

LEARNING AND TEACHING LANGUAGES FOR EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

'Respectable' employment opportunities today go with a sound grip of the English language. In the Indian scenario one's social standing is often equated with one's mastery of English. Ironically, our education bestows degrees and diplomas but fails grievously in lending learners any appreciable proficiency in languages. Very few graduates - even postgraduates - are above board alike with English and the local language. Remedying this malady which is bound to add real meaning to higher education is the most urgent need today. The responsibility lies squarely on teachers of languages. "Giving unto Caesar what is Caesar's" cannot be relegated to the back seat, whatever the constraint.

A strong footing in a language is synonymous with being confident and comfortable in all the four departments of that tongue. Good grammar or flowery vocabulary can only add flavor after mother tongue influence has been overcome to a good degree, especially so in the context of the English language.

Coming from a teacher of English this paper delineates a practical out-of-syllabus methodology to acquire proficiency in English. This worldwide 'language task-force' can fit into any other language situation too with modification to suit and learn and teach that language too for empowerment.

Key Words: Language skills, Motivation, Self-monitoring, Dictionary, Mother Tongue Influence, Common Errors, Vocabulary.

LEARNING AND TEACHING LANGUAGES FOR EMPOWERMENT

DR P V RAMANATHAN

The irony of our education is that while it bestows degrees and diplomas it fails grievously to lend the vast majority of graduates any proficiency in languages. A good and acceptable command of either English or even their own local language remains foreign to them. Is it the antipathy of the learners to languages or the apathy of decision makers or both that is at the root of this malady? This scenario of higher education and what leads to it put all language teachers at the receiving end. The plight of the teachers of English is particularly unenviable, employers in chorus voicing their chagrin on our 'products'. [Coming from a teacher of English the accent here may fall more on the learning-teaching process of English—pardon me—but most of it is applicable to any other language situation too.]

'Respectable employment' as we call it goes only with a sound grip and command of the English language today. One's social standing too is often equated with one's mastery of English. At the state administration angle, it is the vernacular. But our decision makers appear at once blind and deaf—blind to the fact that more English is the need of students for employment and to the country itself for overall progress, and deaf to the voices of honest and enthusiastic teachers eager to improve the teaching-learning aspect and impact factor of the languages taught. Comments like 'years of learning English has not enabled students to put even a couple of error-free sentences together', has become common. Also, today, whatever is taught, what is NOT taught is *how* to learn a language. It is like, *I know 'swimming' but 'cannot swim'* – especially with the English language.

Though the fault may not be theirs, as products of this system in recent decades, many teachers in schools and colleges too are found glaringly lacking confidence with English. To students, only the auspicious [*'muhurth'* of] job-search or campus placement acts as an alert to the significance of English. These two setbacks should be addressed most urgently by everyone concerned with education in this country. *Giving unto Caesar what is Caesar's* cannot be relegated to the back-seat any more, whatever the constraint. And every language teacher has to become part of the 'rescue force' in this operation.

Few of us escape either a crammed classroom situation or a packed academic coursework to find 'extra' time to try out new things. But the situation demands that *something ought to be done*. Here is a four-tier approach to learning and teaching languages to make a visible difference and produce results on a fast-track:

- (1) Instilling confidence first, making the learner appreciably comfortable in all the four departments of the languages taught [namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing].
- (2) Improving grammar and vocabulary alongside.

(3) Overcoming the influence of the mother tongue, to whatever extent possible for accuracy and precision, as the third.

(4) The last tier being, other ostentations to the language.

That *nothing can be taught but everything can be learnt* is an old adage. It actually means that there is but one way—make the learner *willing to learn* and *eager for more*. ‘Motivation’, in one word, is *the* thing. Stunning them with breathtaking structures of a language can wait! Let us teach them *how to learn* a language. That alone will embrace the ‘shy band’ too to cruise with the rest of the class. An out-of-the-syllabus start delineated below before religiously plunging into the syllabus is seen to work wonders.

Today’s students in the English classes are much like a doctor’s patients. A diagnosis of non-achievers invariably reads,

- absence of reading habit;
- shying away from speaking English; and
- lacking of English or confidence—or both.

To find a remedy, know the problem precisely, advises another adage. Now that the ‘problem’ is marked out, charting out an action plan is easier. Any teaching and learning sorority in our country can include modifications to suit its special situation in the modus operandi suggested below.

Every successful teacher is essentially a student too. Hence, any one lacking confidence can ‘fortify’ oneself with this simple three-point ‘prescription’ before embarking on imparting language skills to students:

- 1 **Listen** to twenty minutes of English news daily [on the TV or Radio—they are the most easily accessible media].
2. **Read** three columns in the newspaper [of the desired language], every day—again, an easily accessible ‘commodity’.
3. **Speak** in English [or the language in question] in the campus at least, and also, wherever else possible – give no excuses(!)

