, 43% of respondents recognised English language as an essential requirement for becoming a part of the global culture. Also, English has, in the recent years emerged as the language of international communication as recognised and acknowledged by 48% of the respondents. English is increasingly viewed as a necessity for higher education and research. 40% of the respondents identify the importance of this requirement. Interestingly, the graphical representation of the reasons for learning English language that follows reveals that only 25% of the respondents perceived proficiency in English language as a marker of social status.

It is clear that English language learning is no longer viewed as a disturbing legacy of the colonial times intended to create class discriminations. In the era of globalisation, English language is a practical tool for acquiring a lucrative job and material advancement. A significant revelation of the survey was that a mere 27 percent of the respondents felt the need to learn English for operating the Computer and only 17.3 percent viewed the language as the principle instrument for accessing social networking sites. This observation could be an important pointer to the limited accessibility the respondents have to computer operations, which is available only in schools and not at home. (Since the majority of students hail from lower income groups). Neither is the learning of the language motivated by the urge to read English books, magazine, newspaper, and advertisements or to watch English movies and TV programmes. A mere 17 to 18 percent of the respondents identified English language learning with the above-mentioned interests.

Responding to the actual process of learning English, majority of the students offered a favourable response. English is easy to learn and can be an exercise of fun as well. Evidently, the learning modules are not a deterrent in the learning experience. Only 13.3 percent of the respondents, found the process of learning English language difficult and confusing. With

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regards to the measures adopted to imbibe language skills in the class room, 70.6 percent of the respondents identified reading English news- papers, magazines and comics as useful sources of language learning

Secondly, a significant 49.3 percent practice English grammar and sentence making exercises while, only 32.6% use English language programme on television, to learn and enhance language proficiency. Again the lack of computer and internet accessibility would explain why only 7.3 percent browse websites. Another encouraging revelation is that a majority of the respondents do write down new words that they hear. This is not surprising considering that marking and identifying the meaning of new words in the text is a regular pedagogical practice in the class room environment. What is however surprising is that, 84 percent of the respondents claimed that they speak in full sentences.

In India, the traditional practice of learning a foreign language has involved the grammar and translational method. However, the survey findings reveal that only 23 percent of the students are totally habituated into first framing sentences in their mother tongue and then translating them into English. 45 percent of the respondents claimed they relied on the mother tongue only on few occasions. Many linguists have acknowledged the role of the mother tongue in the process of acquiring proficiency in the foreign tongue among the primary level students as it would be inadvisable to curb their natural reliance on their mother tongue at that age. The survey findings revealed that almost 60% of the respondents expect the English language teacher to translate the English text into the regional or local language to facilitate easy and speedy comprehension. However a significant 32% of the students were willing to learn the language directly.

An encouraging fact that emerges from the survey is that school students are regularly and successfully induced to consult the dictionary, a practice that quite a few college students find cumbersome. 55.3 percent of the respondents rely on an English to English dictionary which understandably does not include students of the primary level since the practice assumes a basic familiarity with the English language. 36.6% of the respondents admitted to using Hindi to English dictionary.

From the survey it is apparent, that spoken English exercises are regular class room practice as claimed by 82.6 percent of the students, though only 40 percent of them enjoyed

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participating in oral activities on a regular basis. 30% of the students participated infrequently while about 2% denied any sense of enjoyable participation.

Teachers and professors in schools and colleges repeatedly encounter the familiar problem of inducing students to express themselves in English especially if the students are in the process of switching over from the vernacular medium. Such students stubbornly resist speaking in English for fear of being laughed at. 56% of the respondents admitted that they are embarrassed to answer in English. Evidently spoken English exercises at school level, though conducted regularly, need to be more innovative to motivate the students to shed their inhibitions and wholeheartedly involve themselves in the learning process. But it is heartening to observe that 35% of the respondents do not hesitate to answer in English considering that they are drawn from family environments not conducive to conversing in English. The survey findings clearly indicate that most respondents pick up their speaking skills from school through interactions with teachers and friends. 86% of the students are desirous of further training to consolidate their basic skills in the language. It is however interesting to note that 90% of the respondents acknowledge parental help in acquiring English language skills which speaks volumes for the anxiety of parents to ensure their children are integrated with the global environment of today.

The third section of distributed questionnaire dealt with teachers' response to the problem of inculcating proficiency in English and some of the methodologies adopted in ensuring effective learning of a foreign language.

A combination of activities is framed to impart the desired level of fluency in the students. Three main activities, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and story-telling sessions ensure the students get properly tuned to the sounds and nuances of spoken English before their writing skills are developed. Vocabulary games, understandably do not seem to be very popular here as these activities assume a basic proficiency in the language and are more instrumental in consolidating already acquired skills.

All the teachers, irrespective of the level at which they teach uniformly believe in the importance of English language as a medium of instruction and a majority of them are comfortable teaching the language and encourage their students to speak the language in the class. But language acquisition is a gradual process and the survey findings reveal only 40% of the students successfully imbibe the language skills.

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The involvement of parents in the teaching & learning process and the consideration is a little ambiguous. While the student respondents have claimed help and encouragement from parents, the teachers' interaction with the parents appeared to have produced mixed responses. Only 20 percent of the teachers claimed to have successfully persuaded parents to be proactive in their children's learning process.

The current study has confirmed the assumption on the basis of which the project was undertaken: English language teaching is top priority in today's educational scenario. The study appears to indicate that Government of Maharashtra's efforts in this direction are recognised and supported by students, teachers and parents. However there is a need for assessing the current practice in relation to selection of teaching material, methods and approaches to evaluation and the infrastructure required. The present findings appear to suggest lack of adequate technological aids in teaching language skills. Computer technology and the internet should be pressed into service in view of the fact that many of the lower income and middle income groups that are anxious to reap the benefits of market economy by pursuing English medium education suffer from inadequate access to technology.

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