



# Geographical And Demographic Influences In ESL Acquisition: From O'Neil To Tharoor

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## Abstract

ESL acquisition programs are organized to help students and other non-native speakers of English acquire better listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. To acquire English proficiency for various purposes, ESL teaching has been an integral part of teaching syllabus to students at various levels of education. The intent of ESL teaching is not achieved easily as there are various factors of differing intensities influencing the acquisition process. Much research has been done on most commonly influencing factors, but not a lot focusing on the geographical and demographic factors involved in the process. This research paper examines and evaluates the latter mentioned factors and their influence in the acquisition of English as Second Language, with the aid of literary works from different literatures. This research presents a viable solution in meeting a common ground to deal with the constraints and overcoming it for better acquisition.

**Keywords:** Holistic Education, Second Language Acquisition, American Literature, Indian Literature, Eugene O'Neill, American Drama, Indian English, Shashi Tharoor, New Education Policy, Academic Revolution.

## Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world English language proficiency opens multitude of possibilities and facilitates effective communication, economic and academic opportunities, multicultural and multi-racial exchange, personal and professional development and much more. The chief motto of the ESL acquisition is to make the non-native speakers of English use English better in day-to-day scenarios. ESL does not focus on proficiency initially but it focuses on the use of English language to communicate better. ESL learning generally goes by various techniques such as vocabulary building, grammar, pronunciation, listening, speaking, and reading apprehension along with writing assignments. However, the syllabus and techniques can be tailored to better suit the needs of the aspirants. Similar to ELT, the medium of instruction for ESL acquisition has been ever growing since the inception of ICT in tools in language teaching. Apart from conservative modes of teaching, use of technological devices, movies, book articles, sitcoms/series or even being in contact with native speakers of English are few boons for today's learners.

Having noted the possibilities and resources to have access to English does not necessarily mean that there aren't any constraints in acquiring the language. English language learning in India has so many factors affecting and influencing the acquisition such as availability and exposure to resources, economic factors, psychological and sociological factors, physiological factors and much more. These factors vary from one individual to another and so is the technique to overcome such hurdles on the way.

English language has complex phonetic and pronunciation rules which obviously makes it difficult to master the speaking skills, whereas the listening skills tends to take a hit as the non-native speakers are not accustomed to the pronunciation, flow and sound of the language during the initial stages of learning. The reading and writing skills can be improved with continuous exposure to grammar and development of better vocabulary. There are umpteen number of methods and ideas that are currently in use to book on the LSRW skills among the non-native speakers of English language.

Other psychological and physiological constraints such as past negative experience, shyness, age factor, fear of failure, along with financial and cultural constraints may hinder the acquisition at the desired pace.

### Why analyze geographical and demographic factors?

It is indispensable to analyze and understand the geographical and demographic influence in acquisition of English as a second language among the non-native speakers. It is perplexing to have not much research done on the geographical and demographic perspective in English language acquisition.

Geography can play a vital role in the acquisition of English language purely because of the linguistic environment and the cultural context in which non-native speakers' lives directly affect and influence the process of attaining language proficiency. For example, an individual who grows up in an English-speaking country is in continuous exposure to the language through various mediums. The individual listens, sees and speaks English

from the moment born. This continuous exposure to English eradicates fear and instills confidence in the individual. Also, the individual is made aware about the language and its functions through formal and informal education, family, media and by other exposures offered by the society.

On the flip side, individual born in non-English speaking countries may not have the equal facility and exposure that is possible in the aforementioned scenario. Formal education given by various academic institutions is the primary source to acquire the basics of the English language. In a non-native English-speaking country, the influence of mother tongue and cultural practices come in the way of language acquisition to a great deal. The dialect or accent acquired by an individual is mainly because of the geographical location of the country.

Socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and presence of different local languages are few of the demographic factors that matter in English language acquisition. For example, an individual who grows up in an area with a limited number of English speakers has only limited exposure to the language in comparison with a learner who lives in an English-language speaking country. The opportunity to interact with an active native speaker is very less to zero depending on the demographic situation. A person's linguistic environment can play a major role in language acquisition and so limited exposure to the native style of language is directly connected to the proficiency acquired.

