

ELT in India at Primary School Level: A Look into Matter

Darshita G. Tank

Ph. D. Research Scholar,
Saurashtra University,
Rajkot, Gujarat.

Received July 01, 2016

Accepted July 25, 2016

ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning of a foreign language has never been an easy task. This is an area that requires policy, tact and competence on the part of the teacher, and positive attitude and a desire to learn on the part of the student. But there are some other factors too that considerably influence the teaching of a language which is not native. Since the day an Indian child starts his formal education, the sole aim of his parents (and later also of his own) becomes to make him 'perfect' in English because English in India is necessary not only to get a job but also to appear a man of position. Parents -whether well educated or otherwise- wish to see their child with good English. But this dream fails and it has been failing majority of Indian parents and their children for years. In spite of years of teaching of English language and literature, teaching of English in India has not been able to give expected results. Unfortunately, it has failed. The present article tries to understand the reasons behind the failure of teaching of English in India in spite of a great degree of toil put in. Along with this some suggestions to overcome the problem is also discussed. Of course, this topic is quite deep and comprehensive but this paper surely discusses some of the key factors responsible for this tragedy.

Key words: *English for Indians, Causes of the failure of teaching English in India: Lack of Proper Background, Inappropriate Teaching Method, Overcrowded Classes, Lack of Speaking Practice, Incompetent Syllabus, Inappropriate Examination System, Lack of Teachers' Proficiency, Lack of Special ELT Training Program, and Suggestions for Improvement.*

Teaching and learning of a foreign language has never been an easy task. This is an area that requires policy, tact and competence on the part of the teacher, and positive attitude and a desire to learn on the part of the student. But there are some other factors too that considerably influence the teaching of a language which is not native.

Since the day an Indian child starts his formal education, the sole aim of his parents (and later also of his own) becomes to make him 'perfect' in English because English in India is necessary not only to get a job but also to appear a man of position. Parents -whether well educated or otherwise- wish to see their child with good English. But this dream fails and it has been failing majority of Indian parents and their children for years. In spite of years of teaching of English language and literature, teaching of English in India has not been able to give expected results. Unfortunately, it has failed. The present article tries to understand the reasons behind the failure of teaching of English in India in spite of a great degree of toil put in. Along with this some suggestions to overcome the problem is also discussed. Of course, this topic is quite deep and

comprehensive but this paper surely discusses some of the key factors responsible for this tragedy.

An average Indian wants to read, write and speak English with fluency, yet he fears the assumed 'difficulty' of this language. Indians believe that English is a difficult language, mastery over which is very difficult to achieve. This negative mental attitude towards English makes Indian student surrender rather than strive to learn the language. The idea that English is a superior language makes every Indian crave to have fluency in English but the same idea frightens him.

When an average Indian student starts his primary education under this ideological influence, this assumed idea of superiority, and hence difficulty, of English settles somewhere in his mind and leads to the development of a kind of prejudiced attitude in his mind, of which he is never able to get rid of. This idea keeps on clinging to him even after years of study of English in schools at Primary, Middle, and Higher levels.

There are many causes of the failure of teaching English in India as:

Lack of Proper Background

A great section of Indian population that goes for primary education belongs to the middle class, subcategorized into upper middle, middle, and lower middle. People belonging to the upper middle are able to send their children to public schools where the medium of instructions is English, whereas those belonging to middle and lower middle send their children to government schools or government aided schools where the medium of instruction is either the regional language or the national language. Students of public schools get ample opportunities to converse in English, and they do get to a large extent, the atmosphere conducive to the proper learning of English. On the other hand, students in government or government aided schools do not get proper exposure to the language. As a result, their practice of the language remains weak and so becomes their knowledge of the language.

When these students get themselves enrolled for higher education, those from public schools face no problem in English while those from government schools or government aided schools fail in this matter because of their faulty background. A student belonging to middle or lower middle class generally does not find atmosphere appropriate to the learning of the language even at his home. The newspapers and magazines subscribed in his house are generally in regional language. This also prevents his exposure to English.

