



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Teaching English in a Multicultural Indian Classroom: Impediments and Remedies

Dr. Vibha Tiwari
Assistant Professor
Dept. of English,

Ch. Ballu Ram Godara Govt. Girls' College
Sriganganagar (Raj)

Dr. Abha Tiwari
Assistant Professor
Dept. of English,
Teerthanker Mahaveer University
Moradabad (UP) INDIA

Abstract

In a multicultural country like India, where the bulk of the population is constituted by people representing diverse social, economic, linguistic orders and locale, to teach an alien language as English is fairly difficult. In fact, while teaching the subject to the students, belonging to such a pluralistic society, to adopt a uniform technique and style is well-nigh impossible as the same is fraught with multiple challenges. Hence the teacher has to devise his own methods and techniques effective in satisfying the needs of the students of the given lot, who essentially belong to various ethnic, social, religious and cultural groups. In this backdrop, the present paper *per se* is an attempt to explore the various teaching strategies, which may help the teachers in teaching English to the students in a multicultural classroom comprising the students of such a heterogeneous lot.

Keywords: English, India, Globalization, Multicultural, Heterogeneous, Strategies, Minority Culture, etc.

English is an internationally acclaimed medium of communication and the scientific and technological no-how; hence in the present age of Globalization it is viewed as a symbol of development and modernization, and is recognized as the gateway of opportunities across the world. India, which is known for its diverse cultures, traditions and languages, too distinguishes itself as the third largest English-speaking country of the world, superseded only by the US and UK. Consequently, in India a good command over English is perceived as a must to climb the ladder of success. Besides, the language, which shapes culture and society in many ways, is also a vital means of transmitting culture within and beyond a culture. It is, therefore, remarked that the languages are “the vehicles for poetic and literary expressions, the instruments whereby oral history, myths and beliefs are shared by a common community and transmitted from generation to generation” (Stavenhagen,

1990). Besides, language is also claimed to be the part of a culture, which serves and reflects its cultural needs; therefore, even though the societies, which share similar cultural legacy, speak different languages completely unrelated and structurally different from one another, which leads Muhamad to remark that it “is especially true when we have a class of students learning, speaking English, all from varied cultural background.” (Muhamad, *ainon@iiu.edu.my*).

In view of this, the teaching of English in India begins right from the very beginning and is taught in the schools as the second language. Besides, also at the college level due premium is given to the teaching of English. However, in such a multi-racial, multi-religious and multilingual country as India, the mental levels of the students vary according to their traditions, languages not only at the regional but also at more microscopic levels. Based on this a classroom at a given place naturally becomes a mix of inmates, belonging to different strata of society, which Nadda prefers to call as a ‘multicultural classroom’, saying, it “is one in which there is a blend of students from various cultures to form a diverse learning environment. Where culture not only includes tradition and religion but also races, language, socio-economic level, ethnicity and living conditions.” (Nadda, 2017) However, since the students in such a complex class have different levels of learning, adopting and speaking capabilities, it poses a genuine challenge before the teacher concerned to do full justice with the whole lot of the student by adopting a particular method of teaching. In view of the above, while teaching English or any other foreign language for that matter in a multicultural classroom with such diversified structural peculiarities, to address effectively the respective needs of pupils a teacher is required to improvise his method and approach of teaching by way of the best of his creative and managerial acumen. In this backdrop, the present paper attempts to explore the teaching strategies that a teacher needs to adopt while teaching English in a composite classroom to satisfy the needs of the cross-section of the students.