The demographic factor influencing the acquisition of English language can be easily brought to light with the help of the play, *Pygmalion* written by the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw. The language spoken by Eliza Doolittle in the play makes the argument valid as she is geographically and demographically away from the urban native speaker of English, which the author makes obvious by differing her English from that of Higgins and Pickering.

### **American Drama and Eugene O'Neill**

Despite not having an official language at the federal level, English continues to be the most widely spoken language in the United States of America. The growth of the English language in America has a very important place globally in linguistic perspective as America is a nation with different regional dialects, slangs, and vocabulary, that differs to a great extent from the English spoken in England. The growth of the English language in America is so strong that it overtook and overpowered most of the indigenous language of America and languages of other races that settled down there. Thus, understanding the growth of English in America with respect to geographical and demographic perspective helps with the teaching of ESL in non-native English-speaking countries.

Owing to lots of indigenous American languages and African languages that were prevalent when English language entered America, the incoming language had to modify itself to suit the needs of the speaker. These changes and modifications that happened to the language can be best traced when one analyzes the history of American literature.

No better way to understand American literature than to start with American drama. And no better way to understand American drama than to start with Eugene O'Neill. The diction used by O'Neill in his plays can be used as a source to trace the growth of language and the variety of language that was part of the American system.

O'Neill's diction is a pressing part of his style of writing. His works are best suited to understand the growth of the English language because of the geographical and demographic context it offers. His personal life can also be accounted for the same. His father was also into performing arts, but James O'Neill was more for the English audience ethnically rather than English speaking audience. Arts in America during James' times were more towards English settlers and their interests.

The case during the times of O'Neill was different. He, of course, reflected his father's art to some extent. O'Neill was a great fan of the works of the Bard. His earlier plays and writing career reflected it, at least to a miniscule level. O'Neill was more than just an imitation and that was evident from his plays as he grew in confidence as a writer. Vernacular language, slang and varying dialects became integral parts of his writing style.

For example, the play *Anna Christie* encompasses differing styles of English language such as the New York slang spoken at the bar by Chris and the sailor's version of English language spoken by Mat Bruke. While this serves as testament to the varying degrees of language modification in American drama as explained by the Father of American Drama, the language spoken by Anna Christie is totally different from the other forms in the play. The main reason for this is the places Anna has been to throughout the course of play. She would have been in the countryside, then in Saint Paul, in the meantime she would have worked as a prostitute too. Thus, Anna being the perfect example to explain how geographical and demographic situations can interfere with one's language acquisition and proficiency.

Chris says, "*Norfolk. Ve make slow voyage--dirty vedder--yust fog, fog, fog, all bloody time!*" (O'Neill, 2005, p.06)

Anna goes, "*Gee, ain't you a hard guy! [Then, with a trace of sympathy, as she notices him swaying from weakness.] But never mind that fight talk. I'll take your word for all you've said. Go on and sit down out here, anyway, if I can't get you to come inside. [He sits down weakly.] You're all in, you might as well own up to it.*" (O'Neill, 2005, p.26)

Another play for example is *Desire Under the Elms* by O'Neill. The main characters would want to move from New England to California, which is over 4000 miles away. They would want to go in search of gold, in search of the American dream, and in search of liberation from the ordinary middle-class lives. Eugen O'Neill would have brought the cultural change with respect to geography and the transition in language that comes along with the want to move from one place to another.

Simeon says, "*Californi-a's t'other side o' earth, a'most. We got t' calc'late—*" (O'Neill, 1925, p. 4)

Demographic factors can also be found in the mentioned plays. The author would have brought in people from all walks of life such as a bartender, mariners, prostitutes, educated youth, aged countryside old guy. This diversified social sector and the differences in it is easily traceable with the language proficiency and the vocabulary they use. The geographical and demographic factor playing in language acquisition is obvious with cited examples. But, how did this factor in the growth of English in America?

