

Challenges of Teaching English in a Diversified Classroom in India

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Abstract:

In the present era of globalization English serves as a window of knowledge, which is spoken by millions of people across the world and in the countries like, India, Pakistan, Africa and France it is used as the second language. India is one of the most diversified countries of the world, where the population is divided on ethnic, economic, social, religious, linguistic and regional lines. Accordingly the classrooms here usually consist of students, subscribing to different religious dogmas, racial disciplines. They speak different languages and have different standards of living and their general behavior, way of life and levels of intelligence also differ. In such a situation teaching of English here is fraught with many serious challenges. The present study, therefore, endeavors to visualize the gravity of the problem of teaching English in India, visualizing a remedy thereof.

Keywords: Diversified, Pluralistic, Ethnic, Demographic Pattern, Heterogeneous, Rural and Urban Divide

India is characterized by a rainbow type of demographic pattern and is one of the most pluralistic and diversified societies of the world, where the population is divided on ethnic, religious, spatial, linguistic and economic lines, and “is represented in what is called ‘unity in diversity’ (that) includes the diversity of religious communities, languages, ethnicities” (Nadda, 2017: 741). As a result of this pluralism, the structure of classrooms in the schools and colleges in every region of the country is essentially heterogeneous, constituting a confluence of students hailing from diverse spectrums of the society who “follow different beliefs, customs and traditions, belong to different socio- economic status and adhere to different sets of ideology” (Nadda, 2017: 741). However, the most cogent division of classrooms in India is the one based on their spatial break-up on rural and urban lines. Here it needs to be pointed out that according to the Census Report of India, 2011, the total population of India is 121 crore people, of which 83.3 crore, accounting for nearly 70%, live in villages (Bhattacharya, 2013). Consequently, in every part of the country most of the classrooms, except those situated in big cities, the rural students outnumber the urban ones.

However, there is no unanimity among the educationists and liberal political theorists with regard to the utility of a multicultural education system. The educationists favour the preservation of the minority group culture by fostering a sense of autonomy among the children and exposing them to new ideas, which “would assist children in thinking more critically, as well as, encourage them to have a more open mindset” (Levinson, 2009) But the major flaw of this system is that it fosters among the minority groups a sense of alienation from and insecurity against the main stream population. The political theorists, therefore, argue for the preservation of multicultural education system, so that “the students are equipped with knowledge, values, and skills necessary to evoke and participate in societal changes, resulting in justice for otherwise victimized and excluded ethnic groups (and) under such a model, teachers would serve as agents of such change, promoting relevant democratic values and empowering students to act” (Banks and Banks, 2013). The multicultural education indeed requires that schools acquaint the students with the rich heritage of all groups, and the educators also understand that all the children are receptive to the same educational environment. Besides, there are many more objectives that the multicultural education system has to achieve. As for instance, it is needed (i) to promote civic good (ii) to right the historical record, (iii) to increase self-

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esteem of non-mainstream students (iv) to increase diversified student exposure (v) to preserve minority group culture (vi) to foster children's autonomy (vii) to promote social justice and equity and (viii) to enable students to succeed economically in an integrated, multicultural world. (Wikipedia contributors, 2017)

Besides this, the multicultural education also exposes students to global uniqueness, fostering deepened understanding, and providing access to varied practices, ideas, and ways of life; it is a process of societal transformation and reconstruction (Levinson, 2009). It, however, requires a good deal of extra effort by the teacher to achieve the above goals, but its negative factor is that there is a paucity of qualified teachers all over the country for providing quality education in its perfect form in a multicultural classroom to ensure preservation of the minority group culture. (Wikipedia contributors, 2017) But it goes without saying that to create an inclusive campus environment in the classroom is quite a challenging job, for which it is gainful "to create a campus laboratory for learning how to live and interrelate within a complex world" (Spees & Spees, 1986: 5). It would indeed prepare students to make significant contributions to that world" (Zhang, 2011) There is, however, no denial to the fact that this diversity has both negative and positive aspects, particularly while teaching a foreign language like English in such a complex classroom.

