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English Language Teaching in India: An Overview

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Abstract

The utilitarian aspects in the Indian society make people acquire English as a second language (L2). This acquisition happens mainly in the classrooms, and serious attention is needed to identify the manner in which language learning takes place in the classroom environment. In a country with a linguistic tapestry as diverse as India, English Language Teaching (ELT) holds a significant position. This research article offers a comprehensive overview of the evolution, current practices, and challenges of ELT in India. With the onset of British colonialism, English was introduced as a tool for administrative convenience and later became a language of empowerment. Post-independence, English has transformed into a global lingua franca, and its proficiency is now viewed as a catalyst for socio-economic mobility. The historical context and examination of the changing roles and perceptions of English from the colonial era to the present day have been dealt in the first section of the article. It also emphasises the communicative and learner-centric approaches. The vast diversity of the Indian populace, coupled with regional languages and varying levels of exposure to English, create a complex landscape for ELT. Disparities in the quality of education between urban and rural areas, resource constraints, and the sometimes-conflicting role of English with regards to cultural identity are discussed. The paper posits that a multi-faceted approach, integrating culturally relevant pedagogies, leveraging technology, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, is imperative for the holistic development of ELT in India. The research article tries to identify the different ways in which English language teaching progresses in India. It also aims to contribute to the body of knowledge and provide insights for policymakers, educators, and learners.

Keywords: ELT in India, Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, Communicative Language Teaching, Immersion Programmes, English for Academic Purposes, Content and Language Integrated Learning, English for Special



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Purposes, Teaching of English as a Second Language, Higher Order Thinking Skills, Lower Order Thinking Skills

Introduction

The evolutionary path of English Language Teaching (ELT) in India formally begins with the famous *Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835* where it was proposed to the Governor General that English language would be the most useful for the native Indians. ELT has been moving through a phase which facilitates British rule in India for the next one hundred years. Then, there was a giant leap in the methodology of ELT based on demands of the local and international society. It has reached a stage in which ELT caters to the diverse needs of people. Along with this, a worldwide acceptance of the identity of Indian English was also established.

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

Language learning involves the acquisition of the four skills and the use of the language for different prospects in a person's life. Jim Cummins in 1984 coined two terms in relation to the utility of language and substantiated the special role of language in dealing with academics. Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills or BICS as the name signifies is the language needed for interaction in social situations. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency or CALP involves learning needed for successful cognitive demands of academic learning. Cummins has distinguished between the two components of language proficiency by stating that "BICS refers to conversational fluency in a language while CALP refers to students' ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school" (*BICS and CALP*, 65).

English for Communicative Purposes in India

English, due to its communicative purpose in India is known as a link language. It is the language of the constitution. It is the communicative language of the apex bodies of administration like the Supreme Court of India. It is the medium of instruction in education especially, higher education. Scientific advancement and research flourishes with this language. Business and industries cannot do without this language. English plays a vital role in international affairs, trade, employment within and outside India. The communication among different parts of India is made possible with English. It doesn't mean that everyone has good communication skills in English. They acquire English they need for their survival in daily aspects. The myriad languages in India are enriched by English in terms of vocabulary, phrases, language structures, literature and culture. Only a population less than 0.1% has English as its first language, but it continues to enjoy its role as a language for



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communication. As per the 2001 Census in India, 12.6% of Indians know English. The number of students learning in English medium schools is increasing each year. The statistics provided by the District Information System for Education (DISE) of National University of Educational Planning and Administration under Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India pointed out that students who enrolled in English-medium schools increased by 50% between 2008–09 and 2013–14. It has become an important aspect which contributes to the integrity of India. This is the reason why English is aptly titled as a co-official language in the constitution of the nation.

Academic Role of English in India

The revisions of syllabi and curricula in the field of higher education is mostly based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and has focus on major governmental projects like the Additional Skills Acquisition Programme (ASAP). Thus, a communicative aspect is prevalent in the direction in which English language learning is moving in India. There is an increasing awareness for a skill-based language learning programme to improve the basic communication needs of our students.

As a sizable percentage of students pursue higher education in various fields of interest, it is significant to view the English language learning scene beyond the mandatory general English classes. The language of higher education in most of our study programmes is in English. In the technical institutions of India too, English is the medium for transacting core content papers.

The University Education Commission in 1948 asserted the importance of English in high schools and universities. This advantage of English was best availed by the educationalists and ELT experts of the nation by introducing the textbooks of almost all subjects in the medium of English. This is in fact a proposal of the Kothari Education Commission (1964-66) that English should be a library language. English thus became the language of content learning, enabling learners to achieve the subject and language through an 'immersion' process. This envisages a situation in which the learners of different subjects and courses become accustomed to the rapid developments in their field and the technical terms and language which turn out best through English. The technical education stream in India offers several graduate, diploma and certificate programmes on various trades, and English is the medium of instruction.

