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LIVING & LEARNING ENGLISH-CHALLENGES BEFORE THE UNDERGRADUATE ENGINEERING STUDENTS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Learning to speak & write in the English Language is a big challenge for learners in India who hail from different non-English speaking backgrounds. Assimilating English is one of the toughest jobs on the part of the Learners & is more difficult on the part of the teachers of English. An undergraduate Communicative English class is worst affected because of the unwillingness of the learners to speak & converse in the Language. This may be because of their backgrounds or their previous conditioning. The current paper proposes ways & means to tackle this difficulty & to enable the speakers to shed their inhibitions, & converse freely in the Language.

Keywords

Learning, English, Assimilating, Converse, Communicative, Inhibitions

1. Introduction

Language is a means of Verbal Communication whereby we express our feelings, ideas, experiences & realizations. It can be compared to a Prism which reflects the innumerable shades of human life. Humans stand apart from animals in their capability to use

language as a means to express themselves. Language & life are inter-related. In the current scenario we cannot imagine ourselves living or surviving without being able to communicate. Thus Language becomes a distinct entity- a living phenomena wherein thoughts & feelings are shaped.

Language teaching implies three things: language, teaching & learning. The main objective of language teaching is to make way for smooth language learning. It is a simple yet complicated process to facilitate learning of a particular language to learners in class rooms. This becomes difficult when, learners are in the form of young adolescents, who have completed their basic education till the higher secondary level & are seeking or have secured admission into some professional or vocational college of their choice.

The English Language is being taught as a second language in India-which means that it is an acquired language which a pupil is supposed to learn & assimilate in his repertoire of words. Learners for a professional or technical course already have a set system of language in their minds - a language which, either they are born into-their native language or a language which they have acquired before being admitted to Professional colleges, that is, in schools. In the case of a country like India, this language is usually, English. Very often it is seen that learners who come from a background where only their native language is spoken, fare badly as compared to learners who have come from an English medium background. The former, though being good in Subjects where numerical formulations are concerned, fall flat in the face where communication skills in English are talked about.

2. Problems faced by an English Teacher at College level

English being taught as a second language in the Indian schools is given much importance in the Indian educational system. The Language teachers are expected to be more competent to develop the basic LSRW skills of the language so that they can effectively develop the communicative competence of the learners. The difficulties often faced by a language teacher in teaching English at College Level are:

2.1 Learners not willing to speak up: Many a times a teacher gets a mixed bag of pupils in her class Learners who hail from many different backgrounds. & having minimal or no knowledge of English. As such, they are not willing to speak or express themselves before a class of good English speakers.

2.2 Learners having difficulty in working in groups: This is but an obvious outcome of a multicultural scenario, where learners who possess good knowledge of English converse

freely and eagerly, while others who have no knowledge of the language, sulk in a corner for fear of being ridiculed.

2.3 Learners not being able to express themselves: Very often the learner cannot find adequate words to express him/her self. This results in frustration & a feeling of inferiority complex gripping his mind & his personality.

3. Principles of Language Learning

An effective English teacher understands all the problems faced by a learner during his tryst with the English Language. S/he has to adhere to certain principles in order to make the learner come out of his shell & interact freely. Broadly speaking, these principles are enumerated as under

3.1 Principle of Habit Formation: Language teaching is an art. Like all other arts it needs regular practice & drill. The Language skills are acquired through a proper teaching of theory. But more than theory, the practical part has a great role to play. The steps taken by the English teacher in the class needs to be followed by the learner's practice activities. According to H.E.Palmer:

“Language learning is essentially a habit forming process, a process during which we acquire new habits.”(Palmer: The Principle of Language Study)

The English teacher should ensure that the learner converses in English in the class – irrespective of his level of conversing in the Language. Learners may be eloquent speakers in their mother-tongue but they face difficulty while conversing in a foreign language. The first hurdle that the learner faces is that of hesitation of speaking in English Language which ought to be removed. The learner should also develop the habits of:

- Listening to the sounds of English words.
- Speaking English with proper accent & intonation.
- Spelling the words correctly
- Speaking English at a smooth pace.
- Reading aloud with articulation
- Writing simple English sentences
- Consulting a good English dictionary
- Reading newspapers, magazines & books of general interest.

3.2 Principle of Motivation: At the Undergraduate level, the English teacher has to take care of a lot many things & situations. Pupils here are just out of school, at the threshold of

their College Life. Adolescents, as they are, their speech habits, pronunciations, spellings have already been set in their minds through their previous education. Learning to converse & write in English would now be a challenge for them & it would prove to be a greater challenge for the English teacher. The Principle of Motivation comes to help at this very juncture. The classes should be made interactive with a lot of fun element in them. Learners should be instructed to converse only in English. At the introductory class, the learners should be introduced to the new knowledge in the light of their previous knowledge & experience.

