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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Sociolinguistic Approach In English Language Teaching: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract:

Today, English is recognized as an associate official language of the Union of India. It is the only language which is a window to the world of knowledge for Indians. In every sphere of life whether social, political, academic, cultural or economic, it holds a significant value. It has played a very important role in building modern India. It enjoys a previleged position. Higher Education in science, medicine, engineering, technology etc. is not possible without English. Higher studies in any discipline are not possible without English. In this era of Information Communication Technology, and the Internet, no country can afford to live without English. It is essential for e-education, e-learning, e-commerce and e-governance. English has become an international asset which can be called world English. English is spoken and understood all over the globe, so it has got international importance. Naturally its popularity on the basis of its utility all over the globe determines its strength. It is through English that we can establish political, cultural, intellectual and economic relations with the rest of the world. It is the means of international communication. After the initial turmoil and resistance against continuing English in India, there is a shift in the attitude of Indians who now recognize the significance of English for national growth.

KEYWORD:

Sociolinguistic , English , Listening ,Speaking ,Reading.

INTRODUCTION: English Language

In this paper, I propose to develop the argument that in India the communicative approach of English Language Teaching has been modified and thus relabelled as Sociolinguistic Approach. The teaching of English is obviously of comparable importance. In India, English is being taught as a foreign language. For the teaching of a foreign language, an environment conducive to the learning of the language has to be created. The demands made on language teachers are steadily increasing, so is the awareness among teachers for the need to improve their own knowledge base. Unfortunately there is dearth of such teachers who are well versed in the content and the methodology of teaching. Hence, it is essential to understand different dimensions of English Language Teaching. A teacher should attempt to convert a prescribed lesson into an interactive session to increase students' participation and to make them active. He should motivate students to communicate in the class to improve their communication skill.

Learning a language is nothing but the development of certain skills. It is not a content-subject like science, social studies which aim at imparting information and fill the human mind with knowledge. Development of communicative competence both at the receptive and productive levels is and should be the only objective of a second language teaching programme. Objectives are the beacons that light the passage of the lone traveller in pursuit of excellence, in this case linguistic excellence.

Language is essentially a skill. To begin with, listening and speaking are aimed at. These are the most important and natural language skills. It is rightly said that language starts with the ear. Listening and speaking skills are inter-related. A child who is incapable of listening to spoken language is not able to

speak. This confirms that practice in listening is essential for the development of proficiency in speech. The spoken language is marked on paper using visual symbols. This graphic representation of the spoken form of communication is known as writing. In English language there is lack of consistent relationship between sound and spelling. The visual representations of ideas are converted to sounds when a person looks at them and reads aloud. Reading is the decading of the visual representation of experience. In the educational context, the teacher is the sender who encodes the subject matter as the message and the student is the decoder. Both writing and reading are not natural process. So training and practice are essential to be writer and a reader. Generally, people who use a language fluently were never taught that particular language formally. They don't make conscious effort to learn it. A native speaker speaks his language without any formal teaching of grammar and vocabulary. He learns his mother tongue in natural manner. In the case of a foreign language or a second language, the learners are not exposed to the language. So some arrangement is to be made to make them listen to the language. As far as the second language teaching is concerned, the training for the four language skills is essential.

ACCORDING TO ROBERT LADO:

"More fundamental than whether the correct order of teaching the skills is listening, speaking, reading and writing is the fact that reading writing are partial skills and exercising them constitutes partial language experiences, whereas speaking and listening are total language experiences. The person that learns the total skills can more easily learn the partial ones than vice-versa."[1]

It means that listening and speaking are important while reading and writing are used casually. It must be remembered that language is a complex skill involving four sub-skills:

LISTENING

Listening is receptive rather than productive, but it is an equally important skill. It involves the formation of proper auditory images of phonemic components such as the use of vowel and consonant sounds, stress, accent, pitch, juncture and intonation.

Listening skills include:

1.Predicting what people are going to talk about.
2.Guessing at unknown words or phrases without panicking.
3.Using one's own knowledge of the subject to help one understand.
4.Identifying relevant points; rejecting irrelevant information.
5.Relating relevant points (note-taking, summarizing).
6.Recognizing cohesive devices, e.g., 'such as', 'which', including link words, pronouns, references, etc.
7.Recognizing discourse markers, e.g., 'Well', 'On, Another this is', and 'Now, Finally……'.
8.Understanding different intonation patterns, and uses of stress, etc. which give clues to meaning and social setting, and
9.Understanding inferred information, e.g., speaker's attitude or intentions.[2]

SPEAKING

Speaking is a productive skill. It is only through speaking that a speaker makes most of the things happen in life. In speech we make use of oral sings which are addressed to the ear. A child acquires the speaking ability by responding to the sounds made by the people around him and imitating them out of his need for communication. So listening and speaking are interdependent. While teaching English in India a teacher should provide lots of opportunities for the students to speak English not only in classroom but in other co-curricular activities also. As it is learnt as a second language, the students don't have many opportunities to express themselves in English outside the school. There is a need to put in more conscious and deliberate efforts consistently. The teacher must pay special attention to similar and dissimilar features of English pronunciation and speech in the mother tongue.

