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Problems and Prospects of Teaching of English to Technical Students in India

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Abstract:

In this paper the authors focus on the problems and prospects of teaching English to technical Students. Even though, English Language is taught as second language to these students at all previous levels, it continues to pose enormous difficulties to both students and teachers. Perhaps, a major evidence of this challenge is that the present day technical students not giving enough importance to English language and rather giving prior preference to their specialized subjects. As a consequence, they are unable to communicate properly using the language. So they lack basic language skills, in particular, sentence construction, vocabulary, spoken skills, writing skills and usage of grammar. Thus, they are unable to satisfy the interviewers in Group Discussion and Personal Interview during recruitment drives. So, there is a need to develop their language through the most scientific methods of teaching especially through the newly advanced methods of using language laboratory, the multimedia and the Web. The author investigates the factors that underlie these problems and a few possible remedies in this article.

Keywords: *English as Second Language (ESL), English Language Teaching (ELT), English Language Lab (ELL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Language Acquisition*

Introduction:

Krishnaswamy and Sriraman (1994) have rightly said,

“English has become an international commodity like oil and the microchip and more than a quarter of the world’s people use English; the world has become a global village. English has become necessary for mobility and social and economic success in the world today.”

Majority of Indian students, particularly from rural pockets consider English, a seven-letter word as a magical and a mystical word. It is spoken by 1000 million people of the world either as a native language, or as a second language. English is rapidly becoming a world language. No language, ancient or modern, can be compared with English in respect of its international status. English has become one of the major languages of the world. It is in the way that English helps in establishing international relations. Without the adequate knowledge of English, our young engineers cannot come to grip with modern technology in their respective

branches. Most people in the world agree with what Alexander V. Sandoval claims in his essay, 'The Importance of English' (www.eagleforum.com),

“English is becoming the world’s language of the 21st century. Most of the world’s population, about 70% speak English or know it. And more than 80% of all stored information in the world is written in English or translated into it. The man who speaks fluent in English will not get lost in the world where there are people.”

Technical students in India Today and English Teaching

The modern technical aspirants in India represent the upwardly mobile rising middle class of a resurgent India. They know that in order to survive and succeed they need “communication skills” or in other words communicative competence in the English language. The employers demand it and universities and technical institutes are waking up to provide it. Does our curriculum meet this demand? Are the materials sufficient? Is the methodology appropriate? These questions continue to haunt all of us. The moment students hear something in English they start feeling uneasiness. Teachers who handle English classes face insurmountable difficulties. Students too find it difficult to listen and understand the English language. What are the reasons for this? What are the remedial measures to be taken to alleviate these problems? Therefore, it is time we take a fresh look at ELT in our technical institutes.

The present context is such that the need for English has become more manifold than it used to be. It is no more just a library language or language used for some occupational purposes. Today’s technical professionals have to communicate with more number of his counter parts across the globe. A large number of Indian engineers have to now travel to many continents and work away from their home country. Also, among the scientists, technologists and business experts from culturally and linguistically different communities, English has become the predominant language for communication. Especially, ‘Spoken English’ therefore has now gained an unprecedented predominance in the university curriculum.

However, writing skill cannot be neglected in this context. Technical writing is emerging as a field of lucrative business. Business process outsourcing centers now demand technical professionals who can write without mistakes. Accuracy in written language cannot be overlooked any more. The technical professionals in India come from varied backgrounds. The cultural and linguistic diversity and the rural-urban divide are posing a great challenge both to the curriculum developers and the practicing teachers. English is the medium of instruction in the field of professional education but language proficiency is not a criterion for selection in any technical institute. The linguistic competence of even those who come from English medium schools is far from satisfactory. They have acquired some rules of language and may manage to convey their ideas often in faulty English. The English teacher of the advanced learners is beset with the problem of making the students unlearn faulty usages they have acquired over a number of years. Deeply rooted as they are, remedying these defects is one of the toughest jobs that the teacher has to face.

Difficulties of an English Teacher in the Technical Institutes

Due to the social and cultural backgrounds of his students a teacher of English faces a lot of problems while teaching English to technical students. There are many reasons for this.