Inappropriate Teaching Method

Another thing that adds to the failure of English teaching in India is the absence of appropriate teaching skills. The teaching skills that are used for teaching of English in India especially in primary classes are not suitable for students, keeping in mind their poor history of knowledge of English language. Teachers generally employ the same strategies to teach English that are applied to teach other subjects and that too, on all the students without considering their background. Learning of language is that non native requires the basics be made clear and exercises given to the students. But this thing is rarely done. Generally, it is taken for granted that

students must know the basics, and then further teaching is carried out as a routine process. As for giving exercises, there is no time because the teacher is always in a hurry to complete the syllabus which he/she thinks is his/her first duty towards the students.

Overcrowded Classes

The Act of free and compulsory primary education has led to crowding in the government schools. In many government primary schools students- teachers ratio does not match. The number of the students has increased but the number of teachers required teaching these students efficiently have not been increased proportionately. It becomes difficult for the teacher to pay attention on each student, and special attention to the weak students, in a class of more than 40 or 50 students, in a period of 40 to 45 minutes. If he tries to pay attention towards the weak students more, those good in the subject suffer, and if he does not do so, the weak, suffer. If he decides to create a balance by going slow, the syllabus suffers.

Lack of Speaking Practice

The process of learning involves four steps: listening, speaking, reading and writing. But in the formula that is adopted in our teaching of English, writing and reading are given preference earlier over listening and speaking. Even the teacher in the class does not speak English as much as he speaks the local language. Sure, the circumstances force him to do so as a number of students find themselves uneasy in English, but as long as students do not hear English sufficiently, they will not be able to speak, and hence read or write, it properly. The first aim of teaching a language is not to provide the knowledge of the language to the learner; it is to enable him to communicate in that language. When speaking- the actual practice of the language- is not given proper scope, the purpose of learning the language, as well as the effort to learn the language fails.

But now the curricula are also based on communicative approach. There are practically many exercises that might make them good at speaking English. Of course, one needs to know the rules of grammar in order to speak the

language correctly but only rules can never make one learn a language completely. So, lack of speaking practice creates lots of hindrances for Indians.

Incompetent Syllabus

The syllabi of primary classes are drafted by NCERT who practically do not teach in primary classes. While drafting the syllabus, primary teachers who really teach the classes are practically never taken into confidence or are not consulted practically. The outcome is an ineffective syllabus. Students who fail to spell even their name and address properly, who do not know even the most basic rules of English grammar, who cannot tell the meanings of simple English words are expected to understand and to do exercises in auxiliary verbs and dangling modifiers, countable and uncountable nouns and also many more. Of course, a level of syllabus matching to the standards of the Primary School needs to be maintained but perhaps the first thing that needs to be considered is the level of the majority of the students because it is the students for whom the syllabus is framed and teaching carried out.

Not just this, sometimes the syllabus is so vast that the teacher fails to do justice with it. His first concern is to cover the syllabus and so much time is spent in covering the long syllabus that no time is left for practice on the part of students or for taking feedback, and teaching of English is reduced to only one way traffic, that is only teaching, without checking or caring for understanding.

One more thing that can be mentioned here is that despite repeated recommendations by different education commissions constituted by the Government of India, the position of English in the curriculums and methods of teaching have always been in a state of flux. Till recent years, the teaching of English is introduced only in 5th class in government schools of Gujarat and now trying to introduce from the first standard itself.

Inappropriate Examination System

Faulty examination system is one of the key reasons of this problem. In our examination system total emphasis in case of English is on

written than on spoken English. This system checks only the written expression of the student, and the student being aware of this thing, manages the things to be written. Multilingual help books/guides which contain solutions in English, Hindi and regional language- three languages- are at his service. He mugs up the answers to the different questions told as important either by his teacher or 'Sure-short' or by 'Guess-Paper' type cheap books. In this way he manages to pass the paper which is his only aim.

Hardly any attempt is made by our examination system to check the spoken expression of the student.

