

TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

India Is a classic example of a multicultural, multi religious country following a policy of multilingualism. Indian culture has always been an integral part of India's education system. Therefore, teachers and learners need to have awareness regarding the issues of cultural diversity between English and the local languages. The multicultural education may be an alternative way of improving the cultural awareness in the process of English language teaching. English language is important in order to be able to communicate with people from other cultures. It is a medium to form a picture of society. By applying this multicultural perspective in the practice of English language teaching and learning, the learners will acquire attitude, knowledge, and skills needed to function within their own culture, mainstream cultural and the global community.

Key words: English language teaching, multiculturalism, multilingualism, Globalization, culture, cultural awareness

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a multicultural, multilingual country. A defining feature of India is its diversity in terms of religion, caste, language and cultural. It has twenty eight states, seven union territories, 22 national languages, 1162 other languages and dialects. India is a classic example of a multicultural muti religious country following a policy of multilingualism. After independence India adopted a federal form of government to provide a certain degree of autonomy to the states to formulate their own laws and policies which would assist the different linguistic groups to protect and promote their language and cultural. Moreover, Indian cultural is a thing of pride with its flexibility, assimilation and preservation of the best practices prevailing in the contemporary society. Indian cultural has always been an integral part of India's education system. Therefore, teachers and learners need to have awareness regarding the issue of cultural diversity between English and the local languages. They need to consider the fact that their students come from different cultural background, have different level of proficiency, speak their first language, and also may have different social, religious and economic background. Hence, it is essential to enhance teachers and students' interest in incorporating multicultural approaches into educational setting.

The multicultural education maybe an alternative way of improving the cultural awareness in the process of English language teaching. Learning second language play an important role in paying respect towards one another's culture. Thus, English language is important in order to be able to communicate with

people from other cultures. It is a medium to form a picture of society. Moreover, learning language assists to gain certain issues and ideas about the thinking, background and cultural elements of speaking community. It was Saussure who first said that language is a social phenomenon. It is a network of relationship in which the value of each aspect ultimately depends on the value of the other. Hence, language and culture are integral parts of each other. They are inseparably separable discipline of human world. In this context, Juri Lotman remarks in McGuire that, "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture ; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language." (Tirumalesh: 126) Hence, language and culture are intertwined. It is not possible to teach a language without culture and culture is the essence of culture teaching. For Hudson culture "is the kind of knowledge which we learn for other people, either by direct instruction or by watching their behavior. Since we learn our culture from those around us, we may assume that we share it with them, so this kind of knowledge is likely to play a major role when we use language." (Hudson: 78) Thus, it is important to study a culture in its socio-cultural context. It is also important to understand the functions which cultural elements perform in the language. As we are aware of the fact that the influence of mother tongue is always present in second language acquisition. It is necessary to investigate the importance of learner's first language which makes an impression on a second language. Hence, teaching and learning second language without its socio-cultural context may mislead the communication. The knowledge of second language enlightens and deepens the understanding of teachers and learners as well. Moreover, second language learning involves efforts to acquire sociolinguistics competence which enriches the appropriate use of language. As John Schuman observed, "the most important influence of L2 learning is the relationship between the social group of the L2 learners and the social group of the speakers of the target language. Successful learning means 'acculturation' becoming part of the target culture." (Vivian: 169) Multicultural education deals with the ideals of social justice and education equality in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally. It is an education that enables all learners regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, have an equal opportunity to learn at school. By applying this multicultural perspective in the practice of English language teaching and learning, the learners will acquire, attitude, knowledge, and skills needed to function within their own culture, mainstream culture and the global community. Therefore, it is important to improve multicultural awareness among students. Moreover, teachers should use content from diverse groups. This will enable the students to understand how knowledge in various disciplines is constructed. The teachers should develop positive intergroup attitudes and behaviours, and modify their teaching skills so that students from different racial, cultural, language, and social- class groups will experience equal educational opportunities. An education system should be such that it can create a new generation of individual who believe that all human beings are brothers and that difference of caste, religion, community have no significance. According to Gretchen and Jacqueline, "a person who is considered cross-culturally competent is one, who has achieved an advance level in the process of becoming intercultural and whose cognitive, affective and behaviours, characteristics are not limited but are open to growth beyond the psychological parameters of only one culture. The intercultural

person possesses an intellectual and emotional commitment to the fundamental unity of all humans, at the same time, accepts and appreciates the differences that lie between people of different culture.”