However, prior to this it needs to be understood what the term ‘multicultural classroom’ is all about, along with its aims and objectives and the various approaches of teaching therein. Precisely, a multicultural classroom is a point where the students are not only taught to learn and master their lessons, but are also exposed to higher human values to enable them to emulate the same in their daily life. In fact, the multicultural education concept is “built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality and human dignity,” which finds mention “in the Declaration of Human Rights and is adopted by the United Nations Organizations.” (Nadda, 2017) As for the scope of multicultural education, it “refers to any form of education that incorporates the histories, texts, traditions, beliefs and values of people from varied cultural backgrounds.” (ibid) Further, it also “denotes a process that involves all aspects of school practices, policies and organizations to ensure not only the highest level of academic achievement but also the all-round development of the children’s personality.” (ibid) Accordingly, Gardner (2001) believes that a “multicultural classroom is a critical social arena where individual lives are shaped and influenced through attitudes and values, which are embedded in both the content and the process of learning” (quoted in Muhamad, *ainon@iiu.edu.my*). Besides, in a multicultural classroom the history and culture of diverse stock of people are taught, which on one hand helps the students

to develop a positive attitude towards one another, while on the other leads the teachers to appreciate the relative importance of cultural diversity. Besides, it also benefits in learning how to promote multiculturalism by caring, respecting and appreciating others values, language and culture. It is the reason why scholars believe that multiculturalism must permeate the curriculum. (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005) In view of this, a teacher has to be extra cautious while developing a method to teach his students in such a mixed class, as through this the students “try to explore their own culture...interact with and think about individuals who differ from themselves” (Muhamad, op. cit.) Thus, a multicultural classroom is a blend of students coming from diverse cultures and diverse social backgrounds. In fact, to teach such a heterogeneous combination of students entails a lot of creative and managerial skill on the part of the teachers, which requires the teacher to ensure that they have proper professional skill to apprise the students about current development programs along with vital information of usual happenings. In the beginning a teacher may face problems in introducing multicultural content to his students especially while teaching a foreign language like English, but after adopting a patient and steady communication process he is able to overcome it.

As for the aims and objectives of multicultural education, the academicians and political theorists are not in unanimity. The academicians might prefer the preservation of minority group culture by protecting children’s development of autonomy to enable them to think rationally and to have an open mindset. (Levinson, 2009) However, on the contrary the political theorist may advocate for multicultural education, so that the students are able to bring out societal changes to seek justice for the victimized and excluded racial groups. Under this model, teachers would serve as agents of such change, promoting relevant democratic values and empowering students to act freely. (Banks and Banks, 2013) Besides, the multicultural education also has various other objectives, such as promoting civic good, setting right the historical record, increasing self-esteem of non-mainstream students, increasing diversified student exposure, preserving minority group culture, etc., which will foster children's autonomy, promote social justice and equity, to enable students to succeed economically in an integrated multicultural world. (Levinson, 2009). As a matter of fact, to achieve the above goals a teacher has to exert earnestly to secure the voluntary involvement of his students with the process. In the meantime, to ensure the preservation of the minority group culture if needed some minor necessary adjustments may be made in the traditional curriculum (ibid). Besides, the students also need to be acquainted with global uniqueness, fostering proper understanding of the varied practices, ideas, and ways of life to prepare them to make significant contributions to the world. (Zhang, 2011)

Now the question is as to how to evolve and implement multicultural education in the classroom and how deep to infuse multicultural ideas and perspectives into the curriculum. (Wikipedia contributors. 2017) In this regard, first it should be understood that the learning styles of the students usually differ according to their status and orientation, which is likely to cause problems for the teacher while teaching them. In this situation, using multicultural education techniques in the classroom shall be of great help, as it enables students “to be comfortable in a diverse workforce (Levinson, 2009: 435). In this case the teacher should align the curriculum

with the divergent groups of students in the class to enable every one of them to learn. Hence it is the duty of the teacher to personalize the curriculum to reach every student assuming that “students are capable of learning complex material and performing at a high level of skill. Each student has a personal, unique learning style that teachers discover and build on when teaching”. (Banks, 2013: 50) Cumming-McCann has visualized following four approaches of teaching in a multicultural Classroom:

- (i) The Contributions Approach, also known as ‘The Heroes and Holidays Approach’ is the easiest to implement, which makes least impact on the current curriculum, but it has significant limitations in meeting the goals of multicultural education as it does not give students the opportunity to see the critical role of ethnic groups in a given society.
- (ii) The Additive Approach, also called The Ethnic Approach, is although slightly more effective than the contributions approach, it still doesn’t involve any major restructuring of the curriculum and is regarded as the first step towards a more multicultural curriculum.
- (iii) The Transformative Approach, which requires trying multiple perspectives while discussing a topic. This approach is, however, more challenging than the previous two, as it requires a complete transformation of the curriculum.
- (iv) The Decision Making and Social Action Approach – This approach includes all of the elements of the transformative approach but also challenges students to work to bring about social change. The goal of this approach is not only to make students aware of past and present injustice, but to equip them and empower them to be the agents of change.

