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ELT in India: Time for a Paradigm Shift?

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Abstract:

The status and importance of English in a globalized society is a question of no debate. It continues to spread despite being a “foreign” language and labelled a colonial residue. The reason for the immense spread is its essential role in enabling communication at both the national and international level. Since no Indian language is the lingua franca of India, English is the language of education, administration and commerce. To quote Dr. S. Radhakrishnan “... English has supplied us with the key to the fundamental ideas of modern civilization, modern science and philosophy...”

The focus of this article is teaching material and it aims to understand the need for evaluating teacher-made materials for language acquisition. Teaching material in the form of textbooks is one of the basic elements required for English Language Teaching and Learning. It acts as a catalyst that enables an effective teaching-learning process. The teaching material used in schools for English language narrows English language to a mere content subject with minimum focus on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW). This paper asks for a timely evaluation and revision of the same.

Keywords: globalized, communication, language acquisition, teaching material, English language teaching.

In the present fast developing world, keeping pace with on-going developments is crucial. The world has become a global village connected with all sort of networks. Borders and distance have become a mere measure or a line, as connecting and communicating with anyone and everyone is much easier with the aid of technology. In this world of globalization, one major



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factor which has enabled communication is language. Language is the basic means of expressing one's thoughts and emotions. However, communicating with people of different backgrounds (linguistically and culturally) becomes an issue if one does not possess the competence in the other's language. And this is when English comes into play. English language has been accorded the title of *lingua franca* in many parts of the world, which means that it is a shared language of communication used by speakers of different languages. Hence, learning to speak English is not only a luxury but has become a necessity. In India, despite the fact that English is emerging as *lingua franca*, its teaching and learning faces certain methodological and perspective related issues which need to be dealt with.

The importance of linguistic and communicative competence in English is unquestionable. It is the language of education and administration, a passport for social mobility and better job opportunities. Braj B. Kachru in his essay "The Alchemy of English" confers upon English a sense of neutrality in a way that it is not related with any religious or ethnic faction, which is why the language serves the function of wider communication and enables administrative cohesiveness in the country. There have been many policies implemented by the Government of India and individual states to efficiently enable the teaching and learning of English. It became the official and academic language of India by the early twentieth century. Haryana School Education Department launched an "I am not afraid of English" campaign in 2018 with the objective to remove rural-urban disparities among students at the elementary level and to equip them with necessary linguistic skills. As a result, English was introduced in all primary schools from class 1. Such and many other steps have been taken in this direction, but even then, English Language Teaching and Learning in India remains a problematic area and requires a targeted approach to bring about transformative changes.

Professor Kachru developed the Three-circle Model of World Englishes in 1985 which categorized all nations into three concentric circles of language namely inner, outer and extended circle based on the status and usage of English. The Inner circle comprises of areas where English



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is the mother tongue of its citizens i.e. their first language like USA, UK, Canada, Ireland, Australia etc. The extended circle covers nations such as Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Germany, France etc. where English is taught as a foreign language (TEFL) as a tool of gaining information and other non-official purpose. Here, English is not the official or primary educational language. Lastly, the outer circle includes nations which were once British colonies and where English is not the native language. India comes under this category along with Malaysia, Kenya, Singapore etc. It is these nations which admit the significance of English for various official and non-official purposes even though it is not the first language of its citizens. The reason being, to integrate and immerse with the outside globalized village.

Accordingly, English has been interpreted in different ways depending on the circle a nation is a part of. As already stated, it is taught as a foreign language (TEFL which is short for Teaching English as Foreign Language) in areas such as Taiwan, Japan, and Korea etc. which comprises the extended circle. On the other hand, in India, along with other nations of the outer circle, English is taught as a Second Language (ESL). Here the language is not an optional tongue or merely a subject to be passed but is considered a necessity.

English Language Teaching has come a long way and has undergone a lot of changes. Many innovative methodologies have been adopted by linguists and scholars over the years. In order to suggest reforms in the process of English language teaching and learning, it becomes important to analyze previously used methodology and understand its drawbacks.

The emphasis on suggesting methods for the teaching of English started with Grammar-Translation method, also known as the Classical Method, which originated in Europe and was based on formal teaching of Greek and Latin. The method makes use of translation of rules from first language to second or target language as a mean of teaching literature and grammar. The Grammar – translation method emphasizes proficiency in reading with little or no emphasis on actually speaking or communicating in the target language. Other than that, the method is teacher – centric and depends on memorization of grammatical rules to attain command over the target



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language thereby compromising fluency. As a result, the method was widely criticized during the 1900s.