English has been taught in India very extensively in our schools and colleges for many decades. Today English has entered the fabric of Indian culture. In 1765 English education began in India, when the East India Company became the political power. The first six decades of English education in India did not witness any remarkable progress. However, in 1835 the spread of English was accelerated by the declaration of Macaulay's famous minutes and the founding of the first three universities on the model of University of London. Macaulay explains that, “English stands pre-eminent among the language of the west, whoever knows that language has ready access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wise nations of the earth have created.” (Sharma. K.L. 1970:2) Thus, Macaulay realized the importance of English education in India. Many Indian and patriots like Raja Ram Mohan Roy also preferred English education. Macaulay's policy was further endorsed by Lord Bentinck and Lord Auckland who diverted all funds for the development of English educational. However, Macaulay's expectation of anglicizing India was not fulfilled. But this policy resulted in the adoption of English as the ‘official language’ of English which led to stimulate a new consciousness among the Indian. But the constitution of India in 1950 laid down that Hindi could be the official language of the union of India and it laid down a period of 15 years for effecting the change over from English to Hindi. Hence, for 15 years English had to function as an ‘associate language’. In 1959, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister assured the non-Hindi people that English would continue as an associated language. There were mass agitations and violence regarding the issue of Hindi and non-Hindi. However, in 1967 the act was amended and restored English to its pre-independence status. Now English occupies the status of associate official language. It is used widely as a link language in offices and among the educated elites in our country. It is not only a compulsory subject in our schools and colleges but is also the medium of instruction to the large extent. It has become the language of education, advancement, jobs and a symbol of self-improvement. In other words, in a multicultural setting of India English has been playing a crucial role in strengthening our unity and making Indian aware of the strong currents of world culture.

In India, the importance of English language is ever growing in this age of globalization and cut-throat competition. It has become an important tool of progress and connectivity. Moreover, it serves two distinct purposes. First, it provides a linguistic tool for administrative cohesiveness of the country, causing people of different ethnicity to become united. Secondly, it serves as a language of wider application and communication. Thus, English is used among Indian as a ‘link language’ and it is the first language for many well educated Indian. It serves as a linguistic bridge between the major countries of the world and India. Furthermore, English has a special place in Indian parliament, judiciary, broadcasting, journalism, and in the education system. Learning English language has become popular for business, commerce and cultural studies. The integration of ICT in English language teaching has stimulated a huge expansion of internet related activity, establishing the future of India as a cyber-technological super-power. English has become an effective means of promoting Indian view of life, and strengthening our culture identity in the world. Hence, it is essential to have positive attitude to English language for the integration of people into Indian society.

The role of English in a multicultural and multilingual country like India is beneficial as it helps people of various ethnic linguistic groups to be united. Considering the above fact, learning English as a second language becomes inseparable branch as also unavoidable in Indian education system. There is an awakening in society towards the learning of English. Government too has awakened to the importance of English in education curricula. Unfortunately, despite many recommendations by different education commissions constituted by the government of India, the place of English in the curriculums and methods of teaching have always been in a state of flux. Teaching English to the Indian students is the biggest challenge. Though enough awareness is prevailing among the students, parents and society, the majority of our students struggle a lot to acquire the language. In addition, teachers too equally toil and moil to find a suitable methodology to facilitate the students in acquiring the English language. As a language teacher something must be done to attract and satisfy the needs of the students and enables them to acquire the language. For this, we have to create the situation in such a way to enable the students to enjoy the skill oriented language drill and at the same time learn the peculiarities and the techniques of language. Moreover, it is imperative to adopt a culture sensitive curriculum. This would facilitate the enhancement of critical culture consciousness among teachers as well as learners. It would promote social integration, preserve local culture and change the way by which the people in these cultures engage with issues of diversity. Varma has rightly said “The time has come when we must modernized and restructure the curriculum in the light of the new needs of learners of English in India today.”

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