REVIEW ARTICLE

FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS IN A MULTICULTURAL ESL CLASSROOM IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid pace of globalization has resulted in making English as the lingua-franca of people for education, employment and business opportunities worldwide. It is a known fact that English has become the universal medium of communication across all countries. English has been accepted as a second language and it also serves as the medium of instruction in most of the educational institutions. India is a multicultural country which consists of people with different languages and cultures. In addition, Educational policies in India have enabled students from all parts the world to have access to Indian education. Hence, Indian classrooms are filled with students of diverse cultures and languages. In a multicultural country like India, teaching English as a second language is often a challenge for the ELT practitioners. Various factors like language, culture and educational background of both the learner and teacher plays a major role in language learning. This paper tries to highlight the factors that influence the teaching- learning process in a multicultural Indian classroom with specific references to higher educational technical institutions in Tamilnadu, South India.

Key words: Multicultural, teaching-learning, globalization, lingua franca, English as a second language (ESL)

INTRODUCTION

English has been taught as a second language for Indian students since their Kindergarten. Generally, South Indian classrooms at tertiary level are filled with three categories of students. The First category students are from good English background whose medium of instruction is English from their primary level. Secondly, students from non-English background whose medium of instruction is their mother tongue from their primary level. The Third category students are from northern parts of India and abroad who have undergone a different pattern of education from their school level. It is often a challenge for the English teacher to deal with all the three category of students in the same class. Various factors like the students' educational background, family background and life style, higher education policies, size of the classroom and mother tongue influence contribute to the teaching learning-process. These factors also play a major role in determining the ability of the students' learning skills.

Educational background of the learners

Engineering institutions in Tamilnadu have students with different educational background. As stated above these students fall into three categories. The first type of students is those who come with strong English background as they were fortunate enough to have access to all four language skills namely; listening, reading, speaking and writing at their school itself. They belong to either CBSE schools or matriculation schools in cities and towns whose medium of instruction was English from the primary level. These schools take extra care in developing the language skills of the students as they realize the importance of English as a gateway for higher education. Moreover, these are schools that have already set very high standards as every year their students shine in national level competitive examinations. Hence, in order to maintain their consistency these schools take utmost care in training their students. Such students will never be a problem for English teachers as they never face any difficulty in learning English. But, there are quite a few number of matriculation schools who largely depend on scoring marks. These schools never give importance to language subjects as the marks obtained in the language subjects will not be taken into account during admission to higher education in technical institutions. Hence, they encourage rote learning among students and hence the practical approach to learning was totally denied for such students. Thus, Children from these schools lack thinking capability and creativity.

The second category is not gifted enough like the first category as their school education was either from corporation or municipality schools which were run by the government where they study everything in their vernacular. For these students English is taught not as a second language but only as a subject. These students learn English by knowing the rules of grammar, spelling, word formation, sentence construction etc,. In most cases they memorize the answers and get through their exams. Hence, they have good writing skills but in terms of reading, speaking and listening they lag behind. They were given less chance to either read or speak in English as it is considered only a subject among other subjects. Students from such schools irrespective of their knowledge and talent develop an inferiority complex when they mingle with the first category of students. This is mainly because they have no chance to learn or practice English outside the classroom also. The teacher has to motivate these students by encouraging them to participate in the learning process by taking extra care.

The third category of students is pupil from north India and a few students from outside India. These students are almost equal to the first category as they manage to mingle with English speaking students since there is no other alternative for them to communicate as they are away from their native or home land. These students will never be a problem for English teachers as they can comprehend English easily. In such a situation with mixed group of students, the real difficulty of the teacher lies in identifying methods and approaches which will satisfy all the three kinds of students. The method chosen should motivate the Non-English background students at the same time it should provide a creative environment to the English background students for participatory learning.

Family Background of the learners

Apart from classroom learning, language acquisition takes place in the outside world also. The first category of students resides in town and cities as their schools are mainly situated in such places. They have more opportunity to use English outside their classroom as they spend their leisure time at a shopping mall, a multiplex theatre or at a hotel. These are places where western style is imitated and hence, English is used for communication. In addition they also have a chance to watch a musical event or a stage play that were conducted in English. Even at worship in church, these people opt for the prayer service offered in English. A family function or a get together also enables them to acquire language skills as majority of their relatives used to communicate in English. The second category of students leads an entirely different life. These students spend their leisure time by helping out their business including farming, visiting friends and relatives, going to temples, participating in festivals and watching movies in their mother tongue or watching a street play in their local language. All these activities will not provide any opportunity for them to learn English because nobody uses English in any of the above said occasions. Even at a family function or in a get-together these students

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used to communicate only in their mother tongue. As far as the third category of students are concerned their family background is different until they finish their schooling and it completely changes when they come for higher education as they either stay in hostel or in a private mansion along with their friends. As mentioned earlier these students can be matched with the first category as these people also have recreation activities similar to that of the first category.