This is too well-known a fact in the post-independence India the opinion was divided about the fate of English among those who really mattered. A number of extreme nationalists wanted to throw it out altogether, which they thought as the reminiscent of colonialism and a symbol of slavery. On the other hand, a sizeable chunk of prudent men, who fully understood the growing importance of English, wanted to retain it if not as the prime *lingua franca* then at least as a link language to serve both at the national and international levels. Eventually, the government of the day succeeded in adopting the latter viewpoint, but by then great damage had already been done to the cause of English. As a result of the introduction of the new scheme, the teaching of English at the elementary level was discouraged by giving primacy to vernacular languages. Accordingly, in many of the states in the country, particularly in the Hindi belt, the teaching of English was allowed to commence after the primary level. Besides, with the expansion of education in the country new schools came to be opened even in the rural areas, where the lack of competent teachers to teach English posed a serious problem. It resulted in the advent of a new generation of teachers, who did not have the opportunity of being taught by those who spoke English in a natural way or who had it as their mother tongue. This led to the rise in committing errors both pronunciation and spelling wise. Presently, although almost in all the states of the country English is taught as a compulsory subject, yet a few states of the northern India where regional parties have come to power from time to time, an open campaign against English has been mostly a political gimmick rather than any worthwhile bid for the promotion of Hindi or any other vernacular language. But for a couple of decades now the IT boom has changed the scenario altogether and even the politicians and political parties, who in the past have vociferously campaigned against English are now not only seen advocating vigorously its indispensability, but are themselves learning it through private tutors and even spending time at the computer, tweeting and surfing at the net. Nevertheless, the old difficulty of the lack of qualified teacher worthy of teaching English taking care of correct pronunciation and spelling still persists. It is, therefore, aptly remarked, "...today one of the major challenges faced by teachers in the transaction of curriculum in the class is for these culturally different students (Nadda, 2017: 741).

In fact, the multi-dimensional classrooms always existed in the Indian education system, but till the advent of National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2005 they were not considered as a significant factor in the development of educational programs. It is noteworthy that the NCF (2005) was invested with the responsibility of designing a child friendly syllabus, which recognized that a child's

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education should be stress free, full of creativity and should lead to a joyful experience of learning. Besides, for the curriculum development it also recognized five guiding principles viz. (i) connecting knowledge to life outside the school, (ii) enriching the curriculum so that it goes beyond textbooks, (iii) ensuring that learning shifts away from the rote method, (iv) making exams more flexible and integrated with classroom activities and (v) nurturing identity within democratic polity of the country. (Nadda, 2017: 741-742) The NCF (2005) with a focus on human values also sought to achieve other educational goals namely: a commitment to democracy and freedom, sensitivity to other persons, a flexible and creative approach to learning and appreciation of beauty and art forms as an integral part of human life. The ministry of Human Resource Development (2013) has also focused on an inclusive agenda with a vision of realizing India's human resource potential to its fullest extent with equity and excellence. (Nadda, 2017: 742)

As for teaching English in a diversified classroom in India, it is quite challenging and is really fraught with many challenges. Since a teacher in such classrooms is invested with the responsibility of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), he has to "constantly adapt to ... students' needs, (which) many times... means dealing with a variety of problems in the classroom, many of which are all too common occurrences" (Davis, 2016) Therefore, a good ESL teacher needs to get into the crux of all these problems, and try to find out their solutions, as even a minor improvisation in the teaching method can be quite productive both for the students as well as the teacher. There are following most common classroom problems faced by a teacher while teaching English as a foreign language: (i) the students rather than trying to solve a question themselves become over dependent on their teacher, looking always towards him for an answer (ii) the students instead of speaking English persistently use the first-language in and outside the classroom (iii) in ESL classes the students unable to cope with the lessons turn defiant and rowdy and try to disturb the whole class (iv) at times the students 'hijack lesson' preventing it from reaching home, which strays too far off the topic going into an unintended direction (v) in an ESL classroom at times there occurs a clash of personalities and a scene is created between certain students (vi) at times it also happens that the students weary of the stereotype teaching strategy get confused and resort to indiscipline (vii) sometimes students also get bored, inattentive, or unmotivated because of the themes of the lesson being dry (viii) at times the students who excel in the classroom turn unduly stronger and dominant and begin to behave in an unruly manner (ix) the students who are unprepared resort to shun classes simply because they feel lost and withdrawn (x) the tardiness or being late in the class is a common problem with some students that is quite bad. (Davis, 2016) Though the above problems are quite common with all the classes, it is viewed with more concern for an ESL class. Therefore, the concerned teacher needs to be a bit extra cautious and attentive to enforce discipline in the classroom, improvise his teaching strategy, make his lessons lucid and attractive, as his aim is to excite the students about learning, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehending English. Commenting on the point it is rightly said:

Staying awake and interested in class can be difficult. But what's even more difficult is being responsible for keeping students awake and interested. This is the job of an ESL teacher first and foremost. In order to be a great ESL teacher, one must not only teach, but inspire and empower. (Davis, 2016)

Apart from the above, in ESL classes the students are vulnerable to certain grave and at times funny mistakes of pronunciation, whereas "pronunciation plays a significant part in our personal and social lives because the way we speak reflects our identities, and indicates our association to particular communities" (Seidlhofer, 2001). In fact, speaking correctly does not imply just speaking isolated words and phrases correctly, but rather a sentence or a series of sentences, that is to say speaking it the way it is spoken by its original speakers, taking care of its nuance, stress, rhythm and intonation.

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However, in India where multiple indigenous languages are in currency, it is also subject to the influences of the mother tongue of the speaker. It is, therefore, difficult to have uniformity in the pronunciation of English or any other language throughout India, which is a multi-linguistic state. However, to teach the language with correct pronunciation, first, it is to be borne in mind that because of the individual peculiarities and influences, regional, societal and familial, the pronunciations of two people can't match exactly. Secondly, the ability to speak in a standard way is advantageous, particularly to those whose original language is distinctly local and whose vocations require them to work at remote places away from their home. Besides, it also needs to be appreciated that despite all the attempts to devise a uniform pronunciation mechanism, English still remains a language spoken differently. Curiously, even in England there exists diversity in the pronunciation of the language that differs from place to place, as for instance the pronunciation of Irish and Scots differs from that of a Londoner. In the case of Americans things are far more glaring whose pronunciation and accent are quite different from the original British ones due to local influences. Besides this, the Americans have also taken liberty with the spellings and have remodeled several words to suit their convenience. . Lastly, the style of speech also differs from individual to individual and there are rapid colloquial styles, slow formal styles, and various other shades between the two extremes.

As a result, there is a need to have a standard pronunciation, based on individual uses to allay embarrassment to those who speak it in a manner somewhat different from others. Besides, the adoption of standard pronunciation is also useful to the foreign learners of English, including the Indians and the neighboring countries. Thus, in a case study based on Malaysian Secondary Education, Rajadurai has stated that the pronunciation is subject to a rigid adherence to prescribed norms for the following reasons, (i) Pronunciation is viewed as a most resilient to change component in the second language due to the influences of age and the first language, thus leaving teachers very little control in teaching (ii) As many ESL classrooms have embraced the communicative paradigm that emphasizes fluency, meaning and authenticity, the teaching of discrete sound elements does not seem to fit comfortably in those classrooms (iii) Teachers do not find themselves well-equipped and comfortable to teach the pronunciation, and it is also hard for them to incorporate pronunciation with other language skills (iv) The oral proficiency of native speakers is used as the yardstick for many oral proficiency assessments. (v) Pronunciation is directly linked to social, cultural and individual identity issues. (Rajadurai, 2007: 3) In this regard, it is also opined that in Malaysia, "English language instructions have focused in general in the teaching and learning of four major skills, namely reading, writing, listening and speaking. (Shak, 2016) Nonetheless, sufficient emphasis should be given to pronunciation teaching. As asserted by Gilakjani (2011), good pronunciation increases students' self-confidence as they are more able to participate in discussions in class as well as interact with fellow classmates. He further emphasized the importance of having students recognize the necessity of good pronunciation and its contribution to the overall sense of achievement.

