

Problems Beyond School: Teaching English for Sustainable Development

Sindamani B S

Assistant Professor,

Dept. of English,

A.M. Jain College, Chennai, India

Abstract: The English language has become a part of every student both in school and in college. Despite learning English for at least twelve years as a language and having English as the medium of instruction for the same number of years in schools, majority of the state board students of Tamil Nadu struggle to develop and produce listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English when they take up their degree programs. The syllabus and question paper pattern of the non-autonomous colleges under the University of Madras are designed in such a way that the students are expected to have moderate level of English language proficiency since the school to understand the text and answer the questions asked during their semester examinations. The problem here is that the students are not taught and trained 'to have been taught and trained' in schools to face English as a paper in their degree programs where pieces of English literature are also embedded in the textbook. An unstructured interview was conducted among select 100 first year non-autonomous college students of the University of Madras to find out their problems that they had in school which made them to study English as a subject to score marks and the problems that they face in college which expects them to produce English as a language for communication. Based on the problems stated by the students, suggestions have been given.

Keywords: *Teaching English as a language, insufficient training in school, problems faced in college*

Introduction

Although students study in English medium schools for a minimum of twelve years, they do not seem to become proficient in the English language. After an observation for six months, the researcher being a college teacher was able to find out that out of seventy students in a class, on an average only ten students were able to speak fluently in English with their accuracy in question. Out of those ten students, some had the base of CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) and ICSE (The Indian Certificate of Secondary Education). The problem faced by students in learning English is not at the linguistic level but at the psychological level (West, 2013). The perception of students is that English can be acquired by learning grammar. This thought is due to the educational system that teaches English just to score marks in tests where the idea of integrating the psychological part to learn a language is failed (West, 2013).

Objectives

Millions of students are able to read English texts but could not speak fluently and accurately in English. If the second language is not properly taught to students at the right age, they cannot attain the proficiency of it easily. This particular period is called the 'critical period'. Majority of the state board schools of Tamil Nadu do not train the students in the English language at that particular period. Hence, it becomes difficult for students to learn English after the 'critical period' (Nap-Kolhoff). Therefore, the objective of the paper is to find out the problems of the students that they face in college due to schools that did not teach them English for sustainable development.

Methodology

To execute the objective, 100 first year students of the non-autonomous colleges of the University of Madras were taken as the sample of the study. With ten open-ended questions, an unstructured interview was conducted with each student. For accurate results, only the students who had English as the medium of instruction in school and who studied under the Tamil Nadu state board syllabus were taken as the sample.

Analysis and Interpretation

To value the privacy of the participants (Creswell, 2014), the names of the students are not mentioned. The answers given by the sample students for each question are given below with the researcher's (my) analysis and interpretation.

Q1. In what language did your English teachers teach you in school?

80% of sample said that their English teachers used both English and vernacular language to teach English and 20% said they fully taught in English. 26% of the sample said that his teacher used the vernacular language to get the attention of the students.

This shows that the students were not properly taught English in English. This could have been one of the major reasons for not learning the language at the critical period. Enough exposure to the language should have been given from the early stage itself.

Q2. In what language did the subject teachers teach you in school?

86% of the sample said that the teachers of subjects like Mathematics, Science and Social Science taught them in the vernacular language and 14% said that their teachers taught them in English. The medium of instruction is English but the subjects were taught in the vernacular language. The positive aspect can be that students would be able to understand the concepts of the subjects easily when they are taught in the vernacular language but the exposure to the English language is reduced. Only when the students are made to listen to the subjects in the target language, can they develop their proficiency in the language through listening, since listening is the first skill needed to concentrate on to learn a language.

Q3. How did you manage to study the grammar part in your exams?

87% of the sample said that they memorized the rules and the teachers too trained them in such a way that would help them to pass the English paper, 11% said that their teachers made them understand the rules and 2% said that their teachers did not teach them grammar at all. This shows that the English language was taught like any other subject rather than a language. This type of teaching does not provide any sustainable development to the students. It is just like learning Mathematics or Physics problems where students are made to memorize the formulae. An accomplished teacher should be able to make the students understand the concepts so that they will gain sustainability in their learning (Jacobsen, Eggen & Kauchak, 2009).

Q4. Were you given opportunities to speak in English in school?

60% of the sample said they were asked to speak in English during the English periods but nobody monitored their errors and 36% said they spoke in English only when the teachers saw them. Otherwise, they conversed in the vernacular language. The remaining 4% of the sample said, “our teachers asked us to speak in English, in Tamil”, where it is understood that even the English teachers are not by the least instructing the students in English. This shows that the students did not have enough practice in the target language. They seem to have been reading and writing in English but not much of listening and speaking in English were into practice. This could have degraded their development in the target language.

