

Improving Teachers' Competence with regard to English Language Teaching at Primary School Level

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Abstract

This article is based on the findings of an experimental study entitled 'Status of English Language Teaching Practices in Primary Schools, their Impacts and Strategies for their Improvement,' conducted by the author for the award of Ph.D. degree degree in education in 2008, M.S. University, Udaipur, and a developmental project entitled 'Effective Teaching of English in Government Shiksha Karmi Primary Schools' 2003–2004, sponsored by Government of Rajasthan.

1. Preview

In the times of change, learners inherit the earth while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no more exists.

—Eric Hopper

Two significant facts related to the use and teaching of English, that may be taken into account, just to begin the discussion, are that (i) English is an international lingua franca, and a global language of opportunities, and (ii) owing to historical and socio-political reasons the issue of the position, use, and teaching of this language has appeared in almost all policy decisions taken by the governments from Macaulay

(1835) to the present day National Curriculum Framework–2005. Now with the gradual realisation of the fact that individual personal growth and national development strongly correlate with proficient use of English, the issue of strengthening the teaching of this language becomes a major concern of the policy makers and educators.

Narrowing the scope of our discussion, we directly focus our attention to what has recently been envisaged in the policy document National Curriculum Framework-2005 (NCF-2005) regarding teaching of languages in general, and English in particular, and its implications for the teachers. The document

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says that children will receive multilingual education from the outset. Three- language formula needs to be implemented in its right spirit, promoting multilingual communicative abilities for a multilingual country. The goals of language education are two fold: attainment of basic fluency such as is acquired in natural language learning; and the development of language as an instrument for abstract thought and knowledge acquisition (NCF-2005 : 37, 38, 39). The very provision of the objective 'promotion of communicative abilities, and the attainment of basic fluency such as is possible in natural language acquisition, underlines the need for a systematic review of prevailing English language teaching (ELT) practices and affecting drastic change to our attitudes, materials and methods.

Both as a matter of principle and experience, it is a common knowledge that students' performance, especially in the matters of foreign language learning, by and large, bears a strong positive correlation with the teacher's proficiency in the target language. Hence, enhancement of the teacher's proficiency in the use of the target language naturally becomes an imperative.

2. Issues Involved in English Language Development Programme for Primary School Teachers

One single factor that qualifies an individual to teach a foreign

language can be his command over that language, i.e. his ability to speak well, and understand that language. Academic and professional degrees or diplomas just qualify them only to enter the job. Thus a teachers' eligibility to teach English can be viewed from four perspectives: (1) their command over the target language, (2) their academic qualifications, (3) their professional qualification, their attitude towards English language and its teaching at primary school level, and last but not the least, (4) availability of academic support in the form of in-service training programmes that brush them up.

2.1 Inadequate Academic Qualification of the Teacher

With regard to academic qualification of the primary school teachers, a great deal of diversity has been observed. It varies from upper primary (in the case of *Shiksha karmies*, and *Shiksha sahayogy* employed in Rajeev Gandhi *Pathshala* as para-teachers) or middle school pass out to post graduation. In most of the cases the qualification has been earned as private candidates. Consequently the exposure to English in the case of such teachers is meagre. Only 5 per cent of the teachers are graduates with English as an elective subject. There are no teachers who have studied in English medium schools or used English as their medium of study. By and large, the academic qualification of 95 per cent of the teachers is not adequate enough to teach English.

2.2 Inadequate Professional Qualification of the Teacher

A similar trend can be observed in the professional qualification of the teachers. It has been found that 70 per cent of the teachers are not professionally qualified in the sense that they have not studied English Language Teaching (ELT) as a subject in their course of study. Teachers engaged in Government *Shiksha Karmi* primary schools and Rajeev Gandhi Pathshalas are not even School Teaching Certificate pass out which is a bare minimum qualification required for a primary school teacher. This leads to the conclusion that only 30 per cent of the teachers are professionally qualified to teach English, but this does not imply that they are professionally equipped in the true sense of it.

2.3 Poor Command over the Target Language and Communicative Skills

The most interesting, as well as the most shocking, finding about the teachers is that they have very poor or, in most cases, absolutely no command at all on English. Information obtained through direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and proficiency tests shows that they lack in basic listening, speaking, reading, writing skills and adequate knowledge and understanding of the lexical and grammar items/structures that are prescribed, and that they are supposed to teach to primary school children.

One of the most important skills that a teacher should possess is the skill of questioning. He should instantly be able to frame relevant pinpointed questions corresponding to the intellectual level of the learner. In the case of ELT the additional feature to be implied is that the questions should be grammatically correct, appropriate and acceptable.

It has been observed that 91 per cent of the questions framed by teachers suffered from grammatical mistakes related to word order, tenses, and selection of appropriate 'why' question-words or helping words. A few questions, recorded in real classroom situations deserve attention.

- Does Ajit Singh a farmer?
- Ajit Singh has how many cows?
- Who was go to Bharatpur?
- Mother what bring for Ishan?
- Did Mr Raju a kind man?