The question can be answered justly if one is able to glean the following from the works of Eugene O'Neill:

- Vernacular language
- Regionalism
- Localism

Vernacular language does not diminish the significance of the importance of a foreign language such as English, it is fundamental to have this very clear before approaching ESL teaching.

The world of Gen Z and Gen Alpha is multicultural, multiracial, and even the universe is multiverse. Similarly, multilingualism can only nurture diversity, imbibe inclusivity and foster a better understanding of the inter related world. Vernacular language also helps with the popular saying "think globally and act locally" as it enhances communication within the community and ensures continuity of local traditions, indigenous literature and cultural practices.

Regionalism in English language, demarcates distinct variations and additional features that are specific to individual geographical locations. English has become lingua franca because of its ability to bend to the conditions it is put into. Accepting regional idioms, expressions, and colloquial words has been a win-win strategy with the growth of English language. Regionalism in English language strengthens artistic freedom which in turn produces great works of art, which is directly responsible for the growth and acceptance of English language among the non-native speakers.

While vernacular language and regionalism helps with acquisition of ESL, localism can prove to be a double-edged sword. Localism can help with quicker understanding and grasp of English as it may sound close to the native language of a non-native speaker, it might lead to acquisition of regional phonetic pronunciation and influence of regional/mother tongue.

From an academic perspective, it is expected to follow the standard and prevalent form of English, and the above-mentioned factors may hinder in getting one's hand firmly on ESL acquisition. Therefore, it is imperative that there has to be a perfect balance to ensure these factors do not negatively impact but only support the acquisition of English language.

Steve Harvey and Ellen DeGeneres can be used as perfect examples to describe the importance of grasping the language in their own way. For example, on a comparative note, Ellen speaks textbook English whereas Harvey's English has incredible influence of vernacularism, regionalism and localism. But what is more important is to note the acceptance of both forms of English by the same audience. Ellen and Harvey are legends in American TV shows hosting history and their respective styles of English has had a significant role in bringing them to the stature too.

### **The Indian Context**

English found its way into India with the Britishers as an administrative language, which meant only the creamy layered people had access to learn and use the language. Even though there were innumerable local languages present, English did not lose its prominence even after the end of colonization. English became a key language in various sectors business, technology, education, communication, and even for administrative purposes. It was flexible to blend with local languages, which made it more prominent and commonly used among the non-native speakers as time moved.

Indian writing in English plays a massive role in embracing the foreign language and accepting it as one's own. Writers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. They gained trust and appreciation with their writing style and themes. Their writings were critiques of the social, political, and cultural standpoint of India during their times. It also spoke for nationalistic and cultural spirit of the people.

Indianness, Indian context, Indian history, mythology, diversity was a few of the prevalent themes that made Indian writing in English flourish perennially. The initial acceptance shown by Indians made more and more people take up English as a serious subject and made it reach every nook and corner of the nation. Despite what is said, acquisition of English as a second language in India has had its own problems to encounter. Mother tongue influence, pedagogical approaches, competence in teaching, psychological barriers, and economic conditions are a few major factors hindering language's growth. Just like the diverse flora and fauna in India, the reach and growth of English language is diverse in magnitude with respect to the above said reasons.

Contemporary Indian writers in English such as Chetan Bhagat and Shashi Tharoor can be considered suitable examples to explain the reach and reality of the English language in present day India. Both the writers have had great impact among the young readers and have educated them with their language.

Readers of Chetan Bhagat can observe the natural flow of lucid language the writer uses, which in turn encourages more reading and continuous use of the language. It would be an understatement to say that Bhagat

has made today's Indian youth pick up a book and read. The greatest part about Bhagat's writing is even students who are not from literature background tend to pick up his works and read. Whereas reading a book written by Shashi Tharoor can be Greek and Latin to those who are not exposed to English language to a competent degree. To them, reading Tharoor would be nothing but floccinaucinihilipilification, and would want to have Tharoor's book be defenestrated. On the other hand, his works and vocabulary are celebrated by those who go nuts for mastery over the English language.