As a strict negation of the principle followed by the Grammar- translation method came the Direct Method, also known as the Natural Method. Here, spoken language is given importance and the method demands the use of target language only as a means of instruction in the classroom which also leads to better listening skills. Also, grammar is taught inductively as opposed to the Grammar – Translation method by focusing on everyday situations and making individual generalizations. Despite this, the method had its weaknesses. Firstly, although the Direct Method focused on the need for developing a proficiency in speaking but it ignored other skills of language learning namely, reading and writing. Secondly, complete reliance on the target language as a medium of instruction led to confusion and could not benefit all.

Next up was the Audio-Lingual method which originated in America. The highlight of the Audio-Lingual method was that it catered to the drawbacks in the previously adopted Grammar – Translation and Direct method. The Audio lingual focused on oral proficiency while not covering much of reading and writing. The method believes in the need for practice of language skills more than their explanations. Apart from this, one of the basic reasons which led to the popularity of this method was that it was among the first theories which recommended the development of language teaching on the basis of linguistic and psychological principles because here language learning process is viewed as habituation and conditioning. However, the method lost its hold, especially in India, because of the lack of competent and skilled teachers to make students master language skills, especially oral proficiency.

Another approach called the Structural Approach came to India in the late 1950s and was based on the belief that language teaching will be efficient if taught structurally. Also known as the Aural – Oral Approach, Brewington defines it as “structural approach is a scientific study of the fundamental structure of English language, their analysis and logical arrangement.” (*Teaching of Language Teaching*, 86). Importance is given to developing correct language habits among



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the students with the help of carefully selected and graded teaching material. The teacher is focused on teaching structures as the main tool of language with the help of intensive drilling and pattern practice. This method was rejected on the grounds that even though the method did teach grammatically correct sentence patterns in the classroom setting but then the same could not be applied to real life situations. Additionally, with the rise of cognitive psychology the focus shifted to teaching language use in meaningful contexts. Noam Chomsky demonstrated the flaw in extensive focus on structures with the help of the following sentence “colorless green ideas sleep furiously”.

Chomsky states that the sentence is grammatically correct but semantically nonsensical as in it has no meaning. Therefore, the 1970s witnessed a shifted focus on developing “communicative competence” among learners. As a result, CIEFL (Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, now English and Foreign Languages University) Hyderabad advocated a Student Activated Multi – skilled approach keeping in view that the practice of language learning must be meaningful and useful to the students in real life situations. The multi-skill approach focuses on all the language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, it also advocates that students must extensively focus on developing their reading skills due to the belief that in India English is needed as a ‘library language.’ There is an emphasis on comprehension, correctness and appropriateness at the cost of phonetic accuracy. This discriminatory preference given to particular set of skills made linguists question the effectiveness of the approach.

The spread of cognitive psychology and focus on English as language laid the foundation for the Communicative Approach to language teaching. The communicative approach, crystallized by Hymes, is rooted in the theory of language as communication. Here, the focus shifts from the structural aspect to functional aspect of language as a social tool. However, one must not be under the impression that Communicative Language Teaching ignores grammar. Instead, the approach tends to maintain a balance between grammatical and communicative



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competence. According to Hymes, attaining grammatical competence is not a sufficient basis for communication, thereby, it works towards an integration of the two. Or one can also say that the Communicative Approach is an all-inclusive one which caters to both classroom and real-life needs. This change in perspective was adopted by educational institutions. The introduction to the syllabus for Secondary and Higher Secondary levels by NCERT discusses the importance of English and mentions that "the emphasis should be on teaching language use in meaningful and often multilingual contexts. For the majority of our learners, what is needed is a basic or fundamental competence in the target language." (NCERT)

The above statement makes one wonder about two things:

1. What does one mean by fundamental competence in the target language?
2. What are the basic language skills?

The answer is: to be able to communicate meaningful ideas and thoughts in the target language. This is the fundamental competence one needs. In answer to the second question, basic language skills involve Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Now comes another question.

Does our education system fulfil the above language needs?

The curriculum and syllabus followed by various boards in India such as the CBSE, does ensure the effective teaching of English as a content subject but lags behind in teaching English as a language and a skill. As a result, the teaching material generated on such grounds is inefficient. The approaches to English Language Teaching discussed earlier in this paper had some or the other drawbacks which resulted in their rejection. After many experiments, linguists came up with an all-inclusive methodology namely the Communicative Approach but even this could not achieve the expected outcome. Lack of efficient teachers and teacher training programs became the cause for its downfall. Moreover, Communicative language teaching is a theory on paper but not to be found in the classroom. However, I believe that the issue is not the methodology but the approach our system has towards English as a language.



