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www.the-criterion.com

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English Language Learning: Exploring Cultural and Lingual Identity of Indian English Language Learners

Ajaz Ahmad Hajam

Research scholar
Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University

Why cannot our students use English? I mean to ask; why cannot they speak it fluently? Why can't they write it with a command? And why can't they read it with a clear understanding? After spending a rigorous and continual class room time of about eighteen years with this language, most of our students after being graduated from different colleges of our country are seen popping up at English coaching shops . A language that has been taught for such a long time (from pre- nursery to final year of graduation) will be now made, in these institutions, understood to students in just few months. The ironical thing is that some of these institutions actually do it to some extent. Now the big question remains why our academic institutions are not able to inculcate the basic skills of English speaking, writing, reading and listening in our students through schools and colleges. Certainly, there is something faulty. The present paper aims to explore the reasons and situations, which led to such state of things. The particular thrust will be given on the cultural and lingual aspects, which play a big role in acquiring any foreign language as second language.

It is a fact that globalization had accelerated the process of turning English into a language of greater factual communicational necessity but more significantly, in an Indian context, widespread societal bilingualism is the norm rather than exception. The possible role of societal Bi/ Multilingualism has been much discussed in recent years. One of the significant factors that has emerged from the research of recent decades is that , for all obvious reasons , bi/ multilingual speech communities use two or more languages as these serve the “ communicative and interactional needs of large groups of people (ignou 2000: 23). Two or more languages are in use at almost every place in India, for instance in Delhi Urdu, Hindi and English are used, in Chennai Tamil ,Kannada, Hindi and English are used, in Chandigarh, Panjabi, Hindi and English is used etc. Multilingualism has fascinated the learners acquiring versatility in communicative and interactional needs of the people because it makes a person more tolerant open minded and receptive to varied cultural conventions and customs.

“Relationships between language and the society are epiphenomena; that is, they are constructed from countless millions of interactions between and among individual people.”(Richard F. Young). Individual interaction between people, whether in speech or writing, occurs in context of beliefs and societal forces that operate at a large level than any individual. The socio- linguistic background of an individual also has a play in this interaction; one can distinguish it from the dialect used by an individual. In India, Indian English has developed a number of dialects distinct from the General Standard English. Different languages that different sections of the country speak side by side with English influence these dialects. The dialects can differ markedly in their phonology; to the point, that two speakers using two different dialects can find each other's accents mutually unintelligible. Indian English is a “Network of Varieties” resulting from an extraordinary complex linguistic situation in the country .This network comprises both regional and

occupational dialects of English. The widely recognized dialects include Malayali English, Tamilian English, Panjabi English, Bengali English, Hindi English, along side with several more obscure dialects such as Butler English, Babu English and Bazaar English and Several code- mixed varieties of English.

The learning process transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity, a process of becoming, or avoiding becoming a certain person, rather than a simple accumulation of skills and knowledge. This learning process is a complex phenomena and it is an outcome of different factors coming together and influencing learner according to his capabilities, knowledge, and interests. The learning of a second language, that too English is a phenomenon that depends on host of factors. Among them the socio- linguistic and socio- cultural factors are of vital importance in learning English as a second Language. In the Indian scenario, colonial legacy of the country has developed the roots of English in Indian Educational setup. A blueprint for India's Educational policy was laid down in Macaulay's Minute (Feb. 2, 1835). Macaulay stated that the mission for the British Raj is to create "*a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in Taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect.*" In the Post- Independence era the attitude towards the English has changed, it is not a colonial language now rather it is a neutral language and has become one of the languages of India. In India it has changed to such an extent that now, it carries the Indian psyche and socio- cultural experience in a meaningful way. It has manifested, itself as reported earlier, as Hinglish, Banglish, Tamilish and so on. English by Indian English learners is not used as it is used in the British isle. It is in fact vary different, a diversion towards indianization.

If we take the stock of differences in the socio- linguistic and socio- cultural levels, then there are noteworthy difference related to phonology, lexicon, inappropriate usage and regional influences. English spellings are misleading. Generally, an average Indian reads the spellings according to the phonology of his mother tongue. There are differences in stress patterns. English language is a stress timed language but Hindi and other Indian languages are syllable-timed languages. Since majority of Indians are unaware of this fact, they tend to put stress on the wrong syllables and this makes their English unintelligible to native English speakers. In addition, the phenomena of stress shift and aspiration are absent in Indian English.