The beauty between the two is both the writers have made significant contributions in the acquisition of ESL. Reading Chetan Bhagat can be compared to reading a beautiful poem of Wordsworth and picking daffodils, whereas reading Tharoor can be equated to reading Milton and comprehending the grandeur of art. Milton and Wordsworth are no less to each other in contributing to the growth of English language and literature, similarly it is essential that both the kinds of writings, of Bhagat's and Tharoor's are read, supported, popularized and used effectively to serve the purpose. Tharoor's writings and Bhagat's writings have introduced a plethora of English words to the reading community. On reading the work of Shashi Tharoor, one can be introduced to long forgotten words, archaic words, words of other languages that English has borrowed and cemented in it. On reading works of Chetan Bhagat, one can be introduced to the millennial English, sitcom language, internet jargon and words that are trending at that moment.

Like Ellen and Harvey, exponential growth of English Stand Up Comedy in India is largely because of the language flexibility and inclusiveness. Academia emphasizes the right usage of grammar and syntax but the youth of the nation has also extended warm welcome to the locally altered use of the English language. With the right balance between the two, the need, usage, and growth of ESL in India can only grow from strength to strength.

## **Summation**

English has almost become inevitable today and it is most important that one learns to use it effectively as it can widen opportunities and provide chances of having a better hand in today's world that can be entirely controlled in hand. Prowess in English language increases global opportunity, better global relations and access to possibilities that are huge than one can imagine. Therefore, learning English as a secondary language becomes more demanding in bridging the gap, as it minimizes the edge in a cutthroat environment.

Taking into consideration the pros and cons that comes in the way of ESL acquisition, it is necessary that a middle ground has to be found in a country like India where acquisition of English language is still to gain pace evenly. ESL teaching in India has to take into consideration the uneven spread of resources and opportunities. ESL teaching must take a humanist approach while approaching a non-native speaker by letting learners take their pace and time to get accustomed to the foreign language.

A humanist approach towards ESL teaching can be drawn from this article. ESL teaching in India has to have two different targets based upon the ability and need of the speaker.

- English for communication
- English for competency

From the earliest of times, the primary use of language has been to communicate better and effectively. Therefore, in the 'English for communication' strategy, it has to target people with little to no knowledge and teach them the basics and the essentials to cover the day-to-day needs. It is mandatory to make them aware about basic grammar and simple vocabulary and help them develop confidence in using the language. Students from remote backgrounds have to be given higher preference in this mode therefore the essentials are covered for them. Children's stories, stories with morals, comics, animated movies, rhymes and word puzzles can be used to expose them to the language and get them used to the basic functions of language. These can be inculcated in syllabus as they not only educate but also keep them engaged and entertained. These forms of inclusive acts evoke interest and create curiosity amongst the learners, which will definitely help in eradicating fear of the alien language. Crossword puzzles, technological games with words, spell bee competitions, story writing can be given as exercise and evaluate their progress. A preliminary test may be conducted to segregate the learner into the better suited category.

'English for competency', is for learners who hold average and above average knowledge of the language and its functioning. In this strategy, the learner is exposed more to the advanced level of training in order to achieve proficiency. This strategy has to be employed to make the local citizen compete globally with other native and non-native speakers of English. Rigorous practices and interaction with native speakers of the language can help in developing the language for competency. In today's competitive world, English efficiency is instrumental in achieving diverse profits; it enables not only to capitalize on opportunities but also to create more opportunities globally in the digital era. Having a good grasp over the language can do wonders in the professional and academic front, hence it is advised that learners with ambitions and diverse goals try to achieve English language to a certain level of competency. Growth of the English language has transcended borders and made everyone stand on the same platform irrespective of national, racial, economical, geographical, and demographic backgrounds thus making it an even race with equal opportunities. Therefore, it is important to provide a holistic and humanistic approach in teaching English to people from all walks of life. Teaching English with the above suggested methods might prove to bridge the difference between people from different paths of life, thereby making it a fair competition all through the way.



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