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English in India is usually held equivalent to English Literature. During the early onset of English education in India, English language teaching was carried out through literature. There was no distinction between teaching English as language and as literature. Analyzing the situation, Prof. Ramesh Mohan said that “it was presumed that the study of the great work in English literature will automatically and imperceptibly provide proficiency in the language....” (Asif).

The above confusion was given the name Lang-Lit controversy. It was only in 1964 – 66 when the Education Commission of India stated that ‘a distinction has to be made between the teaching of English as a skill and the teaching of literature.’ But even now the situation remains largely consistent.

According to a study conducted by S. C. Sood, there is a mismatch between student’s perception of their needs and their actual needs in the sense that there is a difference between what is expected and what is learned. He found out that the order of priority given to the four aspects of English language is reading, writing, listening and speaking. The study was conducted on 63 students of the secondary level and it revealed the following data:

- Out of 63 students, 26 (i.e. 41.3%) felt that the present need of English is to pass examinations while only 10 (i.e. 15.9%) felt that it enables them to face job interviews.
- According to the needs met by the present syllabus, 15 (i.e. 23.8%) students felt that the present syllabus enables them to pass examinations while on the other hand only 7 (i.e. 11.8%) students felt that the current syllabus enabled them to communicate with others and none of them agreed that it helps them in job interviews.

If a similar study were conducted again in this decade the results would be equally disappointing and I say this with assurance based on my experience of teaching English



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Communication. Whenever asked about whether the course is necessary the answer is a 'yes', the reason being that English as a language has not been taught in schools. Many of the students find it difficult to articulate their thoughts into speech, or are unaware of what it means to be a good listener and hence are not confident enough to face the professional world.

Dr. Usha Dutta and Dr. NeeruBala conducted a study in seven states namely Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra, Nagaland, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Chandigarh and prepared a synthesis report in 2012. According to the report, in all states, as regards the skills of LSRW, it was seen that the teacher's effort to develop skill of listening and speaking was missing. Emphasis was more on developing reading and writing. Teachers felt that listening and speaking got covered in reading and writing. Now, one can argue that the report is outdated and various measures have been taken by NCERT and other state boards to deal with the issue since then. However the changes brought about in the curriculum do not cater to the problem judiciously and CBSE's latest syllabus for class Ninth and Twelfth is the proof. A close analysis of the syllabus reveals the disproportionate distribution of space given to the four skills of language learning, especially listening and speaking. Section-wise weightage given to reading and writing in the class Ninth syllabus is 20 and 30 marks respectively and simultaneously listening and speaking are clubbed into a combined weightage of 5 marks under internal assessment. Turning to class Twelfth, where on one hand reading and comprehension enjoys a good 20 marks weightage and writing gets 30 marks weightage, on the other hand, listening and speaking skills are again combined under internal assessment with a total weightage of 20 marks. However, class Twelfth listening and speaking enjoys a better position as compared to class Ninth but is this enough?

Commenting on the situation, Jyoti Thakur in her book *Challenges and Prospects in Teaching of English at Elementary School Levels* published in 2013 states that, "...if language teachers teach as they taught earlier, then one may not achieve the required goals of teaching English in the present global scenario" (126).



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Keeping this in mind an analysis and reform in the curriculum followed and hence teaching material becomes necessary. According to *School Education in Haryana: Status, Issues and Future Perspectives* published by NCERT in 2004, every school must follow a curriculum which is meaningful and relevant to the latest scenario. Such a curriculum must be responsible to the society by reflecting the needs and aspirations of its learners. Following are some of the reforms which can be adopted:

1. Incorporate an all – inclusive approach to teaching of English language.
2. Teachers can make judicious use of smart classroom system to enable better speaking skills and fluency.
3. The curriculum followed can enforce one class per week particularly to language skills.”

This paper concludes with the same thought with which it started i.e. the importance of leaning English as a language. Radhakrishnan Commission (1948 – 1949) outlined the benefits of English and English education in its report which stated that, “...English has supplied us with the key to the fundamental idea of modern civilization, modern science and philosophy, and what is even more important, for all practical purposes English will continue to be the principle means to maintain contact with the outside world....”

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