Three supportive factors hasten results in this method:

- a Follow these ‘prescriptions’ like we do a physician’s directions.
- b ‘Listen’ and ‘read’ – understanding is not the criterion *now*.
- c ‘Read every day’ here means *EVERY-DAY*— no ‘holidays’/

excuses (like a physician's advice, again)!

What actually can thrill the learner now is the truth that the results are 100% 'predictable' and directly proportional to effort put in.

If the situation demands, these 'truthfully dramatic' gimmicks would come in handy. For instance, we can tell them:

*I have no plans of 'teaching' you, but **you** are going to 'learn'.*

***Together** we work and **your** learning will happen.*

A single semester of concerted effort, and you 'cross over'... etc.

This is bound to take them by as much surprise as it would help them relax! It will alert them in disbelief and prompt them to 'sit up' to see what is coming! Even the 'last benchers' will readily join hands in the process. But we do not exclude a warning either(!), to 'watch out': *there is no 'free lunch' – no substitute to consistency, perseverance, patience and adherence to instructions meticulously.*

Launch the programme apprising them of interesting details on the four departments of the language—Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, in that order. Elaborating on the learning process, especially for the sake of slow learners (who are inevitably there), a 'great secret' about the four skills in question can be driven home: *Listening alone can help speak better –and reading alone enhances writing ability*—it is something no different from the process of 'recording and replaying': the brain registers the 'heard sounds' and their peculiarities to be 'replayed' in speech. Listen more and more closely, to speak better. Similarly, if you desire better writing skills, read more. There is no better option! *'Recording' is a must! What is not recorded cannot be replayed!*

Another 'revelation' is a must where campus placements are an annual feature, and the 'next step', for the learners: every employer eyes how you speak and write – and, into a job situation too, better reporting orally and in writing inevitably tells on promotion prospects. Appropriate words in appropriate places in reporting count for promotion prospects and *monetary considerations*. The best student response is assured on concluding with, *'This training is first for your placement and further for your career advancement'*.

The next thing to be anchored in is: *no skill is developed overnight. Consistent effort over a period alone pays. The choice is yours – pay (sacrifice) now and play later, or, to play now and pay (suffer) later.* The logic that goes well is, *The one who starts TODAY will be ahead of all who start tomorrow.* Also apprise them of the break-neck competition out there and the need to be ahead.

Our trump card and the most positive and 'catchy' aspect pleases most learners—the real-time supervision: self-monitoring. *YOU can check whether you are progressing! It is the confidence you gain--better pronunciation, ease in conversation, more apt words and larger*

vocabulary in speech and writing. 'Experience' these YOURSELF. There is no need of an outsider (like 'me') to verify and certify progress— you are your own boss. Check, periodically!

How one can check one's own progress in language acquisition can be elaborated in time, once the learning process is on. For instance, three weeks down the line, 'reading' can be modified as, *also writing out in three or four lines what has been read*—to be simply filed with date. A look at these a month later will tell them the difference—that they are better 'now'. Repeating emphatically that this applies only to those strictly adhering to the 'three prescriptions' will authenticate our methodology! They would be impressed. The 'progress' will happen visibly as they 'keep watch'!

The learning process becomes complete only when the learners can confidently *speak* the language. The *third prescription* indicates this. The 'bonus' part here is that when one does the speaking, the persons addressed do the 'listening' part and *viceversa*. Thus, unconsciously, a process of mutual help sets in. With a little guidance, appropriately, acquisition of better pronunciation and grammar in a 'natural' way is assured.

To those who shy away from speaking for lack of confidence, an effective encouragement in a lighter vein works: *English is, after all, not 'your' language. So, right or wrong, speak it left, right and centre. But rest assured that soon you would become more fluent and more correct with the language. This is the best part of this 'learning game': No good work ever goes unrewarded. The magic will happen. It is just a question of time. More sustained effort, faster your progress.*

Not that any 'magic' happens—but what has not happened in several years will begin to happen visibly, though gradually, in months. This actually makes us also see the truth that language acquisition is better, smoother and faster when the learner learns it in his own style and pace. We are only providing support with the 'style' and the 'pace'. The cooperation of learners will be forthcoming as never before as they start 'feeling' their own progress' *actually* taking roots.

Once the ball is set rolling, the teachers' part gets simplified. As momentum picks up the 'mutual help' aspect will accelerate the learning part amazingly well. The teachers can now switch to the less-taxing zone of directing the progress in the right lines—then the ball bounces on its own!