In addition to it, an attempt was made to understand and measure teachers' own knowledge and ability to use four of the tenses considered being the easiest, the findings were depressing. Eighty per cent of the teachers were found poor in the use of the simple present tense (although linguistically, it is the most difficult tense, but frequently used); whereas 14 per cent and 6 per cent were found average and adequately good respectively. Seventy per cent of the teachers were found poor in the use of the simple past tense, whereas

20 per cent and 10 per cent were found average and reasonably good respectively. Fifty eight per cent of the teachers were found poor in the use of the past progressive tense, whereas 28 per cent and 14 per cent were found average and reasonably good respectively. Similarly, 94 per cent of the teachers were found poor in the use of the present perfect tense (the most frequently used tense in classroom communication), whereas 6 per cent were found average.

It is almost implied that a teacher should use the target language for giving simple instructions and orders so as to minimise the use of the mother tongue or the local languages in English classrooms. But this feature, by and large, can nowhere be observed as teachers are unable to frame imperative sentences such as 'Open your exercise books, please'.

2.4 Excessive Use of the Mother Tongue in the Classroom

It has been widely observed that most of the time teachers make use of students' mother tongue while teaching English. It is partly because of the mistaken notion that students would not understand them, if they used English in classroom interactions, but in fact this happens mainly because they lack in speaking skill. These two factors compel them to use grammar-translation method and use students' mother tongue to conduct teaching-learning activities. This practice not only drastically reduces the amount of exposure to English, but also

deprives children of the opportunity of communicating in English.

2.5 Wrong Attitude Towards English and English Language Teaching

Every teacher inevitably brings a personal view of life into the classroom, a view that interpermeates with his work. The teacher may not always be fully aware of the effects of this fact, and so it can be useful to examine its implications. An attempt to examine teachers' attitudes towards English language, and its teaching at primary school level revealed the fact that 90 per cent of the teachers were of the opinion that English is useful for an individual's growth, but ironically the same subjects found teaching English at primary school level boring and frustrating. The positive aspect discovered is that all the subjects agree to the fact that any child can learn English, if appropriate learning environment is provided to him.

2.6 Poor Efficacy of the Teacher Education Programmes

Despite their relevance, pre-service teacher education programmes suffer from their inbuilt faults, and do not properly address to the needs of the ones who aim to become teachers of English. Time is limited and most of the focus goes to the study of principles and methods of language teaching, whereas development of language and language skills goes ignored. Studies have shown that teachers do not adhere to the methods learnt at such courses, and gradually in a course of

time they develop techniques of their own, and follow them unmindful of the impact left on the students.

In-service teacher development programmes conducted by agencies like SCERTs/SIERTs, and the DIETs suffer from a serious drawback that their programmes are not need-based for the teachers of English. The thrust is more on 'how to teach' rather than on improving their English, and developing their communicative competence.

Now, that all kinds of training programmes for primary schools are being controlled and conducted by the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) with effect from 2002, a view of the interventions related to ELT would be worthwhile. The SSA conducts nine days' in-service training programmes for primary school teachers, once a year, in which every teacher has to participate. Out of the 72 hours, only 18.75 per cent of the time is given to ELT. Even then time is not an issue. The important thing is what intervention is given and in what manner, and whether the impact is sustainable. A critical review of the training modules and procedures used at these programmes, made for the research purpose only, led to the conclusion that these programmes, by and large, attempt to teach the participants 'how to teach?' rather than improving their English and fluency. Eighty per cent of the teachers interviewed after such training programmes expressed the

view that it would be better if efforts were made to improve their English in a systematic way through some long-term programmes.

2.7 Lack of School-based Academic Support

The concept of academic support system involves systematic periodic supervision by officials well-versed in English and ELT methodology. Findings of the study showed that 86 per cent of the supervisory focus goes to non-academic activities, whereas 14 per cent goes to academic activities. Out of this 14 per cent, only 3 per cent of the focus goes to direct observation lessons. In fact, how much focus goes to the observation of English lessons, and post observation sessions with the teacher, out of this 3 per cent slot could not be found, but it may safely be calculated.

Teachers have been found using so called 'passbooks' or 'cheap sub-standard *bazaar* notes' to solve their problems in the absence of suitable reference materials as teachers' handbooks, workbooks, dictionaries, and other appropriate practice materials for children.

3. Quest for the New Strategies

Specifying and strictly controlling the entry level qualification of the teacher is a complex issue as it involves political vision, quality and efficacy of the pre-service training, availability of teachers, recruitment procedures, and the like. But, this doesn't matter much. The issue of improving the quality of

English language teachers can be addressed to simply by conceptualising, developing, executing interventions, that at the first place, successfully improve teachers' own command over English, communicative competence, and fluency level. And, then at the second place, improve teachers' understanding of the materials of ELT through participatory approach (in producing their own teaching portfolios and using them) rather than pumping ELT theories in their minds via scholarly delivered lectures. Here is a brief account of two experiments that successfully brought about significant improvement in teacher's own command over English, improved classroom practices, and students' level of achievement to a 99 per cent level of confidence.