The English teacher can introduce, on a daily basis, two new words in the class. The learners can be asked to find out the meaning of the words as a home assignment. The teacher has to be very persistent in asking the meanings from the students the very next day. Subsequently, the meaning, the pronunciation, & the usage of the words can be discussed and clarified by the teacher. This will also encourage the pupils to use a dictionary, & find meanings of many other words, thus increasing their vocabulary.

3.3 Principle of Interest

Learners learn & imbibe things when they are interested in it. Most of them usually look at the English classes with fear & apprehension of the fact that they would be required to speak in English. To remove this fear, the English teacher needs to make some efforts. This feeling of awe & terror can be tackled by an empathetic teacher who takes pain to understand the problems of the learners & solves them skilfully. The teacher, who creates interest among his /her pupils, not only wins over his own difficulties but also wins the heart of his learners. An effective teacher creates a thirst in the hearts & minds of learners to learn & to explore more about the things being taught in the class.

3.4 Principle of Linking with life: This is one of the most important principles of any teaching. In the teaching of English as a second language, the teacher can easily do so because language is a way of life for the learners. They use it everyday whether in classrooms, homes or labs. The teacher can give real life examples which will make learners assimilate things easily. Learners will benefit more if the teacher introduces some words & connects them with real life situations.

3.4.1 India is a Cricket loving country. The teacher can, in an interactive way, ask the students about the various technical terms associated with the game like ‘off-stump,’ ‘mid on’ etc.

3.4.2 Another activity that can be done using the same game is about the various players in the game, for instance, Players who bowl are known as Bowlers. Players who bat are known as...??

The teacher may receive many answers,

“Batter... (Incorrect)

Batsman... (Correct)

The English teacher can next clarify the terms & tell the correct answer. S/he may also give the meaning of the other term, ‘batter’ together with its usage.

3.5 Principle of Proportion: There is a consensus among the English teachers upon the four aims of teaching a language. We expect that the pupil will speak, read, write & understand English Language. Hence, in the teaching of English as a second language due attention should be paid to all these four aspects & a proper proportion should be maintained to achieve effective results from the Teaching of English.

3.6 Principle of Natural Process: A learner learns his mother-tongue as he is born into it. He listens & observes to them speaking it & gradually picks up words & vocabulary related to it. It gradually seeps into his system in a natural way. The Learning of English should also be allowed to happen in a similar way. Changes would not happen overnight. One has to make persistent efforts in order to get desirable results. It will take its time but the results would be most rewarding.

4. Common errors made in an Undergraduate English Communication Class:

Most of the Professional colleges in India have a paper on Professional English or Communicative English at the Under Graduate level. Apart from the teaching of various subjects like Physics, Chemistry & Mathematics- the pupils, in their Professional Communication classes learn how to communicate in a Professional environment, but most importantly, how to communicate in English. There are various errors committed by the learners which should be corrected at the very outset by the English Teacher. The most typical errors are:

4.1 Perplexing Prepositions: The wrong use of a preposition may change the meaning of the sentence altogether, for example,

The country is protected by the neighbouring states.

4.2 Proper Pronouns: Very often the learners make the mistake of using an incorrect pronoun , for instance,

Incorrect: Who did you meet?

Correct: Whom did you meet?

Incorrect: I am taller than him.

Correct: I am taller than he (is).

4.3 The power of Punctuation: Another common error committed by learners in the use of Punctuation marks. A wrong punctuation mark may create startling change in the sentence or can even render the sentence meaningless.

Here are some examples:

The teacher said the student was guilty.

The teacher, said the student, was guilty.

Woman, without her man, is nothing.

Woman, without her, man is nothing.

4.4 Words that are single or couple: Sometimes there is a confusion as to whether a word should be written as one word or two words. This especially happens in the case of Compound words, where each of the word has an independent meaning. Some of these words that should be single are the following:

Anybody/Somebody

Anything/Something/Everything

Everywhere/ Somewhere

Everyone/Someone

Moreover/ However/ Forever

Similarly there are words that are wrongly combined into one word when they should be written as two separate words. Examples are:

All right

At least

Per cent

All rounds

In spite (of)

4.6 Similar, but not quite same: Sometimes two words are so close in meaning that they are used interchangeably. However, there are important differences between the two, which cannot be ignored and make its usage incorrect Then, there also words (Homophones) which

sound the same but which are different in their spellings & their meanings. It is, therefore, very important to know their exact meaning when using them in sentences.

Adept: to get used to

Adopt: to take somebody as one's own.

Cord: a piece of rope

Chord: musical note

Cite: to quote

Site: exact location

Facilitate: to make easier

Felicitate: to praise

4.7 Indianisms in English

A Vast majority of people in India speak English It is therefore, but obvious that we have cultivated our own style of speaking in the Language. New words have been coined which especially come under the umbrella term of 'Indianised English.' These Indian English words have also been accepted globally. Some of these are grammatically correct while others are not.

