

Academic Issues and Challenges in Teaching English in Mainstream Regional Medium Schools

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'How old are you? What is your father's name? When do you come to school? What did you do last Sunday?'

These are a few examples of the 20 simple questions asked in a recent test to evaluate the listening and speaking skills in English of about 100 of the 'best' Class 10 students in ten government regional medium schools in Maharashtra. The findings revealed that about 50 per cent of the students could answer only five to nine questions in reasonably correct English, and only one per cent answered 15-20 questions correctly. And this after eight years of English instruction. At the same time, there is a high passing rate in English, of 80 per cent and above, of all candidates in the Class 10 board examinations.

It is widely accepted that the situation is no different in many other states in the country. Success in board exams that test rote-learning of answers masks the true picture that our government schools, many private regional medium schools and quite a few English medium schools fail to deliver basic proficiency in English to students from disadvantaged urban and rural communities.

The response of the educational leadership in several states to increasing demands for English from the ambitious poor has been to start the teaching of English in regional medium schools from Class 1 onwards, reversing a long-standing policy of introducing it in Class 5 or 6. The National Focus Group on Teaching of English 2005, while recognising that this policy change was problematic, did not consider it necessary to mention fully the valid academic reasons for a later start, except for a brief assessment of the 'critical period' hypothesis. What are the academic issues and challenges in achieving the goal of basic English proficiency for all children by the time they leave secondary school? It is important for decision makers

and educators to understand them in some detail. I shall therefore attempt to delineate two overarching issues, namely:

- the prevailing myths and misconceptions regarding second language learning
- the context of our government and private schools for disadvantaged children

I shall further touch upon certain linguistic aspects of English that pose difficulties for our students, and conclude with the tasks to be nationally addressed.

Prevailing Myths

The acquisition of both first and second languages has been researched extensively all over the world, though Indian empirical studies in the field are scarce. A major review of the literature was undertaken by Nadine Dutcher in 1995, looking at studies in countries as diverse as Nigeria and Guatemala, New Zealand, USA and Canada. The review highlighted a number of myths, along with the research evidence, of which the following are important for our consideration:

Myth 1 : The younger the child, the more he/she is skilled in acquiring a second language.

Evidence : This is only true in the case of acquiring 'good' pronunciation. Otherwise, research has established that the higher level of maturity possessed by older children and adolescents in their first language enables them to learn the morphology and syntax of a second language faster and more effectively. Earlier biological arguments in favour of "earlier the better" no longer hold ground. (See also the National Focus Group's note on the "critical period" hypothesis).

Myth 2 : The more time spent in teaching a second language, the quicker it is learned by students.

Evidence : The amount of exposure does not

necessarily lead to quicker acquisition, especially if the first language and / or the language of instruction has not been acquired at a fairly high level. The “interdependence hypothesis” has been borne out, i.e. there is a common underlying language proficiency for the two languages being learned by a bilingual student, and this helps to transfer competencies developed in one language to another.

Myth 3 : All children learn a second language in the same way.

Evidence : There is no one universal way of learning a second language. The pedagogy and teaching-learning materials promoted universally by major ELT (English Language Teaching) players from English-speaking countries need not be effective in a given cultural or socio-economic context.

It is important to examine these myths and the counter evidence in order to understand just what we are up against in taking on the policy of English teaching from Class 1 (or even Class 3) onwards in regional medium schools. As the National Focus Group has stated, this is now “a matter of political response to people’s aspirations rather than an academic or feasibility issue.”

The Context of our Government and Private Schools for Disadvantaged Children

To understand the real challenges in teaching English, we also have to consider the context of our schools:

- Children attending government schools and some private schools, urban and rural - belong to the poorest communities. The evidence from cognitive science that optimal development of even the first language / mother tongue is greatly influenced by stimulating, language-rich home environments already places these children at an overall language disadvantage when it comes to transferring skills from one language to another.
- While learning English at school, these students do not need to use it at all in their everyday lives. There are no opportunities to practice newly-learned skills beyond the few periods in their classrooms.

Moreover, the challenge to learn English at the primary level is mind-boggling when we consider that, for a large number of school entrants, the medium of instruction itself is yet to be learned, as the only language they know is either their own tribal language, or a subaltern version of the dominant regional language. It is estimated that a staggering 25 per cent of all school-going children in the country - amounting to approximately 40 million - belong to this group when it comes to language-in-education.

- But the greatest impediment to learning English is the grossly limited English proficiency of mainstream school teachers, resulting in a lack of confidence and motivation to teach English effectively.

