

PROBLEMS AND REMEDIES IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Dr. Rupal Patel

H.O.D. English
Shree M.P. & B.A. Patel (Detrojwala) Umiya Arts & Commerce College for Girls,
Sola,
Ahmedabad- 380060.
(M) 9879874882
Email: rupalashok@gmail.com
rupalben.patel@yahoo.com

In language learning, as in any kind of learning, student's effort is essential. The teacher should be less useful as a brilliant performer, keeping the class enthralled with the magic of his words, than as a facilitator of learning. He is very much expected to create the conditions which make learning possible, to provide the means by which and the atmosphere in which, students can learn. As a matter of fact, one can only learn by doing something oneself. For instance, one can learn all the theory about riding a bicycle, but not in fact be able to ride one. Similarly, one may know a great deal about how language is structured, but not know how to speak it. In order to speak the language or read or write it, one has to have a considerable amount of practice in actually using it. This is not done by hearing the teacher's speech, but by speaking oneself.

At this point, it would be no exaggeration to add that in the major English classrooms of India, learning the language is an extremely boring and thoroughly painful process. Actually there is a textbook and the teacher, in his loudest voice, reads a few lines from the textbooks and explains those few lines in the children's vernacular. The children don't get a chance to listen to an acceptable variety of English, they never get a chance to speak a syllable in English and they spend about four and a half hours every week, learning nothing of the four basic language skills. What is worse, they are often described as "backward children" by their English teachers.

YasminLukmani rightly says in her article "Developing Reading Skills"-

If one calculates the average amount of time given per student in every English class period to speak/read/write, one finds that it is minimal. At best, two to three students answer a few questions taking up about five to seven minutes of the class period. The rest of the time, the teacher holds the stage, the class. This division of time appears disproportionate and not conducive to learning (Lukmani:1988,96).

M.L. Tickoo is right in questioning in his article, "Thoughts on and around ELT Methodologies".

Why is it that even the most detailed studies of TEPL in India of the last 40 years have failed to recommend a method for use in ordinary state supported schools? There is clear awareness of the fact that tension between established practice and declared policies (Tickoo:1988,1).

However, M.L. Tickoo expresses hope when he agrees with M.S. Patel and he quotes Patel in his article that

—
In the hands of a teacher appropriately trained a structural syllabus can be an effective fool for teaching English. Implying an activity method, it demand initiative, resourcefulness and imagination on the part of the teacher. It keeps the young learner keen and active... It is indeed a delightful sight to see a class buzzing with activity like the bee-hive as it gainfully learns by doing and speaking (Tikoo: 1988,2).

Here in this small research my effort is to pin point some of the problems of the classrooms of Gujarat where the teaching of English language is either unsatisfactory or rather hopeless. No exaggeration, if it is said that the teaching of English has gone to such bottom from where it would be very difficult to uplift it. We are enlisting some of the problems, difficulties that come across in our teaching of English —

- (1) Dull, dumb, & unenthusiastic students
- (2) Escaping from the English classes
- (3) Preparing or cramming from the guides
- (4) No pre-preparation nor post-preparation
- (5) No background of English
- (6) Students' hesitation of committing mistakes
- (7) Teachers' use of translational/vernacular method
- (8) English as a compulsory subject
- (9) Neither teacher nor students feel for any improvisations or innovations.

As a matter of fact, when the students come in the class; they sit looking quite dull, dumb and unenthusiastic. They don't respond to any questions asked by the teacher. And if the teacher forces them

to speak in English, they try to speak a little and then onwards they stop attending the classes. As a result, the other students, may imitate the other students and bunk the class.

Instinctively or from the school, students learn that English is a difficult language. In schools, either the student leaves the English subject or unwillingly attends the classes. But in college, he is free to attend the class or to leave it. Moreover, the students get such a worse company in the college that they have been badly convinced that English lectures are boring, difficult, unappealing and what not. Consequently, the students try to escape from attending the classes.

Now, whether the students attend the classes or not; they are supposed to appear in the exam of English and pass it also. In that case, the students get habituated of cramming readymade answers from the guides and cheap digests available in the markets. Most of the students remain absent throughout the year, they just buy guides, cram up and mug up every answer and get through the exams.

