



MAJOR PROBLEMS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN ASSAM: AN OBSERVATION

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Abstract

Assam is the homeland of various tribes and castes. Almost all tribes of Assam have their own mother tongue. Here, people of a particular linguistic community either use their mother tongue or Assamese to communicate among themselves and whenever they have to communicate with someone outside their community, they usually communicate in Assamese. At the same time, here, the educated classes as well as the people of the new generation seem to prefer English to Hindi for academic as well as day-to-day communicative purposes. As English has become the most saleable commodity at the market of globalization, people are showing more interest in learning the language day-by-day. But it is seen that even after learning the language for a good number of years, many students can neither speak nor write the language properly. The problems may be related to the students, teachers, guardians, infrastructure, teaching methods and materials as well. This paper attempts to highlight the major problems in teaching and learning of English as second language in context of Assam.

Key-words: *second language, mother tongue, effectiveness, method.*

Introduction

Assam is the homeland of various tribes and castes. Almost all tribes of Assam have their own mother tongue, yet there are many tribal people living in Assam who use Assamese as their mother tongue as they cannot communicate in the language of their community. Therefore, people of a particular linguistic community either use their mother tongue or Assamese to communicate among themselves and whenever they have to communicate with someone outside their community, they usually communicate in Assamese. Here, English is equally popular with Hindi and unlike many states of North India, the educated class as well as the people of the new generation seem to prefer English to Hindi for academic as well as day-to-day communicative purposes. Again, as English has become the most saleable commodity at the market of globalization, people are showing more interest in learning the language day-by-day. But in most cases, teaching and learning of English is found to be ineffective as most of the students, even after learning the language for more than twelve years, can neither speak nor write it properly. This paper attempts to highlight the major problems in teaching and learning of English as second language in context of Assam.

Why Effective English

In 1962, the Integration Commission advocated the three-language formula, where English was considered as – a) a national link language b) an international link language and c) a library language. Accordingly, the government of India had proposed to teach English as a “language of comprehension” rather than as a “literary language”. But at present context, no one can deny the importance of English as a means of communication. Now, people prefer to learn English with a specific purpose. That means, whatever English we learn, it must be able to serve some purposes. For that purpose, overall development of all four language skills i.e., -listening, speaking, reading, and writing and their sub-skills are required. But in present context, it is seen that though students acquire some proficiency in reading and writing skills, they to a great extent, legged behind in listening and speaking skill. English



in most cases, taught as a subject not as a language. Therefore, even after wasting sufficient time and money, the entire teaching-learning process becomes a futile business. But in order to maintain the salability in the global market, the teaching and learning ought to be effective. Moreover, the evasion of globalization creates a new threat to the identity of different regional languages. Consequently, there is an overall awareness among the races for re-establishment of their racial identity through their respective mother tongues. A good deal of attention is paid for the development of all regional languages, because it is well realized that the national unity is possible, only if proper respect is paid to its diversity. Now people are materially motivated to learn the language, therefore whatever time or money will be spent for learning the language, it must be fruitful. Now-a-days, people are eager to learn English, not because they love the language; it is because they well realize that English can explore the world of opportunities. Therefore, ineffective teaching of English will lead us to nowhere and at the same time it will be wastage of potentiality.

Major Problems in Teaching and Learning of English in Assam

In Assam, the teaching and learning of English as second language cannot be called much effective as many students usually get very poor marks in English and students consider it as one of the toughest subjects along with Mathematics. A good number of students who cannot pass examination, usually fail in English. Again, most of the students cannot use the language even after studying it as a compulsory subject right from the beginning of their formal education. Some major problems in teaching and learning of English as second language are discussed below.

i) Problems Related to Students, Teachers, and Guardians

Most of the students of Assam come to the school with a predetermined notion that English is one of the most difficult subjects of their curriculum. This type of input is given either at home or he/she gets it from the surrounding and it is later re-emphasized by teacher's warning that English is in fact a very difficult subject, therefore the students must study it hard, else they will fail. This type of negative attitude creates a phobia in students' mind towards the language, which in return, hinders the entire teaching learning process to a great extent. Many students become contented with the poor marks they score in their examinations and many others study English only to get the pass mark. But this type of poor expectation always has a negative impact on learning outcome. Again, many teachers do not have any clear-cut objective behind teaching English; many of them are in fact not motivated, inspiring and dedicated to make students learn their subject. Instead of language acquisition, they usually aim at good mark. But a student even after scoring outstanding marks in the subject may not be able to use the language in different real-life situations. Now-a-days, though teacher training programmes and other programmes such as B Ed, D El Ed are made mandatory for the school teachers, earlier there was no such regulations and consequently, anyone after completion of his/her 10+2 or graduation was considered to be qualified for teaching English without any training and there are still many teachers who have been teaching the second language without any proper training. This type of carelessness creates hindrances in the process of offering quality education to the students. Many teachers have very poor communicative competence and therefore they always speak disconnect English words in their classroom communication. The emphasis has always been on how to write the correct answers in examinations and how to get a satisfactory mark, but this type of approach is definitely not much helpful in the process of learning a second language. Again, many guardians consider education to be a complete teacher-learner business and therefore they have nothing to interfere in it. They just supply the financial needs of the student or at the best, arrange tuition for them.