3.1 Developing Teaching Portfolios as a Means of Teacher Empowerment Programme

The concept of developing teaching portfolios as a means of teacher empowerment was experimented by Freeman J.J. (The teaching portfolios as vehicle for professional development) in the U.S.A. The purpose was to avoid or drastically cut down the use of lecture method in teacher training programmes, and engage the teachers in developing their individual teaching portfolios on their own for their classrooms. This underlines the need for the teachers to know and fully understand their syllabi, textbooks, target linguistic components, learning

objectives, resources, learning styles of their students, and their own weaknesses and strengths.

This concept was adopted, and with partial modification applied to a developmental project entitled 'Effective Teaching of English in *Shiksha Karmi* Primary Schools'. A *Shiksha Karmi* is like a para-teacher who are just middle or secondary school pass out having no professional training. These teachers had little knowledge of English and ELT methodology, and were facing genuine problems in dealing with English. The objective of the project was to improve their English to a reasonable level and develop in them competencies (just above the level of those) that are prescribed and expected in a primary school pass out child.

Strategy included identification of the training needs, their analysis, and formulation of an intervention, which consisted of a ten-day workshop-cum-training programme in which the teachers were made to develop their own individual teaching portfolios and learn to use them under expert guidance. Simultaneously, they were taught thoroughly the grammar and vocabulary item necessary to operate the portfolios and deal with the prescribed textbooks.

This was followed by periodic supervision by experts who were specially oriented for this purpose, and feedback exchange sessions on regular basis, and periodic achievement tests

of the students.

Results were encouraging as they succeeded in establishing the efficacy of the innovation. Teachers reported an increased level of confidence and self esteem, and the children performed better (on performance test) than those who were being taught through traditional methods by teachers who had no such training. The difference was found significant at 0.10 level.

3.2 Competency-based Teaching of English

The idea was adopted from Jane Willis' work (A Framework for Task based Teaching, 1985) and modified to suit Indian classroom conditions and teacher's calibre. The concept was developed in the light of the competency-based syllabus prescribed for English for primary school children in Rajasthan, and was put to test for a doctoral study [Status of English Language Teaching Practices in Primary schools, their impact, and Strategies for their Improvement : M.S. University, 2008].

3.2.1

The concept of competency-based teaching and its application:

Competency-based teaching answers a simple question—'What should a child be able to perform after a well-planned intervention is affected?' A hypothetical answer may be 'He will be able to tell what activities are going on around him,' e.g. people are waiting for the bus. This requires a good understanding of the present

progressive tense, first on the part of the teacher, and then the child. Thus the function 'to be able to say, what is going around' becomes the performance objective for the learner, and the teaching objective of the lesson, i.e. the teaching objective is not the present progressive tense, it is rather the competency to say what is happening around.

In 1998 the Government of Rajasthan inducted English to primary school curriculum. The syllabus (of which the author happens to one of the framers) was competency-based which specifies competencies, and the functions that a child should be able to perform, if the desired competencies have been developed in him, and the linguistic content that has to be learnt by him to a mastery level in order to be able to perform the target function. This provision, as a matter of principle, makes almost all traditionally prevailing classroom practices out of place, and calls for fresh strategies for which teacher was neither equipped nor oriented. In order to find a way out, new interventions were developed and systematically executed for experiment. Findings indicated that the model was successful as gains were found significant at 0.01 level. A brief account of the strategy was as follows:

Teachers were made to develop their own teaching portfolios. The teaching portfolio consisted of a task sheet in which target competency, functions, teaching-learning activities,

and language content (vocabulary and structures), and TLM were specified. These task sheets serve the purpose of well organised lesson plans. In addition to it, there were activity cards to help the teacher create meaningful context for presenting the learning points, and to facilitate individual, group or pair work for concept formation (cognitive function), practice (conditioning), and evaluation. Teachers were advised and obliged to use English for classroom interactions. This is followed by regular teaching, well-scheduled supervision, feedback sessions, and tests.

An analysis of the post-experiment interviews of the participating teachers showed that they were highly benefited. The project improved their English and confidence as well as made them more creative and innovative. This may safely be called a success story.

4. How Can We Walk off the Beaten Track?

The answer is simple:

- There may be competency mapping of the primary school teacher, describing in specific terms, (without being much ambitious) what knowledge and skills are needed in them with regard to English language teaching. The attempt needs a pragmatic perception. Comprehensive survey may be conducted to establish how an individual teacher stands against the set parameters;
- This information may be used to

form the basis for crafting need-based courses;

- Teacher-development programmes should primarily aim at improving English rather than emphasising principles and methods. This is possible if teachers may be engaged in portfolio development to encourage task or competency-based teaching;
- Language development may be a continuing process. Every new intervention should lead the teacher one step ahead rather than repeating the same learning experience over and over again;
- Language courses may be developed on distance learning model which a teacher may take up, and qualify a national benchmark proficiency test, specially designed for the primary school teachers; and
- A suitable strategy may be evolved to strengthen school-based academic support to help the teacher solve his academic problems.

When everything is changing so fast, why should not the teacher development programmes?