Classroom teaching suffers a lot when there is no link to it with pre-preparation or post-preparation done by the students. Generally, the students come in the class with empty brain and goes with the same. He does not come with any home-preparation nor he does any after-preparation after going home.

Generally, the students belong to the middle, lower, or lower-middle class. They do not come to the college with any such acquaintance of English that can be helpful to them but they come to the college with a limited knowledge of English. There are some cases who keep a good knowledge of English but there are exceptions.

In the classrooms, the main reason why the students do not reply openly is that they hesitate to speak lest any error should not be committed. They keep reserved. Some of the students want to ask something, want to get clarified their doubts and queries but they are shy, they think that if the teacher would insult them or act in an unexpected way, or they also feel ashamed of the classmates. Sometimes they respect the "teacher-dominance" education system.

Helplessly and hopelessly, the teacher not seeing any response from students' side has to switch over the vernacular language. He has to translate while teaching English lessons or language in the classrooms. If the teacher of English constantly deals only with English, it is very difficult to stimulate the students' curiosity to respond therefore for the sake of their responsive ability, the teacher resorts to translation.

It is also somewhat pathetic that English is a compulsory subject in Gujarat University, therefore the students have to opt for it. English has to be studied compulsorily in all the semesters. Because of this the students unwillingly take the subject and remain dull and unenthusiastic throughout the college life.

The tragedy is from both the sides, neither the students want to learn properly nor the teachers are interested to take the lectures sincerely, regularly and meticulously.

REMEDIAL MEASURES

The pathetic situations of the English classrooms in the colleges of Gujarat University is that no classrooms are well-equipped, no language laboratory and no use of audio-visuals aids. Even the teacher is also losing his heart regarding the betterment of the present situation. It is the teacher who can bring about a Himalayan change, sea-change by just understanding the mentality of the students and by just putting his efforts in improvising the classroom — atmosphere, environment so as to encourage students to respond to the teacher's teaching. Enough attention should be given to — (1) the learners (2) the teacher (3) the class (4) the language.

If these four things can put together in a proper way, the environment of the class for any language can be modified, rectified and improvised. Actually, it is very important to make the classroom a special place. Creating this special environment should be a key goal for each language teacher whether he belongs to Gujarat or any state of India and the most essential aspect in achieving this environment is involvement. A teacher should get the learners involved. Show them that we know and care what is happening to them. We should learn the background of the students - where they live, what their parents do, how they come to college. Even we can also find out how many brothers and sisters they have. It is to be remembered that, in teaching language, all doors are open, because the key to all doors is language. It is, after all, in the teacher's hands to make the language class alive. This kind of interpersonal understanding will not only encourage the students to use language but they will find it easy to learn it also.

The teacher should first try to establish a good rapport with the students so that the students should get interested in attending the classroom teaching. Conferring student's favour, the teacher should start with their names, because this gives them an identity in the teacher's eyes and they feel that the teachers take them as individuals. This also makes the classroom much more personal and exciting.

The University should manage extra classes for the weak students. In those extra classes, the learners should be informed and taught straightforwardly about the basics of English in order to refresh their knowledge of English that perhaps lies in their subconscious mind. This could be the way to remove the discrimination and partiality that generally take place among the students.

The problems we have discussed at length earlier can be solved very easily and for that matter a teacher will have to be alert in stimulating learner's interest towards the class and towards the English language. It is only teacher who can again redirect the students towards the class. By the help of which, the teacher will see that several problems get solved from the side of students. Identifying the students by their names, establishing a close rapport with the learners, we think the students will not be any more fearful to talk to the teacher as where they are having problems in learning English. This is how the teacher can break the students' dumbness and unenthusiastic attitude towards attending classes and for English subject. The moment the teacher makes the English classes interesting, the students will speak other to join it and those students who were keeping away from the class will start attending it.

We would not try to lengthen the topic by just discussing the solutions of the student's problems. If a teacher takes the turn according to the time, we don't think there would be anymore problems — it is as if killing many birds with one stone,; removing several problems with the help of just a wise decision. If the students are regular, the teacher would be able to teach English thoroughly along with the text book and syllabus. The students will get their doubts clarified and then they will be no more dependent on the guides. In the extra classes of English the teacher should recount some interesting stories in English in a very lucid and simple style just to keep up their interests in the class. Certainly, the students will respond, they will also start thinking about something and perhaps this "something" is very important. To instill and implant some thoughts in the students is a success of a teacher. Then there would be no need to ask the students for any pre- preparation. The student will gradually take interest in English language and English classrooms.