More material can be acquired for the listening and reading exercises to suit individuals and groups, with time. The quanta can also be modified. Starting with 'simple reading/listening' exercises suitably graded patterns for intensive and extensive reading/listening activity can be put in place to make the system self-contained and self-sustaining. The progress that becomes evident itself takes over as further motivation soon.

In the context of spoken English, practicing the sounds 'loudly' can be encouraged for better results—even in small groups or in isolation. Longer strides are possible with a few leads to English sounds to overcome the Mother Tongue influence/ interference, as below:

English sounds are never 'full' ['o' is not 'O' but 'au' etc];

Be aware of spellings as they do not match pronunciation;

'Double sounds' are non-existent in English in spite of double letters [= the 't' in *writing* and *getting* sound the same, not differently];

Three 'Indian sounds' are absent in English: l, n and o. [Of these, greater familiarity with the sound of 'O' has to be created at a second or third stage – 'O' sounds only as 'av', 'au' etc in different words.]; [The end-rhyme in the 'instructive' couplet written in a light vein can clear the pronunciation of 'N', introducing a little fun in class:

'Know that it is foolish to marry for money,

But be sure, it is more foolish to marry without any'

'money' rhymes with 'any' and not the other way about.] [The MT influence prompts many of us to sound the 'L' differently in the pair of words *love* and *clove*.]

Next can be, teaching 'stress'—on a syllable in a word, and then on a word in a sentence, highlighting their effect on meaning and pronunciation thereby introducing intonation.

This brings us to the best learning aid for any language – the dictionary. In the context of English very few teachers/students know the 'full use' of the dictionary! It helps with spellings and pronunciation; vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, prefixes and suffixes ... etc. The advantages of **owning a dictionary** can be driven home, now that its usefulness goes 'beyond mere meanings of words'. It is worth repeating that a good dictionary [with the attached CD] helps with –

Synonyms and antonyms

Multiple meanings of common words

Multiple words with same/similar pronunciation

Use of phrasal verbs

Improving vocabulary... etc

Once we point out the need for appropriate words in different situations at workplace, home, travel, visit etc the need for larger vocabulary 'sticks'. Salary linked to one's vocabulary continues to be the best motivator! Gentle reminders to things like 'three columns in the newspaper' and the 'basic prescription' will be received with good cheer at every juncture.

Once on the anvil, several items now part of routine syllabus [like, comprehension, one-word substitutes, reading and summarizing, taking notes, activities like one-minute speech, dialogue, debate and elocution] could be tapped in suitably and to advantage. Thus our methodology takes along the syllabus part as well. Word-building exercises like word-squares, simple crosswords, what's-the-word, quizzes etc. aid the learning process. A couple of items

from above or the listed items below could be culled in to convert the routine class-session, ushering in an 'Enjoy English' atmosphere—a couple of months after the start off. It is well-known that fun and humour accelerate the learning process helping learners shed their natural inhibitions.

Coming to the writing aspect in language learning, what is already initiated with the 'reading' assignment can be expanded innovatively with different kinds of writing exercises to suit. Funny or twisted sentences to be rewritten correctly can add energy to the class since they help learners relax and improve performance. Example:

- Sitting on a chair a stone came flying through the window and hit the manager on the head.
- Board at dentist's: 'Tooth extracted by the latest Methodists'.

Games, fun and play have always been healthy learning equipment.

Listed below are some typical 'Indian errors' which can be taken up from the second or the third week from the start. Drilling in a suitable number of 'errors' per week can ideally help get rid of them all in the course of a semester – which actually is, *half the learning* done!! This additionally, makes the grammar aspect, generally found cumbersome, more palatable to learners (and teachers). Based on 'local errors', situations, experience, mother tongue circumstance and even 'current trends' each teacher can add to and 'complete' the list of 'errors' below:

Never to make Errors:

- 1 Discuss about / explain about / describe about
-----(*not followed by 'about'*)
- 2 One of the/my friend/class/student/book
-----(*Only plural after 'one of...'*)
- 3 Suppose if I had ... -----(*either 'suppose' or 'if' – not both*)
- 4 In case if I see him, I'll tell him... -----(*either 'in case' or 'if' – not both*)
- 5 Scenery/luggage/furniture/advice... -----(*used as singular and plural*)
- 6 News / gallows etc... -----(*always in plural*)
- 7 He can able to ... -----(*either 'can' or 'able to' - not both*)
- 8 Return back / go and fetch / repeat it again-----(*example of redundancy*)
- 9 Used to ... -----(*a past act not continued now – has no present tense form*)

