ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF YOUNG LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

In India, English is acknowledged as a language that enhances career prospects. It explains why demand for English education has increased among parents. However, the teaching and learning of English has been beset with bottlenecks, thus impacting learning outcomes in terms of developing English proficiency of learners for practical purposes. The treating, teaching and learning of English as a subject, rather than as a language, and its status as a ‘library language’ have been obstacles to the proper acquisition of language skills among students. While the problem exists for young learners at the school level, its impact is felt later in their lives, especially when they have to use English for purposes of higher learning or jobs.

It is seen that the hype that goes with English education has not matched with learning outcomes, which is dismally below par. The inclusion of English merely as a language and a medium of instruction and then treating it as a subject to be learnt by rote only for exam scores have contributed to rendering the teaching-learning of English largely as a Sisyphean activity in terms of learning outcomes. Most respondents reported they enjoyed learning English. They expressed overall satisfaction with regard to their English speaking ability, are aware of the purpose of learning English, feel they can prepare notes of their own, have individual and group activities in school to learn English, have their teachers using audio-visual aids, and feel the vocabulary and structures they use in textbooks are useful in daily life. The above contradictions could be because of differences in students’ perceptions of what ‘good’ and ‘adequate’ English is, especially in urban, semi-urban and rural areas. However, the fact is that the level of English proficiency of respondents from rural or small town areas, such as the one surveyed for the present article, is inadequate in equipping them to pursue higher education, or take up jobs.

In this context, it will be opportune to evaluate how using home/local language, or mother tongue, as medium of instruction up to Grade 5, or even Grade 8, as per the new National Education Policy (NEP) will impact students proficiency in English. Apparently, students who learn in the English medium up to the abovementioned grades will enjoy the early starter advantage. This article looks at the above aspects.

Key Words: English, teaching, learning, language proficiency, NEP.

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INTRODUCTION

English is gaining importance in India and more people are bound to use it in future, as demand for English medium schools is rising. Also, higher education is more accessible and English language training is part of vocational education. Jobs in the organised sector require candidates to have good English communication skills. In Satara, English is introduced as for Marathi, semi-English and English medium students of State Board schools from Std 1, and is taught right from upper primary to secondary level. English is mostly seen as a second language (L2), or even third language (L3). Learners in small towns like Satara will be expected to acquire English proficiency to be competition-ready in a globalised environment.

Learning English at the school level forms the base for students’ future knowledge and career growth. But the excessively bookish and exam-oriented system of education that encourages rote learning is not seen to help Indian students gain proficiency in English. This is especially true of Maharashtra State Board school students in small towns and rural areas, where lack of English proficiency remains a problem. This study seeks to discuss problems faced by young learners in learning English, in Satara city, Maharashtra. English, especially writing and speaking, is still a challenge for many people in Satara. The purposive sampling method was used for the study. In order to understand the language proficiency of learners, an analytical survey based on the data collection from the young learners was taken.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to assess the level and attitude of young learners in small towns and rural areas.

1. To study and understand the ground scenario and actual outcomes in the learning of English language among the young learners.
2. To identify the challenges faced by the learners in learning English and the lack of proficiency in the fluency of English.

PROBLEMS OF YOUNG ENGLISH LEARNERS

1. Mother tongue influence: According to the collected data of the learners, there seems to be a mother tongue influence with more than half of the learners. More than half of the respondents have influence of mother tongue. The medium of instruction in the classroom is also bilingual.
2. English as a language: The educating of English in schools isn’t as per the points of showing English as a language but as a subject. The learners study English for the exams and not for practical use. During many occasions, neither the instructor nor the learners is familiar with the points of learning English. The primary aim of the study is neglected.
3. Place of English in schools: The place of English in school educational plan is still not decided. The below inquiries need answer:
   a) From which class should English begin?
   b) Up to which class should its examination keeps going?
4. Rote learning: The learners consider English as a subject; they learn the answers by heart without understanding its meaning. This study causes some problem among the learners that their thinking ability will not be developed. At the time of communication, the learners make mistakes in the usage. The teachers are not able to correct at that time.
5. Lack of effective teachers: The basic years for instructing of English in schools are in the hands of educators who neither know English nor know about the most recent and extensive improvement in the instructional method of English. An effective teacher can train their students in a better way which is essential for their future use. If the basic fundamentals of English are effectively taught, the learners will never forget the language.
6. Traditional Examination system: The technique for assessment with oral and composed test isn’t effective for the learners in the practical use. The instructors follow the conventional technique for
assessment. No hard work is made to understand the genuine points of showing English through assessment.

**HYPOTHESIS**

H1: Low proficiency of young English language learners.