There is often a tendency in the Indianized form of English to use the Past continuous form of the verb. While this does not make the sentence grammatically inaccurate, still it sounds awkward. This can be avoided by using the terse, perfect forms of most verbs.

Incorrect: I am having a pen & a pencil.

Correct: I have a pen & a pencil.

Incorrect: I am working with a multinational firm.

Correct: I work with a multinational firm.

The addiction to use Reflexive pronouns (especially myself) is also seen in many of the students. Using 'myself' instead of 'I' is wrongly taken to be formal & correct. It is also grammatically unacceptable.

Incorrect: I Santosh Ray; this is my colleague, Suman.

Correct: I am Santosh Rai; this is my colleague, Suman

5. How Can an ESL Teacher solve these problems?

➤ A good teacher is a motivator. Before they motivate others they should motivate themselves. It means they should be enthusiastic

- A good teacher is a role model to their students. If they want their students to speak well, they should be articulate. They should possess 5 Cs: Confidence, Clarity, Conviction, Commitment and Courage. They should inspire their students
- For effective ESL Teaching the teacher should establish a rapport with their students. They should attract their students towards them. The more the students like the teacher, the better they learn and participate in activities
- A great teacher is a friend but not a philosopher. That is, they don't sound abstract when they speak to their students. They give concrete examples.
- A good teacher is lavish with her appreciation towards his/her students. She uses phrases such as *Well done. It is a good attempt. I liked your argument very much. It is a good point. You have been very creative.*
- An effective teacher always sounds positive. They infuse confidence in their students. They tell the students that it is easy to develop their speaking skills and make them believe it. They make the students believe that they have the potential to express themselves clearly in the target language.
- A competent teacher uses strategies that do not threaten the students. It is very important to learn and practice a language in a non-threatening environment.

6. How can a Language Lab help?

The tool of a Language Lab can be very useful when taking ESL sessions for the technical learners. The various activities conducted here can be tailor made to suit the efficiency levels of the learners & remove their fear of speaking in a Foreign Language. A wide variety of activities can be held in the Lab. These can take the form of:

- ✓ **Situational conversation:** The teacher can give some situations which s/he comes across everyday life. Any two students can be asked to come to the dais as pair to have a conversation. For example, if they are asked to do the role of a doctor and a patient, they have to act like a doctor and a patient using the dialogues according to the situation. This will help the students to improve their communication skills. They will also gain confidence
- ✓ **Extempore:** This is an effective way of improving their English. The students can be given different topics and they may be asked to narrate a story. All the other students should be asked to be attentive. We can also ask them to point out any mistakes committed by them. The teacher can also correct the mistakes at the end of the activity. This will help the students to improve their vocabulary, pronunciation & fluency.

✓ **Role Play:** The students can be divided into groups and each group can be given a situation to act on. The script, the roles, the dialogues have to be decided by the learners themselves and then performed in front of the whole class. This activity would remove the hesitation of the learners in speaking in English. Working in a team would also increase their confidence. Role Play activity will also encourage the learners to use English in a functional situation. Learners may participate in various stage activities such as prompting, managing, directing etc.

✓ **Reading News Papers:** ESL Teachers should make more efforts to bring a change in the existing store of words in their learners' minds. They should ask the learners to increase their word power by reading Newspapers. Wide reading of News papers will improve their vocabulary. The learners will come to know about new words & their usage.

✓ **Group Discussion:** Topics of general interest can be given to groups of learners who can then be asked to discuss them. The most important thing which we have to keep in mind is to select a topic which can create interest to them and on which they have sufficient knowledge.

✓ **Phonetics:** The teaching of phonetics can actually help the learners in a lot many ways. Phonetics can help in improving the pronunciation of students who hail from a rural background. By helping the learners in correctly pronouncing the various Vowel & consonant sounds, the ESL teacher can readily assist them in the way they articulate words & syllables.

✓ **Language Games:** Learners 'at this level can be made familiar with new words by means of various Language Games. Spelling games can be an indispensable way of doing this. Teacher can write a word on the board & can then asks his students to make as many meaningful words as s/he can, from the given word. He can make three columns, one for three lettered words, next for four lettered words & the third column for five lettered words.

7. Conclusion

An admirable command over English does not prove one's mettle in professional life, but it does serve to add to one's confidence & to inspire confidence in listeners or readers. It gives lustre to one's overall personality & enables one to face the world with confidence. English is not a native Language for most of the Indians; nevertheless it certainly adds value to our life. An imaginative & creative teacher can instil confidence in her/his students to use English in a positive manner without any inhibitions. S/he is the one who would not give up despite all odds in making her pupils comprehend & speak the language clearly &

unhesitatingly. This will go a long way in making English an integral part of their lives & help them to learn & understand English- A Language that really binds people together.

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