- 10 Cousin-sister / co-brother ... -----(*only 'cousin' - for male and female*)
- 11 I and my friend ... -----(*always put 'I' last, as in, "he, his mother and I"*)
- 12 The programme was super... -----(*'super' is not a 'regular' word*)
- 13 He awaited for ... -----(*either 'awaited' or 'waited for'*)
- 14 He came at 6.30 pm in the evening-----(*'pm' indicates 'evening'*)
- 15 He told that -----(*'told' to be followed by an object, like 'me'/'him'*)
- 16 Entered into-----(*'enter' a room – 'enter into' an argument/dispute*)
- 17 At 10 PM -----(*capitals indicate 'Prime Minister'*)
- 18 The shop near by -----(*'nearby' is not two words*)
- 19 Catch a bus/train -----(*Typical 'Indianization'! 'Board a train/bus*
- 20 The doctor operated him -----(*'operate a machine' /'operate on a person'*)
- 21 I have an arrear paper ... -----(*no singular form for arrears, as '6' above*)
- 22 I have an arrear in Maths-----(*'Math' or 'mathematics', not 'maths'*)
- 23 I am MrRaja -----(*'Mr' to refer to others only, not oneself*)
- 24 She presented me a pen -----(*'present somebody with a gift'*
-----(*'present' a culprit/thief in court or police station'*)
- 25 I won her in the match -----(*'win' a medal; but 'winover' some one*)
- 26 Mrs Lola and Miss Mira are friends
-----(*Only a male name is to be used after' Mrs'/'Miss' etc,*
---- *It means, 'wife of' / 'daughter of' respectively. 'Ms' ['miz']*
(= a woman, 'married' or 'to be married'-- name can follow then)
- 27 I am elder than him -----(*older than)/('elder to' if within family circle*)
- 28 I have been invited for dinner -----(*invited to dinner/dine*
-----(*invited 'for'= I will be eaten as dish: cannibalism!*)
- 29 The meeting was preponed-----(*advanced – no 'preponed' in English*)
- 30 He was depromoted-----(*demoted – no word as 'depromoted'*)
- 31 I need some advices on... -----(*a piece of advice)(no plural form, 'advices'*)

- 32 He applied leave -----('applied for') ('apply' an ointment/ powder on face
- 33 The Board comprised of five members -----('consisted of' or 'comprised'
- 34 Each other/One another -----('each other' if two; 'one another' for more
- 35 Keep them separate separate-----('separately
- 36 Please take one one cake -----('one each
- 37 They gave her a send of / sent off-----('send off
- 38 Please do the needful-----('do what is necessary') ('Needful' is un-English
- 39 He can't able to come -----('cannot come / not able to come)
- 40 He as well as I are coming tomorrow -----('as well as' is special use!
-----('He and I are coming/ He as well as I is coming
- 41 Local call Rs 1/-; Local call 1 Rs" ... etc -----('Re 1/-' or 'rupee one'
- 42 Go/went to school ----(= for studying) -----('the for 'purpose' involved
She goes to the school -----(= for another purpose like 'to see the clerk
----- (Similarly, 'to hospital'/'to the hospital'; 'to college/ church etc.
- 43 I kindly request you to help me -----('request you to kindly help me')
----- (Who has to be 'kind'? Seeker or the one obliging?)
- 44 Few people know = Nobody knows -----('few' indicates 'no one'
A few people know = -----(= not many, very few]
-----('used with countable nouns .. few attended/ a few attended
- 45 Similarly, 'Little' = nil / zero / no -----('used with the uncountable
-----('Example, 'there was little water in the jug' = 'no water'..
-----('there was a little..' = 'small quantity, less than required'
- 47 He came back with full of hope ----- (with a lot of hope / with great hope
- 48 I have = I own/ possess etc ----- (I have a house; I have two cars
- 49 I am having = I have right now on me/ in my pocket/ hand ... etc
- 48 He contested in the election -----('contested the election
- 50 The company promoted him as manager -----('as' not needed

The highlight of this approach to learning and teaching any language is that it smoothenes out most of the rough patches in the language learning process and helps

- strengthen skill in all the four departments of the language,
- acquire a comfortable vocabulary,
- overcome to an appreciable (though limited) extent the mother

tongue interference, and

- get over many a common grammatical error.

Our effort here is to ***teach less of the language itself, but more of how to learn it.*** More than stopping with 'imparting' instruction, we would have inspired and trained them to explore territories into which no teacher might 'physically take them'. In short, we provide them the circumstances and an atmosphere to 'think in English' and develop a natural 'sense of English' to consolidate language learning. The additional highlights of this approach include, teacher-taught closeness, support to complete 'prescribed' academic tasks along with this out-of-syllabus activity, improved class results, and greater job-satisfaction to the teacher ... to mention but a few.

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