

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDIAN RURAL AREAS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: The present research paper is an attempt to trace the challenges & new horizons in English Language Teaching in contemporary rural Indian classrooms. English Language is an open window to the world. The aim of this research paper is to open this window for the students in Indian classrooms. Throughout India, there is an extraordinary belief, among almost all castes and classes, in both rural and urban areas, in the transformative power of English. English is seen not just as a useful skill, but as a symbol of a better life, a pathway out of poverty and oppression. English has become a global language and teaching it as a foreign or second language has increasingly become a universal demand. Realizing the demand and importance of English, in almost all the states of India, English is taught as a compulsory subject. Still there is widening gap in the people's English language skills between rural and urban areas.

Index Words: Rural India, Classroom, English Language Teaching

Teaching English in rural areas is a challenging activity. In fact, both the teacher and the taught are unaware of the effective pedagogical strategies. The reasons for such an unplanned perpetuation of English language teaching in such areas could be innumerable but a few are as follows:

- The teachers entrusted with the teaching of English are untrained and unqualified.
- The training provided is purely theoretical and bookish.
- Minimum intervention of technology and in majority of cases it is not available.
- Basic infrastructure is not available.
- Heterogeneous classes.
- Substandard teaching material.
- Hostile socio-cultural factors.

To succeed in life, one should know at least three languages- the mother tongue, the national language and an international language. If English is an international language, then we must promote its systematic and planned learning.

With this prologue to the importance of learning English it becomes imperative to evaluate English's status among the prospective work force which is students community. Most of the parents in rural areas are illiterate, belong to a humble background but have an earnest desire to educate their children. But they have their own limits- they cannot directly participate in the education process of their children. They cannot understand exactly what their children are learning and also need the help of their children to earn the livelihood. And therefore, the educational institution is the only place where the students of rural areas can learn English in a proper manner. But look at the ambience a student has to encounter once he or she enters an educational institution situated in a rural area. Is the ambience

similar in an urban and a rural educational institution? In an urban centre of learning, like teachers, peers, infrastructure, notice board, peon, clerk, sign boards, school bags, covers on the books and the notebooks, slogans written on the walls of the school/ college, language of the reprimand by the teacher, homework etc, makes us feel 'English'. On the contrary, look at the paraphernalia in any rural school or college; it makes us feel 'un-English' and in fact subaltern. These examples may appear trivial, but do matter a lot as far as learning or teaching of English is concerned.

Teaching of English in rural or difficult areas is definitely a challenge. It's a challenge in the sense that all theoretical knowledge acquired as part of ELT training goes haywire in the classroom. A teacher has to evolve strategies at every step. English has become a phobia. It is treated as elite over other languages. The teaching material is substandard, basic infrastructure is unavailable and the socio-cultural factors are hostile. The role of teacher becomes more challenging and demanding in rural areas because in such areas it is the teacher who is the model, to whom a student looks for all learning needs.

As far as pedagogy is concerned, it is not simple to answer the question, 'how to teach?' In spite of the fact that there are various methods of teaching English, but practically none of the methods works effectively. In this age of communicative language teaching (CLT), we really can't discard Grammar Translation method. In case of rural students, mother tongue is one of the very effective tools of ELT. Translation into the mother tongue also helps a teacher in simplifying the nuances of English. Of course, the limit or extent of translation has to be determined by the teacher. No method will tell a teacher, when and how much of translation has to be used; it is the teacher's discretion.

A teacher's role in rural areas is immense as compared to urban areas because in an urban setting a learner has other models like family, peers, society, technology etc. to imitate. A rural student has only a teacher to imitate and learn from. The Educational institutions in rural areas are considered as temples of learning. That means school or college is considered a very sacrosanct, ideal place. And it is the responsibility of the teachers to keep the places sacred with devotion towards teaching and educating the students. The classes may be over crowded, but the teacher should try the level best to attend each and every student and develop his or her language skills.

21st century is witnessing tremendous impact of technology on educational activities. The whole process of teaching and learning has been digitalized. Because of technology, language teaching has undergone a complete transformation. May it be Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Language Laboratories, use of CDs & Cassettes, Internet etc. a modern learner has all the technology to learn not only English but any foreign language provided he/ she has the money to buy this. But it is very painful that a rural learner is still in those dark ages and is completely marginalized as far as technological exposure is concerned. When even chalk, duster and black board are missing, expecting technology will be asking for sky. Even though nobody can undermine the value and effectiveness of human interaction/ interface and moreover we all have learnt English without using technology. But that is no excuse to deprive rural learners of the basic technological devices like TV, Tape recorders, Computer etc. Face to face interaction in form of debates, discussions etc. can be effectively used. Using a traditional cassette player could do wonders as far as listening and speaking skills are concerned. Having said that technology cannot substitute a teacher, it can definitely act like an effective teaching aid making the whole process of language teaching and learning faster and easier. The advantages of conventional teaching are;

1. Eye contact is maintained between the teacher and the student. Teaching is synchronized with the students' mind. Immediate remedial action such as repeating the material already taught or altering the pace of teaching can be executed.
2. Doubts on the part of the student are immediately cleared by the teacher.
3. The teacher does not spend time grappling with technology.
4. Rapport and bonding develops between the teacher and the student through regular face to face interactions in class. The teacher acts as a role model for the student, thereby enhancing the learning process.

Having known that 70% of India lives in villages, majority of the work force comes from rural areas. It becomes imperative that students of such areas are given equal opportunities to learn English. The urban- rural divide in teaching of English has to be bridged. It is possible only if a committed & honest approach is adopted. Having said that a rural student is equally competent to learn English, an English teacher has to adopt innovative strategies in the classroom. One has to go for action research to find the solutions on the spot. A few measures like appointment of skilled & committed teachers of English, effective implementation of technological schemes like EDUSAT, zero tolerance on the quality of both human and infrastructural resources, provision of minimum technological aids like TV, LCD Projectors, Computers, Stereos, weekly film shows, facelift to the general ambience in schools and colleges, etc. should be put in place to arrest the dwindling standards of teaching/ learning of English in rural areas. The said measures may appear far-fetched but will certainly help in better teaching and learning of English language in rural areas.

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