1. The first and foremost the students who come for engineering have very poor knowledge of basic English, although, they are taught English in schools and junior colleges. The linguistic competence of these students is far from satisfactory. They have acquired some rules of language and may manage to convey their ideas often in faulty English. The English teacher's toughest jobs is of making the students unlearn faulty usages they have acquired over a number of years and remedying the deeply these defects.
2. Each class has a variety of levels of English proficiency, a variety of interests and a variety of paces of studying. A few students in the classrooms are quick to complete the given task, before the time set, while the slow learners find it difficult to complete it and so expect the teacher to provide answers. The slower students spend three times as much time as the faster students. This is not conducive to learning. So, it is impractical to lead the students through varied levels of learning.
3. Effective teaching can be possible only when teachers are supplied with proper and latest teaching aids like multimedia, language laboratories, Internet etc. Unfortunately some institutions are not in a position to provide such materials to the teachers as well as to the learners. Consequently, a teacher teaching in such cases is bound to be imaginative rather than practical.
4. Teachers are given a total of 2-3 hours in a week. Lack of sufficient time to teach the students become very difficult on the part of the teacher to teach the full course content in detail and also to pay individual attention.
5. The management and the students look towards their teacher with great hope. They consider the teacher as the most competent and think that their teacher would make them learn English very soon. Thus, a teacher's responsibility towards his students is doubled.

Challenges Confronting the Technical Students:

a. There is no English Environment in the Campus

The students are prone to their mother tongue. They find themselves are comfortable in using it. They are taught other subjects in their native language and English fall in their ears only in the class of English. There is absolutely no English environment in and around the campuses. They do not get enough opportunities to speak English in or outside the classrooms. This process cut short their chances of being competent in English.

b. Lack of Motivation and Encouragement

We are living in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society. Due to this, students do not feel the necessity of English at initial level. As a result, they lose their interest and attraction to English. Their family environment, economic and social conditions contribute a lot for the negligence of English.

c. Fear Factor and Lack of Confidence

In fact, all the students have fear of failure, committing mistakes and being laughed at by their peers even in classroom interaction. Therefore, they do not get involved easily in classroom interaction and learn the language comfortably. They need confidence building and acquiring stage daring activities through classroom interaction from teachers

d. Encouragement of Errors

Errors in learning English challenge students, but they typically learn from their mistakes and progress. Therefore, if English-language learners are intimidated, corrected or judged, it affects their ability to absorb new information and produce English. Hence, teachers of English as a second language typically refrain from providing an overload of corrective feedback so that students feel more comfortable expressing themselves in English, even if it is not perfect.

Problems Typically Ascribable to the Linguistic Aspects

Almost all technical students learning English encounter at least three types of problems: challenges with pronunciation (some people are never able to master certain sounds); issues with vocabulary (most people can add to their English vocabulary with study and practice); and grammar, including challenges with situational grammar, such as workplace English versus slang.

1. Pronunciation

English phonology problems are common for English learners. For example, English has many similar vowel sounds; some students may fail to make the distinction between "ship" and "sheep," "it" and "eat" and "full" and "fool." To avoid these mistakes, ESL learners should be told early, on the subtleties of English-language pronunciation.

2. Plural Nouns

Though most nouns in English simply add "s" to their singular form to create the plural, there are many exceptions to this rule. These include words ending in "f" or "fe" (wife/wives, knife/knives), words ending in "y" (spy/spies, fly/flies), words that change interior vowel sounds (man/men; mouse/mice), and Old English plurals, such as child/children and ox/oxen.

3. Verb Tense

English has a relatively large number of verb tenses, the correct mastering of which is important for communicating shades of meaning in English. To complicate the difficulty, English uses many auxiliary words, instead of verbal inflection, to create its tenses.

4. Irregular Verbs

English has many irregular verbs. Some English verbs are altered radically in conjugation (drink/drank/drunken, grow/grew/grown), while others do not change at all, such as burst/burst/burst and cast/cast/cast.

5. Writing System

There is often little connection between the way a word is written and the way it is pronounced. Consider cough vs. through and flood vs. door. Other inconsistencies include heteronyms, words

that are spelled the same but pronounced differently, such as wound (wrapped up) and wound (an injury), and row (a fight) and row (a line of something).

6. Syntax

English relies heavily on word order to convey meaning, while many other languages rely on case systems that show relationships between words with noun, pronoun and adjectival endings. English only retains these relationships with pronouns, but the alternations in English pronouns are also highly irregular. The English sentence structure is SVO where as, the structure of their L1 (Marathi) is SOV.