Specific Difficulties for Learners

English has certain innate features that create difficulties for learners. Here are some examples:

- **Orthography:** English has a particularly irregular and complex orthographic system. A sound may be represented by a number of letters, and conversely, a letter may represent more than one sound. Hence, apart from the proverbial spelling difficulties, our regional medium students face overwhelming challenges when we expect them to learn to read without oral proficiency in English. For instance, would a child in Class 3 know how to read the word “row” or “bow” in a passage, unless the meaning in context has already been derived?
- **Grammar and Syntax:** The sentence structure of English - Subject-Verb-Object - is entirely different from our Indian languages and hence poses the greatest difficulty for students. Likewise the auxiliary verbs, e.g. the use of has in “He has a pen” is easy enough, but “He has eaten” is tricky. As for auxiliaries do / does / did these are very tricky, particularly in the interrogative. Consider: “Did she do her homework?” Definite and indefinite articles the, a, an are absent in Indian languages and therefore difficult to master. And then there

is the “zero” article, e.g. “I sleep at night (zero) and get up in the morning” (definite) or “There are trees in the park.” Irregular past tense forms of verbs are problematic run-ran, give-gave, win-won, etc.

- Vocabulary: An example related to vocabulary is prefixes for opposites fold-unfold, but agree-disagree, and correct-incorrect.

The Way Forward

Considering the above delineation of the global research evidence, the language context of our mainstream schools, the innate features of English, together with the fait accompli of the introduction of English at the lower primary level in most states, how do we meet the enormous challenges in the teaching of English? Section 3 of the Position Paper of the National Focus Group has laid down several concrete directions for all stakeholders. Based on our own (Centre for Learning Resources) experience in the teaching of English, I would like to shortlist the steps I believe need to be prioritised, with some tangible examples of interventions we have attempted.

1. Enhance teachers' own English proficiency. The English syllabi for Classes 1 and 2 of most states recognise that oral fluency is a pre-requisite to literacy learning, expecting teachers to familiarize children with spoken English in meaningful contexts. But most teachers, through no fault of their own, are simply incapable of doing this, as they lack both the oral skills and confidence to use English in their classrooms. Hence the 'pseudo-production'¹ of oral language suggested by the National Focus Group only for the very initial stages of learning takes hold in the form of rote-learning throughout elementary and high school. Unable to engage students in authentic conversation, teachers resort to teaching the alphabet, spelling and text-based answers. States therefore urgently

need to give intensive inputs to teachers to help upgrade their own English proficiency, particularly their spoken English skills. Training them in how to teach English can be effective only when they themselves know English.

2. Provide well-designed teaching-learning materials in audio form that not only give listening and speaking opportunities directly to students, but also indirectly serve to train teachers in imparting these two crucial skills for oracy. It is important that these audio materials are not restricted to giving dry pattern drills and pronunciation practice, but expose students to functional English in real contexts, in a graded and lively manner.
3. Adopt a bilingual pedagogical approach in teaching English, using the development of the school language as a pedagogical resource. Better reading and writing skills in the school language will help students to transfer this competence to the learning of English. Moreover, bilingual story books and other materials with parallel texts in the two languages go a long way in strengthening reading comprehension in both languages.
4. Involve informed resource organisations / persons in textbook development specially in the grading of language levels and relevant content. This will ensure that the attainment levels expected from year to year are realistic. In many states, there is no clear technical understanding of scope, sequence or the appeal of content for young children.
5. Provide a wide range of both instructional and reading materials in every class, instead of a single prescribed textbook. The National Focus Group has suggested several tangible ways to ensure an input-rich classroom environment.
6. Reorient learner evaluation. Up to now, tests and exams evaluate recall of textbook-based content instead of the ability to use the language. Given

¹The National Focus Group defines “pseudo-production” as language behaviour that mimics real production, but is not supported by an underlying system that allows the learner to step outside the boundaries of what has been taught.

the well-known backwash effect of evaluation methods on curriculum and pedagogy, we need to measure functional proficiency in spoken English, reading with meaning, and independent writing at different levels.²

Unless the above measures are taken seriously, the early introduction of English in our regional medium schools will remain a ritualistic reform. Furthermore, the intention behind it, that of social equity and equal opportunity, will ring hollow.

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²Examples of interventions relating to steps 1-5 above attempted by us at the Centre for Learning Resources, and available for wider use :

- "Enhance Your English", a 144 - hour modular course for teachers' proficiency
- "We Learn English - Levels 1, 2 and 3" - interactive radio course of 245 lessons for basic spoken English skills (also available in audio CD form)
- "Let's Read And Write English Levels 1,2 and 3" - interactive audio lessons with accompanying readers-cum-activity books for Class 4 and above
- "My World - My Words" - bilingual picture word books for basic vocabulary in English and 12 Indian languages
- Series of graded bilingual story books for young readers
- English games and activities