Q5. How did you study the other subjects in English?

80% of the sample said that they were given repeated training to write the answers and some of them said 20% said they memorized the answers. This shows there is no proper understanding of the concepts among the students and the purpose of having English as the medium of instruction is lost.

Q6. When teachers in college use only English to teach, are you able to understand?

89% of the sample said they could not fully understand. 11% said they partially understood and they took the assistance of their friends, who did their schooling in the CBSE, for understanding the words and phrases that were difficult for them to comprehend. One of the students said when he continuously hears teachers teaching in English his head starts aching. This shows that the students were not exposed to the language properly. Had the students had the listening practice in English since the childhood, this situation might not have occurred. A student saying his head will start aching if the teachers teach in English is a pathetic condition in reality and a great fault on the education system here.

Q7. When your teacher in college asks you to summarize a story in class, are you able to do?

95% of the sample said they are not able to do. When the reason was asked some of them stated that they do not know to summarize on their own words, some said they lack confidence and some said they had the fear of committing mistakes. These fear and lack of confidence should have got rid of them when they were in school. Having these barriers in college shows they were not given enough chances and exposure in school. The remaining 5% of the sample said they are able to manage when are asked to summarize. It is understood that they could only ‘manage’ but could not be fluent.

Q8. What could be the reasons that delayed you in learning English?

40% of the sample said they did not have motivation, 20% said they lacked interest, 40% said they did not have proficient teachers in schools and the remaining 20% said nobody told them that this level of importance to English will be given in college and to get a job. They also added that their teachers just taught them to score marks in the exams. Some of the students even said their teachers did not have any commitment in making them learn the language. From the answers given by the sample students, it could be understood that the students are clear about what made them lag in learning English. It is high time that teachers should have commitment in teaching and flourish the lives of the students.

Q9. How do your classmates from the CBSE and ICSE boards speak in English?

94% of the sample said that they speak well in English. The remaining 6% said that there are students from those boards too who also suffer to speak well in English. One of the students interestingly said “for us it is education through English and for them it is the English education itself”. On hearing this statement, there was a great worry that the students should not lose hope on the state board education system of Tamil Nadu. A good measure has to be taken to give a satisfied education to the students.

Q10. What would be the difference between your board and the other boards of education with respect to speaking skill in the English language?

70% of the sample said that the students of CBSE and ICSE would have had proficient teachers to train them in English and the recruitment itself could have been based on the quality (sound knowledge) of the teachers in the respective subjects. 50% of the sample said that the CBSE students had excessive speaking exercises in English and repeated assessments on their listening and speaking skill but in the state board pattern they had it just once which was for the record that they too have assessed the speaking and listening skill of the students. There were no formative assessments, which could have helped the students to rectify their errors. This shows that the students of the state board in Tamil Nadu did not get properly the above stated reasons during their school education. Since the other board students had enough exposure to listening to the English language through all their English and subject teachers, they have easily acquired the language whereas the state board students suffer to learn the language after their critical period of learning a language.

Conclusion

From the answers given by the students, it is clear that English is not taught ‘to have been taught’ in schools. “Most government school teachers are poorly trained and barely proficient in the language” (Mody, 2017). Due to poor training to the teachers given by the teacher educators, poor training is given to the school students. This makes all the three- “students, teachers and teacher educators [get] caught up in a vicious cycle, from which there seems to be no escape” (Mody, 2017). The students feel that the state board teachers come to teach to satisfy their economical need where as the CBSE ought to ‘teach’ to satisfy their economical need. This statement reflects a bad connotation on the teachers. It is very much necessary for the teachers and the state board education system to change its style of teaching. Every teacher and the management should make sure that the English language is taught not for scoring marks but for the sustainable development that will help the students throughout their life.

Suggestions

- The educational board of the state should design the curriculum in such a manner that makes the teachers and the students to understand the importance of the English language.
- Teachers should be given proper training to make them proficient in the language.
- Students should be given proper practice in the English language right from the childhood.
- To make the students understand the concepts of each subject, the teacher can use the vernacular language. Otherwise, while repeating the concept or teaching them about other aspects related to the concept, the teacher should use the English language so that the students can become used to the concepts not only through the vernacular language but also through English.
- When it comes to teaching a language, it is better to use the respective language to teach the language. When any other language intrudes while teaching the target language, it creates distraction.
- Listening skill should be given importance right from the beginning, since listening to the target language is the first step in learning a language.

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