(Cumming-McCann, 2003)

Besides, while teaching a foreign language to the students, who represent divergent ethnic, religious and cultural groups, and speak their own mother tongues to adopt a uniform technique to address them is hardly possible. It makes it incumbent upon the teacher concerned to adopt his own methods and techniques, devised to satisfy the needs of the students of the given lot effectively. Hence, let us now turn to our basic question as to how to teach English in a multicultural classroom and what strategies a teacher needs to adopt to be a successful teacher to address together to a group of students coming from a diversified societal formation. In this backdrop, Nadda has visualized the following teaching strategies, which along with traditional methods the teacher in a multicultural classroom needs to adopt:

1. The first of them is the Role playing approach, wherein a student is asked to express his views by enacting the role of someone from real life, whether it is a king, courtier, soldier, or a character from literature.
2. The second is the exposure to different language and culture, which subsists on the hypothesis that the traditions, rituals, beliefs and values of the people across the world have much in common, as everybody is a part of composite world culture, interlocked with one another.
3. The third is to know the background of the students, according to which, as a preliminary preparation, the teachers need to learn the background of the individual student of his class, along with his traditions, beliefs, values, customs, food habits, economic status, etc., to share it with other children in the class, which will help wipe out hesitations of students in mixing with one another.
4. The fourth is the cooperative learning method, under which the teacher encourages the students to interact with his classmates to find out the traits and skills of one another, as the basic aim of the classroom is to help children from minority cultures to develop cooperation and social skills.

5. The fifth and the last is the group discussion, which stimulates the sense of independent thinking among the students. It is an excellent strategy to motivate students to foster intellectual ability and encourage respecting democratic values.

(Nadda, 2017: 242-243)

Thus, by the Role playing method the teacher is able to demonstrate effectively the current social, religious and political issues as also those related with the past, which normally is difficult to explain in the classroom so well, as while watching it the viewer is led into the time, space and situation, the character played has really existed, experiencing the same feelings as present at the time. The exposure to multiple languages helps the children to recognize the differences and similarities among their class-mates, which helps them to find unity in diversity to overcome their prejudices, leading them to respect others irrespective of their class, caste, faith and culture. Similarly, by knowing each other's background the students will be able to share their cultural experiences with one another, while the cooperative learning approach aims at enabling the students to become more familiar with one another, motivating the students to forge stronger interpersonal relationships. And the group discussions afford students the opportunity to learn the skill of defending their viewpoint vis-à-vis the hostile points of views. It also helps students to develop their power of questioning, analysis and logical thinking of the facts and ideas, leading them to come out with their own new ideas. Curiously, reiterating the above viewpoint Muhamad also opines that the main teaching strategies that the more experienced teachers employ are “classroom discussions and collaborative work; avoid(ing) elements of prejudice, speak(ing) of differences in cultures, solicit(ing) culturally diverse opinions, etc. (Muhamad, *ainon@iiu.edu.my*). However, the situation in India, where classrooms are usually constituted by students speaking different native languages, owing allegiance to different faiths and cultures, belonging to different classes, creeds and socio-economic status, with different orientation and grooming conditions, hence their problems about learning English also differ.

As a matter of fact, despite being regarded as the gateway of global knowledge, English in India has lost the pride position it enjoyed during the colonial days and for quite some time even thereafter. More particularly, the JP movement of early 1970s, which paved the way for coming into power such governments in the north Indian states, as were characterized by their anti-English tirade, English suffered a severe set back. However, despite the fact that these state governments wanted to replace English with Hindi for all practical purposes, it still continued to be the most dominating language of India. Presently, it is taught as a compulsory subject at the school level almost in all the states of India, including Rajasthan where in government schools it is started from the sixth standard. But in view of its utility as a medium of scientific knowledge now the attitude towards English has changed and even in the Hindi-speaking states it is becoming increasingly popular, which is evident from the growing rush towards the English medium schools. It is no wonder, therefore, that a Hindi speaking state like Rajasthan has of late decided to begin English from the very beginning. However, because of the shabby deal already meted out to English the standard of English there has hopelessly gone down.

