

Unique Challenges of Teaching English in Multilingual India

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Abstract: English is the voice of science, technology, commerce, law, and industry today, and it has often been regarded as the global language. For all the countries, it is the lingua franca of the present contemporaries. English is taught and learned as a foreign or a second language worldwide. In India, English is being used for inter-state communication and even for intrastate communication. It is due to the wide linguistic diversity, with almost 780 spoken languages nationwide. It is indeed an appalling fact that ours is the second most multilingual country globally. People speak different languages in different states, with different dialects, and every state eulogizes its state language as the best of all. And some still need a script. Though there is a fusion of modern technologies with the advent of electronic gadgets in educational institutions to teach English effectively, learners in towns and rural areas need this facility. Besides the contemporary era, the age-old practice of traditional teaching can be seen, and the teachers are reluctant to update themselves. This glaring lapse is found in the schools and colleges of the public sector. As a result, students at schools and colleges can get through the English examinations somehow. They must make more effort to understand the language or communicate with others. By and large, the situation is grim, even in engineering colleges in rural and semi-urban areas. The teachers of English have to undergo meticulous English Language Training and employ different strategies to make the students learn and practice English for their future. This article highlights the significance of learning English to be successful in the competitive corporate world today and the unique challenges in teaching and learning it against the core multilingual backdrop.

Keywords: real-time, standard English, linguistic imperialism, linguistic globalization, language acquisition, multilingual, semi-urban

Of late, some of the states in India have made the medium of instruction English. Almost all the private educational institutions have already chosen the English medium path and declared it mandatory for the influx. They also state that teachers should have English fluency regardless of their subjects. In some states, the first language can be substituted by the second or the third language, and the vernacular language can be annulled. Apart from it, there is no opportunity to study engineering and medicine or any post-graduation course in one's mother tongue; the medium is English alone. Besides, if one wants to enter the job market, minimum command of English is obligatory. In this way, the commercial angel escalated the importance of English in India. The teachers in their 30s, 40s and 50s still embrace traditional teaching in their classrooms where the teacher is an active giver, and the students are the passive recipients. This way of teaching nullifies students' interest in English and gives them no scope to learn it. As a result, students need help acquiring and using their English language knowledge in real-time practice. Therefore English Language Training is necessary for teachers, but it still needs to be done en masse.

When viewed retrospectively, it can be said that for the last three decades, parents and their children have become very particular about speaking English. That consciousness has permeated into rural areas too. The parents are worried if their children are not able to speak English. But the student community is often reluctant to speak English, even in engineering colleges, because of some irrational fear of English. This fear can be dispelled quickly at the primary and high school levels, but public sector teachers, in particular, do not do it. The teachers in the private sector are under the pressure of their management, but most of them need to learn how to make the students speak English. It is because they have yet to undergo any English Language Training. If it is the case of English teachers, the other subject teachers are great translators, especially those in the public sector institutes; they read from the text and translate it into the vernacular language. All the teachers except those working in some reputed private schools tread the same path.

On the other hand, the demand for communicative English is looming large with the development of the corporate industry, which offers jobs with good packages. In addition to that, there are scientific and technological innovations opening doors to different worlds. The paradoxical thing here is the students are well aware of the importance of speaking English, and they would like to get that ability, but they want it without trying to speak English. It is like attempting to make an omelette without an egg. Then the thousand dollars question is, what prevents them from speaking English? The answer is as simple as ABC; they must be scared to say it. Any language becomes tougher with the growing age. The miserable thing is the teachers in many engineering colleges teach their subjects in English, but when they interact with the students, they switch to the vernacular language. Why...? ...because they seldom know functional or communicative English. It is like a situation where a person who knows nothing

about something gets advice and help from someone who knows almost nothing. The outcome is English remains ‘an unattainable haven.’

On account of the growing demand for English, there has been a mushroom growth of English Language Teaching Institutes, in the name of Spoken English Centers or Institutes. They are all run by private people in almost all the towns, and no city is without them. Most Spoken English Centers in towns plunder the hard-earned money from the aspiring public and students. However, there is an exception to some reputed Spoken English Institutes in cities; in the remaining institutes, the teaching faculty teaches pure English grammar as such. It is like a belt running on two pulleys; there is motion but no progression. The rules and regulations of English grammar further scare the learners. It is like adding fuel to the fire.

The grammar of any language is to know the nature of that particular language. It has ingredients that can't become food; they must be used in specific quantities to make food. Meanwhile, colleges and universities often conduct fests, seminars, and workshops, thinking students can interchange their knowledge and improve their communication ability. Only a tiny part of the purpose is being served. But, there are a lot of books, both in hard and soft copies, and online videos available to improve one's verbal ability in English, and they are all just a click away from the learners. Yet the problem continues because the simple principle is that if one wants to speak English, one has to say it. There is no other go. One can't learn it by being a silent spectator. There is a saying, ‘If one doesn't follow what one wants, one will never have it.’