The positive environment for enhancing communication skills in English, and for using the language for academic purposes is thus evident, but this seems to have fallen much short of the target, as evidenced by the large number of technical students who are unemployed or employed in areas where their subject and technical skills are vastly under-exploited. The phenomenon in question can frequently be attributed to the incongruence



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between the intended pedagogical framework and the actual mode of content delivery for core subjects. Although curricular materials are ostensibly structured for instruction through an English medium, adhering to a Content-Based Instruction (CBI) paradigm with immersion characteristics, the prevailing practice often deviates significantly. The instructional pattern gravitates toward utilizing the native language as the medium, with the educator assuming a predominantly translational role. This discordance culminates in a dual deficit, detrimentally impacting both the acquisition of subject matter expertise and the development of proficiency in the secondary linguistic medium. This bifurcated inadequacy manifests as diminished competencies in the content domain and attenuated linguistic dexterity in the target language, thus thwarting the cardinal objectives of the instructional design.

Background to acquisition of English in India

English as a Second Language (ESL) is taught in the classrooms from different levels or grades in India. There is no uniformity about the level of starting ESL. So, learners differ in their exposure to English. There are schools where English is introduced from the lower primary classes. In some schools this level is the upper primary or high schools. In some schools where mother tongue is the medium of interaction, English continues to be taught in English periods only. In English medium institutions, the entire curriculum is transacted in English. In the field of higher education, most of the learning and evaluation is done in English which is the medium of instruction. There also option is being given to transact in mother tongue. So, the learners who attend higher education courses are a mixed group of individuals having different levels of English proficiency.

English Language Teaching in India

A) Immersion Programmes

English had been accepted as an official language at the time of independence. English then was considered as a language of utility and a language which is part of the integration of India. This has paved way for using programmes similar to Immersion in India for ELT. “Immersion programs aim to provide the quantity and quality of involvement in the use of target language that ensure the development of a high level of proficiency” (Johnson and Swain, xv) Immersion programmes began in Canada where subject content is taught in the target language. Students get immersed in the one or two target languages. They are exposed to the language in and outside the classrooms. Immersion programmes in the form of English medium schools flourished throughout India and this continues in several parts of India in the form of partial immersion and full immersion.

B) Communicative Language teaching (CLT)

English language teaching can be broadly divided as per its utility: English learning for basic communication aspects and English learning to meet the academic prospects. The



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former one is done in English classes and deals with the basic communication such as simple vocabulary and the basic language structures to satisfy the day-to-day requirements. The language aspects of CLT are included in the school curriculum with varying levels of practice which should help in the improvement of BICS. There is also learning about language aspects which include teaching of grammatical items using prescriptive and descriptive techniques. Learning literary texts is also included so as to improve communication skills in English and to improve familiarity with a new world of literature. This learning of language through literature also forms part of the teaching of English as a second language (TESL)

C) English for Academic purposes (EAP)

A clear definition of EAP is given as “EAP refers to language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts” (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2). English for academic aspects is implied in Immersion programmes or the English medium schools in India. The text books which are prepared in English are transacted in English or in English and the mother tongue. The basic communication aspects are also intertwined in this method of learning and thus should help in improving both BICS and CALP.

D) English for specific Purposes (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes refer to learning English for particular reasons like application in work place, using in academic aspects, equipping the learning in specific professions. Hutchinson and Waters theorize, "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning" (19). The needs of learners and demands of the specific field are identified, using needs analysis, followed by preparation of the English material based on the need. Thus, institutions and universities have prepared text books like English for Commerce, English for Law and English for Science. The specific aspects can also include certain language tasks and structures needed for particular purposes.

E) Short-Term Programmes

The present-day demand for acquiring skills for working abroad has led to short term courses which prepare learners, for International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Pearson Test of English (PTE) and Occupational English Test (OET). These programmes use specific tasks for acquiring English language skills and learners are supported to learn language in an integrated manner.

F) Teacher-Centred and Learner-Centred Learning

Language learning happening in classrooms is primarily through interaction. Teacher-talk and student-talk are essential for this. In India, most of the language classes are teacher-centred. Most of the talk is made by the teacher. This one-way communication has a



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restrictive role in language learning. On the other hand, the teacher's role should be as a facilitator in interaction. Comprehensible input (Krashen) can be provided by the teacher. Meaningful interaction and student-centred learning are also experimented in many parts of the nation.

G) Content Based Language Teaching (CBLT)

In CBLT, subject content that can be handled by a language teacher in a language class is used. The subject content may not be complex subject areas. In CBLT, additional materials and peripheral aspects may be dealt by the subject teacher. Here, subject vocabulary, pronunciation of key words and language structures needed for subject learning are dealt in language classes. Thus, language teachers collaborate with content learning. This has been done in the form of ESP in universities and in technical education institutions. "English Communication" prepared by Technical Teachers' Training Institute (Southern Region) Madras and published by Oxford University Press is an example. It includes chapters like 'Concrete' and 'A Lab Report'.

H) Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Content and Language integrated Learning (CLIL) is a "dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (Coyle et.al 1). It aims at developing both language and content. So, CLIL requires a collaboration of subject and language teachers. It is a learner-centred approach. Hence learners "make new personal meanings in another language" (Dale and Tanner, 12). This is revolutionary in the Indian context, but it will help learners acquire English (L2) in meaningful contexts, without using additional time for that purpose.

Conclusion

ELT has a varied structure in India based on its demands. It has grown much above the traditional methods of teaching grammar or some language structures. It has been growing in a sense of competing with international standards. While complying with the Indianness in English, TESL has given learners myriad opportunities of learning English. In fact, all the experiments in language teaching happening around the world gets reflected in this sub-continent. This is in addition to ELT researches in local contexts happening in different parts of India.

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