7. Participial Adjectives: Present Participles vs. Past Participles

Another problem area for many ESL students is the right usage of present (e.g., "annoying") and past (e.g., "annoyed") participial adjectives. The rule is that you should use present participles when the noun you want to describe is the cause of the action. If the noun receives the action, use past participles. For example, "The movie is boring" and "I was bored." Other participles that ESL students often misuse include "confusing"/"confused," "depressing"/"depressed," "exciting"/"excited," "exhausting"/"exhausted" and "surprising"/"surprised."

8. Articles

Many ESL students get confused by English articles. The general rule is that indefinite articles-- "a" and "an"--are used when the speaker is talking about some objects in general, while the definite article "the" denotes a particular object. In addition, the indefinite article "an" is used when the first letter of the noun that comes after the article is a vowel, while "a" is used when it is a consonant ("an apple" but "a train station.") However, there are exceptions. Nouns that cannot be counted, such as "sugar" or "coffee," are never used with an indefinite article--a mistake some ESL students make. Another mistake concerning articles is that some ESL learners forget to put the "the" article in front of superlatives, such as "the best," but do put "the" before names of people.

Teaching Prospects of a Teacher in a Technical Institute

There are a number of methodologies for teaching English. These methodologies keep on changing with the passage of time. For some, one method of teaching may be fashionable while for other the same may be out of date. Today our teachers and students want a totally novel methodology. They want a methodology that is modern and effective. This can be met with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or through language laboratory. It is a relatively new and rapidly evolving academic field that explores the role of information and communication technologies in language learning and teaching. It provides fertile ground for leading edge, innovative and highly creative thinking and scholarly work.

The researchers suggest that students working at a computer during the class can do assignments drills, tutorials, games, simulations and even reviewing and preparing for the class. Using computers give way to their knowledge and promotes the nature of independence. The

researchers are of the view that the computer education is a beneficial one for both the slow workers and the advanced students, as it encourages working at their own pace. Slower workers can catch up, and advanced students can do extra assignments. Presently, students are tired of traditional English classes and are interested in a new style of learning. The researchers rightly accept the suggestions of Kitao (1993)

“Students think materials are new and fresh, if they are presented on computers, and they are often interested even in routine tasks such as learning to type. They seem to be willing to spend more hours and do more exercises on a computer than by hand.”

The main aim of a teacher should be to develop the linguistic knowledge of his students. To achieve this goal, a teacher has to take the following steps:

- a. A teacher should encourage students to learn new vocabularies and their usages.
- b. He must tell them how to consult a dictionary.
- c. He must teach students the parts of speech. It means that students must know either the words, which they are learning are verb, noun, adjective, or adverb.
- d. The teacher should make students use the words in sentences. The sentences should be small, simple and of daily uses.
- e. If, in the beginning, students use translation method in framing sentences, it is not bad. They should not be discouraged. It means if they think in their mother tongue and then translate into English, it is not bad but gradually this bilingual method should be discarded and direct method should be applied.
- f. To make the correct sentences, students should be taught structural patterns. It means they should know which parts of speech should come first, second, third and so on. For this students should be given a structure and asked to frame a sentence based on the structure. For example:
 - a. Subject + Verb + Object
She reads a book.
 - b. Subject + Verb + adverb
He drives slowly
 - c. Subject + verb + adjective + noun
He is a handsome boy

The teacher has to enable the technical student to write English cohesively mainly for academic and professional purposes. The exercises should activate the cognitive learning process of the students. When we teach writing skills, grammar at the sentence level alone is not sufficient. Writing involves two major aspects: grammatical competence and discourse competence. All the grammar teaching stops at the sentence level in most classrooms today. Use of grammar in a continuous piece is not given importance in our teaching. Sequence of tense is an area which the students have not mastered. The students have to be enabled to see the inadequacies of one's own rules of the language, and then form new hypothesis. The tasks one faces in writing are three fold

- How to link sentences together to form a cohesive text?
- How to connect ideas together to form a coherent passage?
- How to create the desired response in the reader?

Conclusion:

To sum up, we would like to say that the teacher of English should bear in mind that there will always be innumerable challenges, hurdles, difficulties and problems which will encounter both in teaching and learning process in English. However, his main task is to withstand courageously to the changing times and challenges and strive to the utmost and do all that his resources permit him to develop four language abilities of the students: i.e. to understand written English, spoken English, to speak English and to write English and also encourage and motivate to create English environment in and around the college campus that will certainly solve all the problems. As a matter of fact, English has a bright future in India. Generations will come and generations will go, but English will live in India. It will continue spreading its splendor like a rising Sun.

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