Since, the question of background of English is concerned, very few families are there in Gujarat who have English as their first language. Teacher can enhance or build that background, he can bring some pictures, photographs of English alphabets, numbers, and the photographs of animals, birds, reptiles etc. For keeping up their interest the teacher can ask them to play games — like spelling games or word games. This is how the students' familiarity with the English background can be initiated. And to our mind, this proximity between the teacher and the students would be fruitful for they will unhesitatingly ask any question related to English language that puzzles them.

Gradually, step-by-step when the teacher sees that the students are capable enough to pick the English words, spellings, phrases easily, then he should leave taking help of vernacular; he should shun to translation method. He should adopt such techniques of teaching that this teaching should be appealing not only for the students of English but also for the students of other subjects. The teacher, for example, can take use of audio-visual aids to teach English, he can arrange English quiz in the college, he can take the students to nearby library where he can guide them as to how they can use the library and English-books.

We are sure about the over-all improvisations. Only students, (learners) and teachers can bring about the change in the class, some of the above-mentioned tips could prove very useful in English classrooms of the colleges.

Having made the classroom teaching interesting or having solved the primary problems of the students, the teacher can go a little deeper in the teaching of English language. The students who have fundamental and minor problems from escaping the English classes, they should not be burdened by the different so-called methods. The teacher should 'go deeper' in teaching — 'going deeper' means the teacher should minutely and closely observe and study the tender and delicate brains of the students. The teacher should understand in which activity the students take part, in which activity they are more interested, the teacher should activate those programmes where he finds himself appealing to the students and he should also examine those methods where the students become responsive. The teacher should not solely depend on the so-called methods laid down or propounded by the language teachers. After using the techniques of describing pictures, posters, word games, spelling games, explaining alphabets, numbers, the teacher can save little time for teaching the lessons of the prescribed next and syllabus, he can then take help of the following steps:-

- Introducing the dictionary
- Introducing reading skills
- Rearranging short sentences
- Writing shortest stories
- Inspiring them for general conversation
- Listening and watching the Audio-visual aids.

Generally, it is seen that the students of any state, not only of Gujarat, they have the habit of not referring to the dictionaries. The teacher should explain the way it should be referred. For the students' sake, the teacher can make them buy a good desk-dictionary, and can ask them to bring in the class. The teacher thus, can inspire the students to cultivate the habits of consulting dictionaries. This habit of the students can make the work of a teacher easy.

There are few benefits that can come out of the dictionary activity. In the course of teaching a prose or a poem, the teacher can list out a few words on the blackboard. The teacher can ask the students for

looking up the meaning of the words into the dictionary. Where there are multiple meanings for a given word, help them choose the right one that would fit the context. The advantages of this procedure are: -

- The students will look upon the dictionary as the ultimate source from where they can get their meanings.
- They should also know that even the teacher is dependent on dictionaries.
- They learn to distinguish between meanings.
- It is great way for vocabulary expansion. The teacher can also teach some of the phonetic symbols to the students. And he can occasionally draw their attention towards the pronunciation of the words.

So, this is one of the ways to make classroom activity less teachers-centered and more learner-centered. In order to introduce reading skill in the classrooms, the teacher can take help of the lesson from the textbook. So that the students will be familiar with their prescribed syllabus. In teaching reading, therefore, it is necessary that the teacher does not do all the work by, for instance, reading aloud or that one or two of the brighter students do not monopolize all the time given to the students by being made to read instead. All the students should be involved in a struggle with the text. This can only be done by making the entire class read the text silently, so that each one is required to make the efforts. After having read, the students can get their doubts clarified related to the difficult words, pronunciation problem, grammatical problem, any incomprehensible etc.

The students must be forced to grapple with the text and to apply their minds in deciphering meaning. It isn't necessary to give them the meaning of every difficult word on the blackboard. We also come across many new words in our own reading and do not always make a beeline for the dictionary. We understand, in the context, what the word means.