In this backdrop, it becomes easier to identify the main features of good and bad speech, according to which a good speech is clearly intelligible to the common people, while a bad speech is difficult to understand, which is mainly caused by mumbling or definiteness of the utterance. In view of this, even if a person speaks with sounds very different from those of his audience, it can be regarded as good if it is clearly intelligible, but if a speaker even with an accent similar to that of his hearer speaks in a muffled way, his way of speaking being not easily understandable can only be considered as bad. Thus, the first and foremost feature of a good pronunciation is that it is clear and is easily communicable and the speaker does not mumble and speaks clearly. Besides being intelligible a 'good speech' must also be 'pleasing', but this condition cannot be universally applied, as it is often

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determined by the circumstances in which it is spoken. Therefore, what is 'pleasing' to one may not necessarily be pleasing to the other. Going by the above parameter, the pronunciation of the students in a diversified classroom in India is generally found defective, the main reason for which is that in the school curriculum no adequate importance is given to the pronunciation and the students are required simply to pass the examination securing good marks. Therefore, rather than caring for improving their pronunciation, they cram the material that is important from the examination point of view. Besides, for this many other reasons can also be adduced, such as: (i) Sometimes the teachers themselves don't have proper knowledge and expertise of the standard pronunciation and the students get little opportunity to listen to standard spoken English and have to depend on such unqualified teachers (ii) the dearth of audio aids like tape-recorder, record-player, and lingua phone records, etc. in the schools, which is essential for teaching pronunciation (iii) the atmosphere in the classroom is also not generally congenial for learning the spoken English (iv) a few sounds of English words produce sounds as in the native place, which pose a problem to the Indian learners. In the absence of clarity over such things, they remain confused. The result is that sometimes they produce sounds which belong neither to English nor to their own mother tongue.

The other major problem of teaching English in a heterogeneous classroom in India is one related with the spelling errors and its eradication. The main problem is that in English a word is not always written the way it is pronounced and there is no set pattern to be followed in that regard, which frequently leads the learners to commit spelling errors. To elaborate the point, it is to be pointed out that according to the phonetic tips English has 44 sounds as against the number of letters in the alphabet which is 26. In English 5 vowels are made to do the job of 12 pure vowel sounds and 8 diphthongs, while of 21 consonants at least 3 viz. c, q, x are redundant and are used with certain other letters and their pronunciation is determined accordingly. As for example, 'c' used with 'k' is pronounced as 'k' as in 'luck'; and that with 'h' as 'ch' as in the case of 'charge'. Similarly, 'c' preceded by 't' and followed by 'h' is also pronounced as 'ch' as in 'match', 'catch', 'hatch' etc. Sometimes 'c' used with 'h' is pronounced as 'sh' as in 'cache'. The letter 'a' is also represented by different sounds as in 'able', 'about', 'after'. In the same way the vowel sound 'u:' is represented by different vowels in different words as in 'tomb', 'who', 'blue', 'doom', 'tune', 'lose', 'move' and 'you'. Besides, there are many words in English in which a letter is silent, for example 'b' in debt, 'r' in first, and 'k' in knight etc. (For more details cf. Alam, 1999: 34 ff) In this way, in the matter of spelling English is quite typical and is different from the languages which are written as they are pronounced and the vice versa. In English there are such letters which remain silent and are not pronounced while speaking the particular word. Similarly, in different words a particular letter has different pronunciation. Thus, as Vallins aptly remarks in English every word is law unto itself. (Vallins, 1954: 304) In view of this in English to learn correct spelling has been a big problem to a foreign learner including the Indian. Since in English language there is no uniform formula to be applied to every word in the matter of spelling, it is, therefore, imperative to learn the spellings of individual words properly. Also as to write good English the first and the foremost condition is to write and pronounce a word correctly, which is possible only when the students give special attention to it and there are competent teachers adept both in spoken and written English.

To sum up, in the modern time when the world is turned into a global village, it is important for our students to be conversant with English. However, in a pluralistic society like India, where the classrooms are constituted by the students belonging to different faiths, ethnicity and locale, it is well nigh difficult to adopt a definite and effective methodology to address the needs of all the students there. In fact, in such a complex classroom the pronunciation and spelling errors are quite common, where the teacher has to improvise his tool and mechanism as per the need, for which competent teachers are the need of the hour. But in the absence of competent teachers unfortunately of late the

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standard of English in our schools and colleges has gone down hopelessly. Consequently, the classrooms today are suitable only for mediocre as the teachers direct their attention only towards the average type of students, as a result, both brilliant and dull students feel neglected. Accordingly, in the class of thirty to forty students, the brilliant ones find their teachers useless while the dull ones find their teachers unnecessary. In view of the above, the need is of having qualified teachers trained in the art of addressing the needs of individual students in the classroom adopting worthwhile measures and methods suitable to such a complex classroom.

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