Admission policies in Higher Educational Institutions

Admission to higher educational institutions especially technical institutions demanded certain strict standards in the past. This is mainly because of the limited no of seats available as there was only limited no of technical institutions offering higher education. Hence, these institutions selected candidates by conducting entrance examinations in which English language assessment was also a part. These examinations assessed the language skills of the students and graded them according to their performance. So, students who were able to score a descent grade found admission in such technical institutions. But in the recent past, these procedures have become fluid as the policies have been revised to suit the need of the students. Reservations came into practice and due to political interference the total entrance system has been abolished. Also the numbers of educational institutions have increased at a rapid rate thereby enabling admission for all students irrespective of their capability. But, after admissions the burden is on the English teachers as they have to manage with these mixed ability students.

Learning environment

English is used as a medium of instruction in almost all technical institutions in India. There are institutions that strictly adhere to the practice of communicating in English inside the campus. These institutions are fully equipped with resources like high-tech language laboratories which enable the students to practice and master the language. Moreover, these institutions have qualified and trained teachers who will ensure better learning of the students. In addition to regular classes in English, they prepare students for language proficiency tests like IELTS, TOEFL, BEC etc., which in turn enhances the languages skills of the students. Hence, these type of institutions get reasonably good number of students belonging to the creamy layer who can make use of the available resources and benefit themselves. But, there are few institutions that lack proper infrastructural facilities and the students admitted in these institutions struggle a lot. They do not have chance of acquiring language skills outside the classroom as they communicate only in their mother tongue. These are institutions that struggle hard to make their students pass in the university examinations. As they are result oriented, English teachers and English subject do not get any priority among those students. Moreover in technical institutions courses are designed with heavy syllabus which requires more attention and hard work on the part of the students. The students in such situation seek some leisure time to overcome the boredom that arises out of their academic pressure. Furthermore, English periods are scheduled either first or last period of the day during which the students attention is limited.

Size of the classroom

Increased strength in the classroom is a major drawback in language teaching. Classrooms of technical institutions have a capacity of accommodating maximum sixty students. In such cases the traditional lecture method is suitable for the teachers of other subjects but in terms of language teaching, the teacher adopts methods to enable participatory learning among the students and the teacher acts as a facilitator. The teacher in these types of classrooms finds it difficult to adopt uniform method for all the sixty students as they were from different educational and cultural background. The teacher also cannot give individual attention to the students because of the limited time and increased strength. Even in terms of group learning, students used to form groups with their native language people. The teacher finds it extremely difficult to form groups which have a mixture of all the above mentioned three categories of students.

Mother tongue influence

The first category of students from good English background think in English and perform all other tasks like listening, reading, speaking and writing in English. They can easily comprehend to the class and will never be a burden for the teachers. The second category of students who had their school education through

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their mother tongue will have their native languages' influence while learning English. They were taught English through methods which are suitable form them like grammar translation method. Hence, in schools they learn English by alphabets, words, sentences and rules of grammar. As a result they tend to pronounce words with traces of their mother tongue. The third category also falls in this line as they too face pronunciation difficulties since their school education was in their mother tongue. There used to be a lot of gap in communication as each category finds it difficult to comprehend to the other category of students.

Lack of interest among the learners

Students can better achieve anything if they develop an interest in whatever initiative they take. Lack of interest among students was found to be a major barrier in language learning. English is taught as an allied subject in technical institutions and hence, minor importance is given for it when compared to other subjects. So, automatically students lose interest in learning English and to some extent they make use of English classroom to relax among themselves. But in the case of second category of students, the issue is different. Some students from this category, irrespective of their knowledge and talents, develop an inferiority complex in the language classrooms. This is mainly because the first and third categories of students try to dominate these students in all the language related activities conducted in the classroom. The teacher of such classrooms struggles to identify the reasons and solutions for such problems. Motivation is the only key factor which helps the teacher to resolve such issues.

Trainers' background

Majority of the English teachers in India are from English literature background. These teachers, almost like other subject teachers have learnt English only as a part-II language. Hence, graduating in English alone will not be sufficient enough to teach English. Fresh graduates from universities and colleges will definitely face difficulties in teaching English. Teacher training courses and workshops helps fresh and young teachers to qualify themselves and become efficient teachers. Very few people undertake courses on ELT and undergo training to equip themselves with the latest trends and techniques. It takes some time for them to study and assess the students and gain experience. Irrespective of the number of graduates in English there was always a demand for competent teachers in English. Second language teachers are held in high esteem among the students when the teaching- learning process is made a joyful event.

Conclusion

Teaching English as a second Language is generally a challenging task as the approaches and methods change frequently with the fast changing world. Language teaching is gaining importance nowadays as good communication skills have become a basic necessity for employment opportunities. It also acts as the gateway for higher education in reputed institutions around the world. Apart from educational institutions there are various private organizations that have started giving language training to students and thus language teachers are always in demand. English teachers have to update themselves with the latest advancements and techniques to meet the demands of the students. It is the responsibility of the teachers to make the teaching - learning process a joyful experience.

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