ii) Problems with Teaching Methods and Materials

Though since the first half of the twentieth century, various methods such as Direct Method, Translation Method, Bilingual Method, Communicative Method etc. have been developed for teaching second language, in our context, it can be said that many teachers, due to lack of training have not even heard of those methods. In case of regional medium schools, most of the teachers teach the target language text by translating each and every word into the mother tongue of the students, so that the students can follow them easily. But today, the ELT experts agree to the point that translation is not much helpful for the development of the communicative skill in the learners. Again, words are taught in isolation and grammatical rules are taught deductively, which in fact creates a grammatical overdose in the learners. English as a foreign language has no similarity with the Indian languages. Therefore, the teachers and the learners should not seek for syntactical and lexical equivalence between the mother tongue and English. This type of excessive dependence on mother tongue may hinder the entire process of language learning. In the existing system, in the name of examination, questions are asked from the text, and students have to write down the answers from their text. Again, the contexts of many prescribed texts are completely unfamiliar to the students and this type of cultural alienation makes the text uninteresting and very difficult to understand. The prescribed texts must have cultural and linguistic familiarity for the students, so that they can find it interesting and understand it easily. Moreover, it is difficult to teach a second language effectively only with the help of a text book and black-board. Teachers should use different teaching aids, such as charts, maps, audio-visual aids to teach English, and if needed they should go outside the classroom. But only a few teachers are found to use teaching aid to make students learn English. Moreover, language acquisition is a matter of overall development of all four language skills, e.g. - listening, speaking, reading, and writing. But in our context, the focus is only on writing skill. For these various reasons, a student, who gets good marks in examination, cannot communicate in English in real life situations.

iii) Problems with Infrastructure

In Assam, the conditions of many school buildings are in fact very pathetic and it is more so in rural areas. Before a few decades, a school building usually meant an open space surrounded by some bamboo walls and covered by a roof with thousand holes. Now-a-days, though the condition is little bit upgraded, many school buildings have no wall to divide two different classrooms. Apart from the black-board, those schools have no other teaching aid to teach the students. Moreover, a good library is an essential part of an educational institution. But most of the lower primary or middle schools neither have any library, nor even a book shelf for the students. Most importantly, most of the government aided schools do not have sufficient number of teachers to teach all classes. Consequently, a teacher needs to take teach two three classes simultaneously. Again, educational institutes are preferably used as relief camps for the victims of flood or any other natural calamities and natural calamities are not much rare in Assam. Therefore, the schools of those affected areas have to sacrifice many of their working days even after the disasters. Educational institutes are also very frequently used for various social purposes and teachers are very frequently entrusted with different types of duties such as census duty, election duty etc. which do great harm to the school education.

iv) Negative Influence of Mother Tongue in Second Language Acquisition

Though mother tongue enhances the process of learning a second language, yet excessive dependence on it creates obstacle in the teaching learning process. While teaching English, the teachers must not forget that as a foreign language, English has no similarity with modern Indian languages which originate from Indo-Aryan or Tibeto-Burman language family. English has a completely different



phonetic, morphological, or syntactic system than Indian languages. But in classroom teaching, many teachers ignore the fact and do not take any care to distinguish an English sound from that of his/her mother tongue. For example, an Assamese speaker usually pronounces 'sea' 'she' or 'sheep' 'chip' in the same way. To them, there is no difference between 'seat' & 'sit' or 'beat' or 'bit'. Similarly, many students from Nagaland, pronounce the letter- 'G' as /gi/. Again, North-Eastern people use their own L₁ accent, intonation pattern to speak English. But all these types of fallacies in fact bring a communication gap among the English speakers by making it unintelligible to each other.

v) Problems Caused by Lack of Exposure

Learning a foreign language in the classroom is in fact a difficult task. If the classroom teaching is well supported by outdoor exposure, then the entire acquisition process becomes easier. But in the context of Assam, especially in rural areas, it is very difficult to get English exposure in day-to-day life situations. Here, people of the same language community communicate only in their mother tongue. English is used only in highly formal situations, to express fury or under compulsion. Again, English used in such situations are of fragmentary type. Speaking English without any compulsion is considered as 'showing too much.' In television also, Hindi movies, songs or serials are considered to be much more popular than English shows. Therefore, to a great extent, the classroom provides the sole exposure to learn English as a second language. But unfortunately, in many of our classrooms, English itself is taught in the mother tongue of the learners.

Suggestions

After analyzing the problems, few suggestions can be put forward to uplift the ELT situation in Assam. They are mentioned below

- a) Realizing the growing importance of English; teachers, guardians, and other people of society should try to create a favourable atmosphere for teaching and learning English as a second language. Students should be encouraged and motivated to learn the language.
- b) Students should be made realise that they are learning the language for academic as well as day-to-day communicative purposes, so that they give equal emphasis on overall development of all four language skills.
- c) Teachers should try to become the role model so that the students can imitate them and they should try their best to create exposure to learn English.
- d) Teacher training should be made compulsory.
- e) Both teachers and students should try to avoid any fallacious influence of their mother tongue on English.
- f) English should be taught as a language, not as a subject. It should not be taught in the mother tongue of the learner. Equal importance should be given on the development of all four language skills.
- g) Use of mother tongue inside the classroom should be restricted; students should be encouraged to open their mouth.
- h) The language teaching should be contextualized. Grammar should be taught inductively.
- i) Teaching aids should be used sufficiently. Audio-visual aids should be used in the language classroom.
- j) The evaluation system should be reformed so that all language skills can be assessed properly.
- k) Infrastructure should be developed. Every educational institute should have a library, with at least a few interesting English books. Classrooms should be made scientific.
- l) Education institutes should not be encouraged to use for any non-academic purposes.



Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the teaching and learning of English in fact needs a good deal of attention from both public and the government. North-East India as an isolated area needs some especial education policy for the overall development of the region. Now, what we need first is not English literature, but the language and language is defined as a means of communication, therefore, language learning must aim at communicative competence of the learners. Again, as most of the learners are materially motivated to learn English, the focus should be on ESP (English for Specific Purpose) and the teaching learning should be learner-centered and need-based.

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