Lack of Teachers' Proficiency

The question of teachers' proficiency is equally indispensable one. Government of Gujarat has started to take primary tests such as TET/TAT for recruitment of teachers since 2011. Such type of eligibility or ability tests for teachers' recruitment proved quite fruitful but not sufficient. The problem remains the same regarding the proficiency of the teachers in English language. In many of the schools teachers appointed through TET/TAT have to teach other subjects along with their own special subjects. So, it's very factual that how can a single teacher have proficiency in all the subjects they are teaching in the class. Same thing happens with English subject. So naturally the problems of teachers' proficiency cause the main hurdle.

Once teachers are appointed in government schools then no evaluation of the teachers have been taken place. Timely assessment of teachers' progress is not done at all in the education system in India. As a result teachers' become unaware of their level of proficiency.

Lack of Special ELT Training Program

In India, the Government is doing lots of efforts and providing various grants for various training programs but the output after such training program is not much satisfactory. There are many reasons behind such a bareness of training programs like timing and schedule of training during vacation period, teachers' disinterest, lack of proper material, sometimes lack of expertise and many more.

Lack of a Definite Policy

It is an unfortunate thing that till this date no proper policy for the teaching of English has been drafted. Attempts in this regard are known to us but these attempts have in fact not yielded any significant result. Though syllabi is based on communicative approach many teachers still emphasis more on grammatical rules and structures.

As two study groups established in 1967 and 1971 in their reports also emphasized on the teaching of communication skills and this view has been endorsed and pleaded a number of times in various seminars and discussions.

Suggestions to Improve the Effectiveness of Teaching of English

The debate for improvement in the teaching of English leads to various opinions. Given below are certain suggestions to improve the effectiveness of teaching of English in India.

1. The mental attitude of an average Indian cannot be changed overnight. Such a mental attitude is a product of a 250 year long rule of the British and it will take time to go. But students must be informed that English is not at all difficult. If it is, it is only as difficult as the vernacular is.

2. Overcrowded classes should be prevented. Smaller groups, at least of students weak in English, should be made so that the teacher may pay due attention to each student.

3. Instead of teaching each and every thing, students should be promoted towards self study. They should be given assignments to prepare which the teacher will be able to check if the sections are smaller.

4. Teacher too should be provided with knowledge of how to teach English language. For this purpose special ELT training programs should be run from time to time.

5. Students should be inspired, and provided opportunities inside and outside the class, to converse in English. This can help those students who do not find around them proper atmosphere conducive to the learning of English.

6. While drafting the syllabus for the subject of English for primary classes, teachers who actually teach these classes should necessarily be consulted.

7. There is a need to review our examination system also. Rather than checking only the theoretical knowledge of the students in the field of the language, their practical abilities, that is spoken expression, should also be tested. For this matter, a full practical paper focused on spoken English should be introduced. Students can be asked to create bits of conversation on given situations, or to understand pieces of spoken English from audio and video clips. A kind of oral test can also be introduced. This kind of paper is included in the syllabi for Functional English or Communicative English etc.

8. A definite policy should be adopted regarding the things to be taught. The number of communicative activities should be not more than three in every unit covering all the basic language skills. So that teachers can also guide in all the activities and reduce the scope of skipping.

9. The use of audio-visual aids for the teaching of English should be made popular. Teachers should invent ways in which learning can be made more interesting.

10. The use of grammar books as well as good dictionary among the students should be encouraged as these books are very helpful for the creativity and knowledge of the language.

11. Teachers should motivate the students to be active in the class and should generate two way communications. So that the class can become live.

These are a few measures which can be helpful in improving and enhancing the total output of English teaching in India. The question why teaching of English at primary level has not been expectedly successful in India is a very crucial one and it cannot be ignored. As English has become an international language and the world is rapidly undergoing globalization, we need to make our future generations good at this language, in order to bring them in a competent position. Missing this aim will be something unforgivable. More

research needs to be undertaken in this matter because primary education is the base of everyone's life.

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It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed.
~ Theodore Roosevelt