READING

Reading is the decoding of the graphic representation of a language. It is sight - sound - sense process. Reading is a receptive skill. In the teaching of English as a second language, the best method to give this language exposure is to read the language. Jane Willis gives a list of reading skills in English:

1.Recognizing words and phrases in English script.
2.Using one's own knowledge of the outside world to make predictions about and interpret a text.
3.Retrieving information stated in the passage.
4.Distinguishing the main ideas from subsidiary information.
5.Deducing the meaning and use of unknown words; ignoring unknown words/phrases that are redundant, i.e., that contributes nothing to interpretation.
6.Understanding the meaning and implications of grammatical structures, e.g., cause, result, purpose, reference in time (e.g., verb tenses; 'He could swim well', past, 'He could come at 10 a.m.' future).
7.Recognizing discourse markers; e.g., therefore + conclusion, however + contrast, that is + paraphrase, e.g. + example.
8.Recognizing the function of sentences – even when not introduced by discourse markers; e.g. example, definition, paraphrase, conclusion, warning.
9.Understanding relations within the sentence and the text (words that refer back to a thing or a person mentioned earlier in the sentence or the text, e.g., which, who, it).
10.Extracting specific information for summary or note-taking.
11.Skimming to obtain the gist and recognize the organization of ideas with in the text.
12.Understanding implied information and attitudes.
13.Knowing how to use an index, a table of contents, etc.
14.Understanding layout, use of headings, etc.3

        In India, where English is taught as a second language, fast reading with understanding is to be developed among the students.

WRITING

        The modern technique is to teach orally words and simple structures, and when the learners have sufficient practice in oral exercise, they are initiated to writing.

        "Learning to write a foreign language is learning to put down at a speed greater than that of drawing the conventional symbols of the writing system that represent the utterances one has in mind. This is divided into several stages; pre writing, copying 'read' texts, transcribing, composition, and literature." 4

        Writing is the graphic representation of ideas and experience. Being an artificial skill it requires a lot of practice. This is the last of the skills to be taught in teaching of a language.

        So it is to be summarised that one can learn a second language through the content and the expression of the language along with their association for rapid use in the proper positions within the systems of the target language.

        So far the concepts of language, learning of a second language and four basic language skills have been discussed. Next step is to discuss briefly the methodology / suggested approach to English language teaching.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

        Before embarking on this, it is worth while discussing the three terms which are often used when talking about language teaching: approaches, methods and techniques.

        An 'approach' is based on certain theoretical principles. A 'method' is a set of procedures or a collection of techniques used in a systematic way which it is hoped will result in inefficient learning. A 'technique' then is the narrowest term, meaning one single procedure. A method will consist of a number of techniques probably arranged in a specific order. The world 'approach' is much more general and the implication that whatever method or techniques the teacher uses, he does not feel bound by these, but only by the theory in which he believes; if he can find new and better methods or techniques which will fit in with his approach, then he will adopt these.5

        The importance of English language, for social, cultural, scientific and industrial interaction within the country and with relation to other developing and developed countries, is increasing day by day. The researchers in the teaching of English have been trying out new methods and approaches to facilitate teaching-learning of English. Here a new approach is suggested that shares most of its features with linguistic communicative approach, with may be termed as sociolinguistic approach.

        The sociolinguistic factors play an important role in the evolution and growth of a language. The changes are brought about both by the linguistic patterns of the native languages and socio-cultural behaviour of its users. Language is a means of communication. The basic communication model involves an information process in which message, informations and reactions to information travel from the

initiator to receiver through the communication channel. That is, the users of a language require a knowledge of the social meaning of the linguistic forms and their functions.. If the user of a language has only the knowledge of language rules and forms, then he is said to have 'linguistic competence', and if he also has the knowledge that enables him to communicate functionally and interactively then he is said to have communicative competence.

The traditional approaches have made the learners structurally competent and have developed in them the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences. Still the learners are not able to participate in a simple conversation. These structurally competent but communicatively incompetent learners know the grammar of the target language but lack the ability to be appropriate as well as fluent.

Without given due place to sociolinguistic, socio-cultural and psycholinguistic factors in language learning, it was difficult to determine how users of a language communicate in a given society. The learners of English language, to whom English is just a foreign language, are not able to communicate what they really want to do because they don't get much opportunity to perform communicative task in their society.

