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## Teaching English in Rural Colleges of Punjab: Theory and Practice

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### **Abstract:**

The present paper is an attempt to provide a generalized overview of the problems faced by students of English in the rural colleges of Punjab and aims at achieving better teaching-learning environment by focusing on the practical methodology of quality teaching of this language. Teaching English in rural colleges is a Herculean task if you are a conscientious teacher. It requires a well framed teamwork on the part of the teacher and his students. Rural students are a treasure house of talent and energy. Great potential in rural India is wasted away due to lack of direction and guidance. These students only want right guidance and proper approach towards their future. The teacher ought to be optimistic but should be practical enough not to expect miracles in one year.

**Keywords: Entry Behaviour, Eclectic Approach, Drills, Testing, Error Analysis**

### **Assets of a Good Teacher**

A good teacher, as we all know, is a **wise** facilitator of learning – wise because he's completely aware of his role as a teacher. Besides being a catalyst, consultant, guide, and model for learning, he understands his own goals and objectives as well as the needs of his students. A good teacher is dedicated and perseverant. He's open to criticism, suggestions and modifications in his methods of teaching.

"The successful teacher is no longer on a height, pumping knowledge at high pressure into passive receptacles...He is a senior student anxious to help his juniors."

-Sir William Osler, *The Student Life*

He encourages feedback from the students by involving each and every student in the class helping them overcome their complexes and inhibitions. The aim of a good teacher is not just to cover the prescribed syllabus of a particular subject but to focus on the overall personality development of his students. He proves to be an inspiration and role model for his students.

Of course this is an idealistic picture. How many of us fit into this frame? Maybe one or two. Teaching is basically considered an easy and 'cool' profession by a layman in our country. But actually, it's one of the most challenging professions, of course if the teacher is conscientious and dedicated. A teacher is highly instrumental in building up the foundation of his students. A student who has the opportunity to come in contact with and actually benefit from good teachers during his formative years is likely to succeed in his later life.

Professional expertise is usually the most sought-after attribute when teachers are interviewed by a selection board. But the personal attributes are an integral part of a good teacher, without which he can never be a good 'facilitator of learning' even if he has excellent command over his subject.

Parker Palmer has encapsulated the essence of a good teacher in the following words:-

"Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge--and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject." Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, Jossey-Bass 1998, p. 2.

### Importance of English in the Present Scenario

With the world having diminished into the size of a global village, English is the only apparent *lingua franca* available. Knowledge of English is considered to be a tremendous asset in contemporary world. English presently is the most important second or foreign language in the entire non-English speaking world. The importance of English today can be reflected by the fact that a large chunk of the knowledge of the world has been put into words through this language. Moreover the internet which connects the entire globe has adopted English as its language of operation. English has penetrated each and every nation of the world acquiring "loan words" from everywhere. According to Braj Kachru

"One can claim that in S. Asia [India], English is used in four functions: the *instrumental*, the *regulative*, the *interpersonal* and the *imaginative/innovative*."

- "Models for Non-Native Englishes", *The Other Tongue* (1982)

English has inadvertently crept and seeped into our system, our collective unconscious, so much so that today all of us use it in our daily communication in some or the other way. It is no longer a monopoly of the British. It is the language of the future, the language connecting the world. The growing importance of English can't be denied at any cost. In India there is extensive use of English as the associate national language. It is taught in schools as a second language. It is like a mother tongue to the corporate sector, the IT industry etc. Therefore proficiency in English now-a-days is synonymous with better career prospects and implies more job opportunities.

### Challenges for a Language Teacher

"What is important is that a student who learns English as a second language should be able to feel that he has the basic machinery to say what he wants. It is not easy to instill this confidence in the student; it calls for considerable preparation and creative thought on the part of the teacher."

- C. Paul Verghese,  
*Teaching English As A Second Language*

A good English teacher should be firstly aware of his teaching-learning situation – the entry behaviour and the level of intelligence of his students, their background and their previous exposure to target material; the prescribed curriculum and the materials/equipment available in the institution to realize it in an effective manner. Ideally a language teacher ought to focus equally on all skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading & Writing. For this first of

all, he should have competence/proficiency in Speaking as well as Writing. He has to focus on the development of spoken English of students along with covering up the prescribed syllabus with them.