The dissemination of English worldwide happened because of British rule centuries ago. That led to linguistic imperialism or language imperialism. It means the imposition of a dominant language on other people. This imposition was considered to be a sign of power in those days. Thus English reached the nook and corner of the world.

At last, the British left all the counties and confined themselves to their county now. However, English remained in all countries and has become the global language. It is everyone's language at present. English can be learned through practice, and it takes some time to get acquainted with it. Besides, reading stories and watching videos can enhance one's ability to speak English correctly and presentably. The key is to learn the basics of English. Everyone makes mistakes while learning it. That is very common. If someone says, ‘I have never fallen from a bicycle,’ we can understand that he doesn't know how to ride a bicycle. Once one knows the nature of English, one can understand that it is the most straightforward language in the world. Once there was an aversion towards English, especially in Northern India. Still, everything has changed, and the present generation has understood that English is not just a lingua franca—still a language of global necessity and a launching pad to reach better heights in life.

Meanwhile, there are sea changes in the academic syllabus and the education system. Education is linked to livelihood. The government at the center and governments at the states

adopted changes in the education design, including English Language Training. There is a proverb, 'One teaches, and many learn.' This is one side of the coin; the other side is the attitudes of teachers and learners should be changed.

Students can hardly have English-speaking environments in India's rural and semi-urban areas. No one speaks to them in English. It is one of the major obstacles in making them speak English. The only ray of hope is the educational institutions. It is strongly felt that the need of the hour is the right kind of education, whether language learning or teaching, demands elaborate and careful planning with the utmost regularity, continuity, consistency, and stability. Above all, there should be a high commitment in teachers and students with a learning and practicing attitude. Teachers ought to realize that teaching is a complex and dynamic activity. It is said that a teacher is a lifelong student. They play a significant role in the lives of students. Education is student-centered, so they must justify their subjects in an applied way. As the instruction is English, every teacher must interact with students in English in real-time. If teachers remain mere translators, speaking English remains a Himalayan task for students. In such a case, medium plays no role. Some students are excellent in technical but could improve at communication in English despite the medium being English.

Of late, several technologies have been integrated into English teaching to make classrooms more effective and impressive. During all these years, there have been several approaches, methods, theories, and techniques to impart English language skills. Though there are diverse ways and means of teaching and learning, the English language continues to be elusive, especially in a multilingual country like India. For the benefit of contemporary learners and posterity, specific challenges must be identified, which in turn need to be addressed through selective strategies by English teachers. By the demands of the current generation, through distinct modes, teaching would be made the most exciting experience both for the teacher and the taught. Education should never become boring and routine; teaching English should be student-centered. Every student should be allowed to converse in English. Undoubtedly there is a sea of differences among the students who opt for different instruction mediums where possible. In such cases, the teachers can only employ the same methodology for some, and at the same time, the learning capabilities of students would be different. Therefore the teachers must be attentive in observing all the students to understand their language acquisition.

It is necessary to take due cognizance of specific issues relevant to the prevailing and challenging situations in the classrooms, and teachers need training and retraining. Language and literature should be connected; it means reading and telling stories. This can work very well at the primary and high school levels. Teachers must find out the students interested in learning English and make them participate in English learning activities. On seeing their peers performing, other students can get inspiration. The management of the institutions should oversee how English teaching is going on. All the institutes from KG to PG must have state-of-

the-art English language laboratories with sophisticated gadgets and software applications, which can pave the way to technology-based language learning. The English teachers should realize that the English language learners in India, unlike their counterparts in Western countries, can't have English speaking environment everywhere as people speak the local languages and the only place where they have access to English is in their classrooms alone. Therefore the classes should be productive and effective. English language teaching can be taken to a respectable level with classroom activities like situational conversation, questions, and answers, picture description, reading aloud, writing on hearing voice, expanding clues, storytelling, etc. Teachers should never criticize the learners showing for their mistakes. The learners should understand that the beginning of anything is difficult and fear of speaking English is the worst enemy.

Conclusion: Due to India being multilingual, the students from rural areas don't feel the necessity to speak English as they have their mother tongue for communication. Though the teachers take utmost care, most students pay less attention out of ignorance. Some students at the school level need to learn the importance of English. Even the students in engineering colleges feel some miracle will happen and some company will hire them. But it is a mere illusion, and the students realize the point just before entering the interview rooms; by then, most of the valuable learning time might have slipped through their fingers. Thus the fusion of committed teachers and students with a learning attitude is uncommon. It can be seen only in some places, sometimes only in some institutes in India. All the teachers know that learning never ends, so they should remember the proverb, 'What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.' So teachers ought to update their techniques of teaching. Let us remember **Charles Darwin**, 'It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself.'