William Littlewood is of the opinion that the communicative language teaching "makes us more strongly aware that it is not enough to teach learners how to manipulate the structures of the foreign language. They must also develop strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in real situations and real time." 6

Though the procedures have much in common with what were followed in Oral and Situational Approaches. The traditional procedures are not rejected but are interpreted and extended. There is not fundamentally new communicative methodology. However, simulation, group activity in the class becomes central as a procedure, for only thus can quasi-realistic communication be conveniently simulated on a large scale, and only thus can intense personal contact between the learners and the language they create be fostered. The learners should be equipped with the competence that they would need to communicate effectively in the target language. Both linguistic and communicative competences are required to communicate well in any language.

To begin with, linguistic competence is learning the language while communicative competence is using the language to learn. The neutral interpretation of linguistic competence refers to the knowledge of a system of rules and assigns structural description to sentences. This is purely descriptive, and it does not intend to say anything about the way in which the speaker-listener uses the system of rules in constructing well-formed sentences of his language. Wilga Rivers: "Linguistic competence is the ability to communicate naturally by using, the forms of the language native speakers normally one's own intentions and feelings and understanding those of others, whose cultural background and ways of conveying meanings may be different."7

Communicative ability is a complex and many-sided phenomenon. The main function of language is to fulfill the communicative demands of a society. The learner has to acquire communicative skills to meet these demands. Language function in a context and words acquire significance from the context, and therefore, social rules which enables the speaker-listener to interpret the social meaning, must also be taken into consideration.

The communicative competence is the linguistic competence plus an ability to use the language appropriately. It is the effective use of language in social context. Communicative competence is different and broader than linguistic competence. It is the native speaker's innate knowledge of the language.

Further, the interpretation of competence gives rise to the problem of how to draw the line of demarcation between competence and performance. Competence is abstract. Its concrete realization is performance. Communicative ability is a complex and many-sided phenomenon. Competence is concerned with socio-cultural significance. Effective communicative requires more than linguistic competence. For effective communication, a speaker must have the knowledge of grammatical utterances of the language and also how to use them properly. To D. Hymes:"…………a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. …. The competence moreover, is integral with attitudes, values and motivations concerning language, its features and uses."8

The term 'communicative competence' has now become a household word in second language teaching. It enables to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings inter-personally within specific contexts.

So communicative competence includes:

(i)grammatical competence

(ii)discourse competence
(iii)strategic competence
(iv)socio-linguistic competence.

Communicative competence includes cultural knowledge, the organization of verbal means for socially-defined purposed.

Halliday has given a theory which deals with language use and also takes into account language functions which are realized by speech. His theory is a social theory. His focus of attention is on interpreting language within a socio-cultural context.

"A child, in the act of learning language makes his language and learns the culture of his society through language. His task is to construct the system of meanings that represent his own model of social reality. This process takes place inside his own head, it is a cognitive process. But it takes place in contexts of social interaction, and there is no way it can take place except in these contexts. As well as being a cognitive process, the learning of the mother tongue is also an interactive process. It takes the form of the continued exchange of meanings between the self and others. The act of meaning is a social act."9

Thus Halliday's focus of attention is on language as a social semiotic. He believes interpreting language within a socio-cultural context. The variation in language basically relates to the variety of social meaning. The use of language is conditioned by the communication needs engendered by the social pressure exerted on the learner. In communication process, for sending message properly the sender's command over language, ability to exploit the linguistic potential and the restrictions imposed by socio-cultural factors play an important role. On receiver's part, his interpretative ability to understand it and situational constraints play an important role.

A more significant aspect is the fact that the learner of English, who is learning English as a second language, is exposed to bilingual education. He is already a master of his mother tongue. In the learning of mother tongue, the child forms certain habits e.g., speaking, reading, writing, silent reading, reading with comprehension, writing beautifully. And all these habits are needed in the learning of a second language. It shows how the competence acquired in mother tongue is helpful in a second language teaching. Just because of this significant role of mother tongue in learning second language the process of Indianisation of English has been going on at all levels of language. In India, people use English for social interaction as well as cultural expression to which typically English norms and practices in the use of body language cannot be applied.

For sociolinguistic approach, linguistic competence may be taken as the internal consistency and the communicative competence as the external appropriacy. Language is a tool for the performance of social transactions. It is a system for the expression of meaning in a socio-cultural context. The choice of language varies according to social function and personal intention. Sociolinguistic approach is also helpful in achieving the three main goals of English language teaching e.g., accuracy, fluency and appropricacy. This implies that the application of this approach in a particular community would have strategies of operation unique to that community.

Though, the approach has much in common with the earlier approaches. Without giving due place to sociolinguistic, socio-cultural and psycholinguistic factors in language learning, it was difficult to determine how users of a language communicate in a given society. Some of the ingredients have been more specific, concretised and enlarged in this new approach, designed with a purpose that it will suit to the learner of a second language. It is essential a learner-based approach and stresses the importance of learner, society, the community, etc., in determines the course content. As a result, there emerged a new concept in English language teaching that may ultimately lead to the development of a theory of language teaching suitable for reorganising ELT in India.

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