We all know that language is learnt best and fastest in the formative years. If a student is weak in English, a lot of hard work is required from both sides (teacher as well as student) to improve his skills. This process requires a great deal of patience.

### **Problems of Rural Students**

Students of the rural areas as well as their parents do not realize the importance of English as a language of communication during their secondary education years. Late introduction of English in rural schools is also one of the reasons behind this. The rural students lack the confidence to speak English; their expression in the language is poor. First reason is that they have been taught English grammar deductively that is after presenting before them and explaining grammar rules. They are highly dependent on their mother tongue that is Punjabi, to understand even very basic sentences of English. Whatever they read, they translate into Punjabi. They barely pass the subject of English. There is practically no positive washback for English because the students are highly dependent on cheap help books and guess papers for passing the exam. Another reason is that English is taught as a subject and not as a language. Poor performance in translation, lack of proper vocabulary, no knowledge of proverbs - all are results of a casual approach. Even after learning English for several years the level of the students remains poor. When the students enter the college, they are barely aware of their purpose or aim in life. Towards final year, they realize the importance of English and in anticipation of learning this language overnight they join private institutions providing coaching for exams like IELTS, TOEFL etc.. Now these institutions are purely commercial and they do not impart basic knowledge of language from grass root level rather they only provide superficial or surface knowledge of English with the result that at the end of such a short-term course the students are in a position only to demonstrate basic social etiquettes in one-liners. So, our faulty education system is also responsible for lack of motivation and poor performance of rural students. Teachers employed in government schools act as autonomous bodies and do not do full justice to their profession. Also rural students have lack of exposure as compared to their urban counterparts and thus have limited opportunities.

Poor background knowledge of English leads to the development of a phobia towards this language in the minds of rural students. Such students suffer from lack of interest in attending classes. They have to be lured into the classrooms. For this the teacher should build a good rapport with his students. He should encourage and inspire them at every juncture. A teacher of English in a rural area has dual responsibility – to teach English as a language as well as a subject.

### **Challenges Before Teachers in Rural Colleges**

Low teacher-taught ratio is a big obstacle in rural colleges. This ratio is between 25 to 50 in urban colleges and between 100 to 150 in rural colleges. Giving personal attention to each and every student is near to impossible. Further, the rural schools/colleges get least attention from higher authorities in getting infrastructure and modern teaching aids. Luring the students into classrooms and thereafter holding their attention and building their interest in classroom activity is a big task. Overcrowded, dingy classrooms, dilapidated furniture, broken blackboards and *graffiti* on the walls is a common sight in most rural colleges of Punjab. Bringing good results from students in villages is really hard. A student who has secured 35% at + 2 level can hardly exceed 40% marks in BA I. Further, maintaining

discipline in class is not easy considering the poor approach towards English in rural areas and it becomes more difficult when the teacher is not from the village background.

### Methods and Approaches of Teaching

A number of methods and approaches of teaching have been suggested by linguists e.g. Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching, Audio-lingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching etc. A good English teacher conducts a fair analysis of his students. He should know where they stand. How proficient are they in different skills of English? Then, he should be humane, sensitive and sympathetic towards his students. He should build a good rapport with his students trying to instill confidence in them. He should make his lectures interesting through quality drilling exercises, use of work-sheets, handouts and oral practice sessions.

“Drills are inherently unnatural, contrived examples of the use of language. Humanizing these devices is left to the teacher. Unless the students are stimulated by variety, novelty & a quick change of cues, they may be mouthing meaningless sentences and in this unwilling frame of mind, no learning takes place.”