For another activity, the teacher can give a group of five sentences but not familiar story or events so that the students do not get confused. And it should be a group of only five sentences, less time-consuming; the students should get enough time for its comprehension. The teacher can check their attempts in isolation. And any student goes wrong, he can ask him to revise the sentences once again, and try to make it logical. That is how the teacher can stimulate their curiosity and can make them self-reliant gradually.

Under the sub-topic "writing the shortest stories" — the teacher can bring some pictures or posters and can ask the students to write a story consisting ten or twelve sentences. For writing skill (WS), M.P. Bhaskaran rightly says in his essay, "Composition: from controlled to free" -

In addition to methodologies of ELT history, the WS is itself the most difficult of the language skills to acquire. The communication is at a distance; paralinguistic features do not operate; there is intense mental activity; the need for organisation and clarity is paramount. In addition, the written form of the language, while using the same code as the spoken form, is markedly different from the latter, and has to be separately acquired. (Bhaskaran: 1988, 151).

Enhancing and developing this writing skill among the students is necessary as well as useful because as Bhaskaran says that the students get 'exactness' after writing even a single paragraph. And this exactness does not come just by spoken skill of a language. So, for that matter writing skill has to be taught. Now, once they write down a short composition or a story, the students can be asked to exchange their stories mutually and can see how other students write. They can compose and try to write as good as possible.

The teacher can now rightly divert the students towards communicative and conversational use of language. The teacher can ask them to talk on any point, any object, any topic they like with each other. The teacher can form a group of two students and then he can supervise accordingly. Sometimes, he can also ask the students to come on the stage for a short self-introduction. For that teacher can supply some of the sentences beforehand viz.

- (1) My name is
- (2) I am a student.
- (3) I study in ----- College.
- (4) I am a student of -----.
- (5) I come to college by bus.

For the sake of group discussion, the teacher can supply some readymade questions and answers, which can help them in their conversation.

At this juncture, Adrain Palmer is worth to be quoted, -

Language learning calls for communication practices rather than pattern practice. In communication practice drills the learner enjoys responses that are linguistically acceptable and also conveys information relevant to himself and other people. For communication the meaning of a sentence is more important than its form. Sentences illustrating a new pattern should be practiced with special attention to meaning. Whereas in pattern practice the meaning of the sentences are not necessary related to each other or to the students situation, in communication practice the learner pictures himself in a certain situation and passes judgment on the social acceptability of his utterance. Communication drills require flexible and human responses. (Palmer : 1970, 55).

Now in taking help of the audio-visual aids, the teacher can manage to bring V.C.R./V.C.D., a television and a radio with which, the teacher can show some small dialogues, small conversation, communication,

small speeches etc. Visual aids are better experiments where students get engaged themselves in listening and watching. The teacher can also ask them to watch English news on T.V. — B.B.C. and on other channels. He can also ask them to buy some cassettes based on small English dialogues, which are available in the market for their home practice.

The teaching of English is not something that 'you do the tough and master the easy' but the teacher, particularly, the teachers of Gujarat is supposed to start with the easy tasks, he should start his teaching from the beginning, from the basics and gradually he can venture towards the exhaustive details or methodology of English language teaching. That's what we have discussed in the first chapter, the minor and the most fundamental difficulties faced by the students. As a teacher we should break that long-back tradition of one-way teaching, we should also include actively the students in learning process. We, as teachers, should keep away from making the class — 'teacher-dominated'

We will conclude with the words of S. Vedayudhan who says in his essay 'Study skills in the classroom' — Some of us, (we, the teachers) do carry loads of learned lumber in our heads and we expect our students to get it from us, like retailers collecting their daily wares from wholesalers. Worth remembering that in a commercial sense wholesalers have a vested interest in not letting the retailers going to the sources. (Vedayudhan : 1988, 159).

So long as the teaching of language is based on prescribed reader/ texts teacher-dominance in the pursuit of knowledge is bound to continue. The thing is — can't we suppress our urge to supply every bit of information?

Shouldn't we invite the students to go, search and find out things for themselves?

On the whole, it is time that we take a second look at the educational process. Blaming the system and waiting for drastic changes and improvement of our resources is no solution. Change should begin with every individual teacher.

Romeo exclaimed:

'O! She does teach the torches to burn bright.'

When would we think of our students as torches whom we could help burn bright.

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