Besides, the diverse socio-economic status of the students in a classroom which is essentially multicultural has its own adverse impact on the process of teaching and learning English. As a result, students have become vulnerable to pronunciation and spelling mistakes. To illustrate the above viewpoint, an attempt has been made here to understand the problem of pronunciation and spelling of the secondary level students in Rajasthan along with necessary suggestions to cope up with the same.

Accordingly, a sample survey conducted on 25 students selected randomly from a Senior Secondary School at Sriganganagar, Rajasthan, has revealed that the students who come from Hindi medium schools and from the rural area are more prone to spelling and pronunciation mistakes with the result that in achievement tests the English medium students easily get precedence over them, as they get more conducive environment at home for learning the language. It is also revealed that in the matter of spelling and pronunciation a large number of the students suffer from a defective accent of typical English words. Besides, as there is a lot of uncertainty in the pronunciation of vowels and the same differ from word to word, as for instance, 'a' in 'anti' and 'alter', 'and' and 'answer' 'e' in 'end' and 'eat', 'even' and 'end', 'settle' and 'sequel'; 'i' in 'till' and 'time', 'ink' and 'ire', 'soil' and 'soldier'; 'o' in 'old' and 'order', 'tome' and 'tomb', 'son' and 'sound'; 'u' in 'but' and 'put', 'use' and 'urge', etc. give different sounds leading the students coming from the rural spectrum to pronounce such type of words often erroneously, as they generally have little occasion to hear someone speak English. It is also found that the incorrect speech habits of the students have also sneaked into their writing, leading them to commit so many errors of spelling directly connected with vowel sounds, for instance they write 'pants for paints', 'collage for college' and 'argent' for 'urgent' etc. The ignorance and wrong speech habits also contribute to many other such errors, like writing 'Britice for British', 'bicked for wicked' and 'sake for shake' etc. Similarly, writing 'Addmission', 'Proffessor', 'Carefull' for 'Admission', 'Professor', 'Careful', respectively are also the common spelling errors found committed by the students too often. Besides, the students have also committed following other mistakes:

- They have written the plural form of wife as 'wifes' for 'wives', of ox as 'oxes or oxs' for 'oxen'.
- Have committed errors in past tense formation by writing 'flied' for 'flew', 'readed' for 'read' and 'casted' for 'cast'.
- Some of them have erred in writing a word in the continuous form, spelling 'carring' for 'carrying' and 'puting' for 'putting'.
- Students are found erroneously using ei/ie, ai/ia, confusing them with one another.
- They are found unaware of the noun and verb forms of some popular words and have not been able to differentiate between the words like advise and advice, devise and device, practise and practice.
- While writing a word in plural form they have erred by writing 'denys' for 'denies' and 'carrys for carries'.
- Students are also found confused in the use of words like goods, news, innings, scenery.

Thus, the students though of secondary level were found having no proper knowledge of syllables, accent, intonation and semi-vowels. The impact of the mother tongue of the students seems to have affected their English pronunciation adversely. The silent letters in English words are also found to be problematic for the students as they found it difficult to pronounce the words like knife, knowledge, Tsunami, Pneumonia etc.

correctly. The effect of the mother tongue is also discernible clearly on their spoken English. As for the remedial measure to be adopted to combat all these problems, Daniel Jones in his book *An Outline of English Phonetics* has visualized five main difficulties that the learners face, in his initial stages of learning English, such as (i) to recognize readily and with certainty the various speech sounds accruing in the language, when he hears them pronounced (ii) to make foreign sounds with his organs of speech. (iii) to use those sounds in their proper places in connected speech. (iv) the proper usage of stress, intonation, rhythm etc. (v) to join each sound of a sequence onto the next, and to pronounce the complete sequence rapidly and without stumbling. (Jones, 1922) In fact, in the Indian schools the teaching of English pronunciation is not easy, because of the problems of stress and intonation, multiplicity of sounds of vowels in English as compared to other languages.