( - Dacanny, 1963)

Here are some examples of kinds of drilling exercises for students with weak foundation in English:

- Cloze exercises can be given to the students in the beginning merely for the sake of starting conversation of target language (English) in the classroom. This will encourage the students to participate and create a healthy classroom environment.
- Gap-filling exercises with a ‘pool’ of answers. These exercises demand individual answers from students which will lead to an increase in their vocabulary. If some students do not respond they should be given hints and comparison so that they can arrive at the answer on their own.
- Matching exercises, picking odd one out.
- Brainstorming exercises help tremendously in vocabulary building.
- Pronunciation, Stress and Intonation can be effectively taught through audio aids. If the teacher’s own accent is good, it will be a great help to the students.
- Use of mother tongue in teaching grammar. Structure of English sentence (SVO) can be overlapped with structure of Punjabi sentence (SOV) to teach the student the parts of speech in a sentence. When students are given several examples of parallel sentences in English and Punjabi they start finding it easy to identify Noun, Verb, Adverb and Adjective in an English sentence. Students are fully proficient in mother tongue (MT).
- Similarly *types of sentences* (simple, complex, compound) can also be taught through the same method.

The crux of the matter is that the teachers should balance their teaching methods between Grammar-Translation and Oral-Situational teaching methods. In other words, he should follow an eclectic approach. Exposure to language is very imperative. Group

discussions can be arranged. Texts should be read loudly by students. Simple usage of words will become a part of their speech only when they are exposed to deliver a speech and express their own ideas.

### **Error Analysis and Formation of Actual Curriculum**

An error analysis of the common mistakes of students can give a picture of the type of difficulty learners are experiencing. For example Indian students have the habit of using “-ing” very frequently. It is conspicuous in the advertisement of MacDonald – “I am loving it.” They will always pronounce the final ‘r’ in words like *car*, *father*. Most of them cannot distinguish between /v/ and /w/. They are very bad in differentiating the sounds in the words *pleasure*, *measure*, *short*, *sort* etc. Most students in rural Punjab come up with the same pronunciation for *pen* and *pin*. Such a survey can be helpful in drawing up an effective (actual) curriculum for the class. The teacher can introduce new words daily through innovative methods like flashcards etc. For instance, the physical personality of people can be distinguished with a variety of words like *thin*, *fat*, *skinny*, *bonny*, *plump*, *chubby*, *obese*, *anorexic*, *svelte*. We all understand that there is a distinction between ideal and actual curriculum, where the ideal curriculum is seen basically as a document and where the actual curriculum involves implementation or actual classroom activity.

Besides extensive drilling exercises, teachers must focus on preparing the students from examination point of view. Rural students cannot imbibe quality notes from the teacher. So they have to be given formula beginnings or endings for reference to context questions, summaries, long answers etc. They have to equip students for securing goods marks in the examination.

### **Testing and Evaluation**

Frequent testing of students is very important to know their progress level. But all this should be done in a light and friendly manner. With testing comes evaluation. The more tests you take, the more note books you have to evaluate. Most college teachers shun the very idea of it. But it is a necessary evil. Regular checking of students’ note books can help a teacher in monitoring the periodic progress of his students. While correcting written work the teacher should overlook less important mistakes and point out only the main or more conspicuous mistakes. He should not demoralize the student by marking his notebook red. Evaluation of work in notebook should be done on a weekly basis along with evaluation of tests.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching English in rural colleges is a Herculean task if you are a conscientious teacher. It requires a well framed teamwork on the part of the teacher and his students. Rural students are a treasure house of talent and energy. Great potential in rural India is wasted away due to lack of direction and guidance. These students only want right guidance and proper approach towards their future. The teacher ought to be optimistic but should be practical enough not to expect miracles in one year.

Biggest problem for a teacher of English in a rural college is to maintain regularity and punctuality of students and then discipline in the class. This is most challenging. For achieving this objective, the teacher has to be very tactful. He has to be stern as well as friendly. He should memorize the names of maximum students. Eye to eye contact with each student, especially backbenchers is of utmost importance. The teacher has to walk around the class for effective control. Instructions should be given very clearly. Students should be addressed politely, never stepping on their self-esteem. Learning a language at college level is relatively a slow process because the foundation is weak. Giving incentives/rewards to students can motivate them to burn midnight oil and boost their energy to excel further. The

teacher should inspire the students to use library daily. So it cannot be doubted that the teacher can impart a direction to a student's life. It is rightly stated by Henry Adams that "A teacher affects eternity. No one can tell where his influence stops."

Once the students realize the practical use of English language, they will begin to use English as a medium of expression and communication. It is obvious that individually we cannot overcome this problem of teaching and learning English in rural Punjab, however, collectively we can definitely achieve the desired goal.

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