Indian English learners can be categorised into two groups; one having the regional language as the medium of instruction and another having English as the medium of instruction. The students having regional languages as medium of instruction are having less opportunity to acquire this language. English is as an alien language that is hard to comprehend for them. The main reason for this lag is that their all subjects are in their respective regional language, whereas English is only one of these subjects that too it is not taught well. On the other side, students having English as medium of instruction are offered much opportunity and scope to grasp this language because of the reason that all their subjects are in English. The students having regional languages as medium of instruction, therefore show a slow response in acquiring English as a second language where as students from English background tend to acquire it more rapidly. Family background (economic as well as educational) also has implications upon the learning process. Students from well to do families have better opportunities in acquiring second language because of economic affluence, whereas learners form poor backgrounds tend to lag behind in this regard because of economic constraints.

The existing scenario of India is that English is not our language of being or identity. It has come to be the language of doing, language of academics and the language of recognition. It is learnt, not really 'acquired' from 'the days of being inside the womb'. English is heard everyday all around us but English does not help us 'socialize' or 'mature' within our 'experience'. It helps us 'grow' outside our 'inner circle'. In spite of all our efforts we cannot really get many 'coordinate bilinguals' with our academic or professional exposure to English. The point of reference will always be a native variety of English. That is why we call English as a National Foreign Language.

English in India is primarily taught as a foreign or a second language. Recent researches have considerably changed our understanding of the processes of second language acquisition and necessitated a change in the teaching methodology, so as to make learning of English more effective and relevant. Moreover, there has been a shift in our aims and objectives of learning English, the primary aim being to communicate effectively. In the wake of these developments, there is an urgent need to replace the existing methods with the ones that can help us meet the desired goal. The following suggestions are proposed to make any English program that relies on English course books more effective. This would greatly increase and develop the student's language ability. In language learning, reading is considered one of the most important lessons for the learner. Researches in extensive reading have shown many beneficial effects on students and claimed that when learners read, they not only learn new words, but they can also develop their syntactic knowledge as well as general knowledge of the world. Other recent studies have also shown that students who participated in extensive reading increased gains in the areas of vocabulary as well as in reading comprehension and reading fluency. In present hour it's needed to explore some more effective ways to make an understanding and fluency among students. Using various kinds of media in the class room has always been a challenge, and how to bring these media in the classroom is more than a challenge. Students and teachers should be able to use in their classrooms different media through different technologies. Media provide teachers and students with creative and practical ideas. They enable teachers to meet various needs and interests of their students. They also provide students with a lot of language practice through activities using newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, movies, books, Internet, etc, and tasks which develop reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. They entertain students and encourage reading English in general, both inside and outside the classroom, promoting extensive reading by giving the students the confidence, the motivation and the ability to continue their reading outside the classroom. Media provide huge information, they motivate students to speak and help them integrate listening, reading, talking and writing.

In the third world countries and so in India, English has been taught through literature for the past many years. But students opt for various optional subjects like Pol. Science, History, Economics, Medicine, Engineering etc. where the medium of learning is the English Language. Such students, even when they become Post Graduate remain unable to write and speak it correctly. So a pragmatic kind of approach is essential. It is important that the learners of English should be trained practically about how to use English for communication.. The syllabus/ course order should be formulated in such a way so as it focuses on the practical use of language. Students need to be trained to think about and realize their experiences and to articulate them fully in English. In order to make English more 'user friendly', the teacher needs to use English as frequently as possible for interaction with the students. Mostly it is noticed that in our schools and

colleges, teachers employ Grammar Translation method. They use English only when it becomes absolutely necessary – for example- while narrating a text – again and again the teachers deviate from one code to the other and translate the content of the text – as if they are narrating and old wife's tale. A teacher needs to use English while Introducing the lesson, checking attendance, organizing the seating arrangement of the students, presenting new vocabulary, asking queries and correcting errors. All the activities that surround the classroom teaching which are designed in such framework, will help the students to remove their reluctance and disabilities so far as English speaking is concerned. There is no doubt that English Language learning in India faces a lot of challenges. All we need to do is just to change our direction and approach.

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