To sum up, English in India is presently in shambles and is passing through crises. The failure of a large number of students in the subject at the Boards' Examination and the adoption of malpractices brazenly in various states by the overt or covert connivance of respective governments is really alarming. It also shows that no proper attention is paid towards improving the standard of English, particularly by educating them to rectify their common spelling and pronunciation errors by employing suitable methods. As for instance, the students should be encouraged to keep pocket dictionaries to keep note-books to note down the spellings of difficult words that they often spell wrongly. They should also be encouraged to use different types of audio-visual aids and to do regular spelling practices. The teachers should pay individual attention to each student and make a list of words which are mostly spelt incorrectly to help him to improve the common spelling errors. Besides, a regular time say that of at least 15 minutes daily should be given to the students exclusively for spelling exercises. Besides the above, the teachers and the students should feel relaxed from the hazards of examination or the obligation of completing the courses in time. The students should be judged on the basis of their practical performance to read and to speak through periodical oral tests and the written examination should be meant only to test the understanding and writing abilities of the students. Thus, giving stress on the practical aspect instead of the theoretical will help the students will soon be able to speak English well. The teachers should also develop their abilities through regular workshops, orientation programs and symposia to keep them updated, as it is found that the old method of teaching, as the present day chalk and talk method of teaching in our schools has been mainly responsible for our lagging behind. The teachers of English language are also required to speak English with their students in and outside the classrooms and express themselves in the simplest possible way to encourage them also to speak English usually. Also the students should be made available taped lectures and model speeches to enable them to listen to them regularly. The competitions of dictation, dialogue writing, one-act plays, essay writing, etc. in English should be organized ensuring the students' participation therein. The students should be inspired to make it a habit to write letters, comments and other write-ups in English and to make immediate corrections therein. Every student also needs to be given equal opportunity to read the text loudly in the classroom one by one. The language laboratories should

also be made available to the students in all the Secondary schools. Besides, the teachers are also required to focus on developing the following four basic skills among the learners viz. Skill of listening, Skill of speaking, Skill of reading and Skill of writing. Lastly, it is hoped that by adopting the above measures both teachers and the students would be able to address the long felt problem of improving the lot of English, thereby making it popular once again and restoring it to its old glory.

References:

- Banks, James A., Cherry A. McGee Banks (eds.) "Multicultural Education: Characteristics and Goals", *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives, 8th Edition*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
- Cumming-McCann, Alison, "Multicultural Education Connecting Theory to Practice." *FOB, Volume 6, Issue B, February 2003*, <http://www.ncsall.net/index.html?id=208.html>
- Gardner, Paul. *Teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms*, London: David Fulton Publishers, 2001
- Jones, Daniel. *An Outline of English*, B.G. Teubner Pennsylvania State University, 1922
- Levinson, M "Mapping Multicultural Education", Ch. 23, in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed., Harvey Seigel, London: Oxford University Press, 2009
- Muhamad, Ainon Jariah, *International Islamic University Malaysia Malaysia* –ainon@iiu.edu.my
- Nadda, Prachi "Teaching Strategies in a Multicultural Classroom" in *Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (IJIR) Vol-3, Issue-2, 2017*, ISSN: 2454-1362, <http://www.onlinejournal.in>
- Stavenhagen, Rodolfo "Language and social identity" from *United Nations Work in Progress*, Vol. 13, No. 2, December 1990
- Tiedt, Pamela L. & Iris M. Tiedt. *Multicultural Teaching: A Handbook of Activities, Information, and Resources (8th edition)*, U.S.A.: Pearson Education Inc., 2009
- Wikipedia contributors, "Multicultural education", *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 5 Sep. 2017.
- Zhang, Najjian. *Rentz's Student Affairs Practice in Higher Education*, Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2011, pp. 246- 247