H2: Low proficiency is due to the lack of effective teaching methods.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

As a postgraduate trained teacher in Kerala and also in Maharashtra, the researcher is acquainted with the challenges in teaching-learning of English in schools. The researcher collected some data through a questionnaire of fifteen students containing fifteen questions about the challenges of English language. It is found that most of the learners face some problems in the learning of English. The study design follows the purposive sampling method which is a non-probability sampling method in which the elements selected for the sample are selected by the researcher. Data has collected from the fifteen respondents about the present status of existing problems of learning English and the researcher provided some possible solutions for the problems. The sample of the study includes young English learners from Satara city limits of various schools.

**DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION**

**Questions for Data collection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Medium of instruction</th>
<th>English (46.7%)</th>
<th>Marathi 0%</th>
<th>Both (53.3%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teachers teach how to learn a lesson</td>
<td>often% 40</td>
<td>sometimes% 40</td>
<td>never% 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Individual/group activities for English</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teachers use audio-visual aids</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Converse with friends in English</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Prepare own notes</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Teachers collect students feedback</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Difficulty in conversing fluently</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Know purpose of learning English</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Textbook vocabulary/structures useful</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Teachers teach how to use dictionary</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Enjoy English language learning</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mother tongue influences English</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Problems talking with teachers in English</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Happy with English speaking ability</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data is collected using both qualitative and quantitative method. To design quantitative data and to collect data, the Likert scale is used. The terms used in the questionnaire include ‘often’, ‘sometimes’ and ‘never’. The respondents’ personal opinions on the learning of English and the problems they face are measured through the questionnaire. Most students have group activities to help them learn English – 40 percent often and 26.7
A relatively small but significant number (33.3 percent) reported never having any group activities to learn English. We can infer from the data that most of the students are exposed to language learning activities and a smaller yet significant number of them are not, which in turn could influence language learning outcomes.

According to the data, only 20 percent respondents are seen to converse with their friends in English, whereas 60 percent reported conversing in English sometimes. It can be inferred from the data that most students do converse in English to some extent. The high number of students reporting they converse sometimes points to their use of both English and vernacular language. Most respondents (46.7 percent) are seen to face difficulty in conversing in English sometimes. 26.7 percent of them face difficulty often and the same number reported never facing any difficulty. The table shows that only 26.7 percent students never face difficulty in speaking in English. It points to lack of proficiency among a majority of students. Mother tongue is a major influence on the English of a majority (60 percent) of respondents. It can be inferred that for most students, their mother tongue influences their English. It is seen that most students have problems in conversing with teachers in English. Almost half of the respondents (46.7 percent) reported being sometimes happy with their speaking ability in English. 26.7 percent said they were always happy with their English speaking abilities and the same number said they were never happy.

STRATEGIES AND DISCUSSION

According to Solanki D. Shyamlee (2012) and Pourhosein Gilakjani (2017), technology has changed the methods of language teaching. Pouhosein Gilakjani and Sabouri (2014) highlight the role of technology in helping learners control what they learn and also give them access to information that teachers are unable to provide. Technology is also useful in encouraging activities among learners and has the potential to influence teaching methods.

The internet is no doubt an important tool. According to Arifah (2014), using the internet boosts learners’ motivation. Movies as a teaching tool could help learners understand topics of study with enthusiasm and also help them learn meaningfully. Technology also helps them develop their higher order thinking skills. Therefore, it may accord CBSE-1 Affiliation Rules; classrooms must be equipped with e-learning facilities. High-speed internet, latest configuration desktops/laptops and projectors are mandatory, in addition to necessary audio-visual arrangements. The curriculum aims to improve LSRW skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) their ability to analyse and evaluate texts and also express themselves. While all four skills contribute to mastering a language, an important, yet neglected, aspect is listening. However, despite the technologies available for education, students have problems with listening (Renukadevi, D., 2014). Adequate and proper listening resources are a key learning enabler where English is not the first language and learners are exposed to mother tongue influence (MTI). Also, as the study by Renukadevi points out, inappropriate strategies tested on students is a reason for inadequate listening comprehension.

Feedback is another aspect that influences learning outcomes. A study (Coyle, Larios, 2013) on the role of two types of feedback – error correction and model texts – in 11-12-year-old children learning English as a foreign language looked at the learners’ “noticing” and “written” outputs. It was seen that though the participants noticed and incorporated lexical changes into their output, the error-correction model had more benefits as it helped the learners understand the grammatical aspects which they incorporated in their revised texts.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

As we have discussed above some problems and solutions based on the study of English learners, the poor proficiency exist among people those who seek jobs and higher studies in big cities and foreign countries. If they acquire practical English skills at the earlier level, it becomes far more useful for them in their later life. According to New Education Policy (NEP), it has decided that the system of 5+3+3+4 will be in the education system. This policy decided that up to grade 5, the medium of instruction will be mother tongue. It is not sure that this system will have a great impact on the students. In my opinion, the students will be able to cop up
with the daily life in the usage of English. In order to acquire English proficiency, an efficient teacher should encourage the learners to practice English skills in practical purpose.

REFERENCES

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