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TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS:
CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

SAWAN KUMARI

Ph.D. Scholar

Department of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi

sargamsah82@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to understand certain issues of teaching of English as a second language in Government schools. Undoubtedly, English is a language of various opportunities with a status of the second language in India. Moreover, mushrooming of English medium private schools is the evidence of its massive status. Similarly, the rapidly increasing numbers of Spoken English Institutes in North Indian states like Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh also proves the point in hand. Government schools also practice this language as a second language, especially in north Indian states. However, unfortunately, a large number of students do not achieve the basic proficiency after spending ten years in schools. Therefore, it is essentially required to understand the reasons behind this disappointing situation. To understand this issue, it is required to look at the teaching practices prevailing in classrooms of the second language. For that reason, this paper will present some episodes from second language classrooms and discuss its basic features.

Key Words: English as a second language, Government schools, Teaching practices, Classroom processes

Introduction

Second language teaching and learning is always a matter of concern for policymakers. The Position Paper on Teaching of Indian Languages (NCERT, 2005) elucidates regarding the poor condition of language teaching. "In the case of languages that children already know, we rarely see any progress; in the case of a second language such as English, most children hardly acquire even the basic proficiency levels after six to ten years of exposure..." (p.9).

This above mentioned statement clearly declares the unfortunate condition of the position of the second language in schools. Classrooms are the place where teaching and learning process executes. Therefore, to understand various issues of second language teaching, it is important to examine the prevalent process of teaching inside the classrooms. For this purpose, this paper will discuss certain classroom practices of second language teaching in government schools. This paper is divided into two sections, the first section presents some episodes from secondary classes, and the second section discusses the features of second language teaching in Government schools.

Process of teaching English as a second language in classroom

This section will provide some episodes of classroom process from secondary level.

Episode 1

Class: revision for the purpose of examination

The teacher started the class by asking the students how well they were prepared for the exam. The teacher also provided sample questions from previous year exams. All the lessons of this year are finished now students are preparing for their final exams. So, the teacher asked them, if they have any problem. Students started asking questions one by one.

For every question which students asked, the teacher instructed them to read the concerned paragraph of a certain page, like (read page no. 15, 2nd paragraph) and find the answer. Subsequently, students read the answer and tried to articulate in the English language. The teacher helped them to form the grammatically correct sentences. Afterwards, the teacher explained the answer to make everyone understand. While explaining the teacher tried to provide various examples from real life. For example, there was a question about the description of a detective, so the teacher gave examples of the detective from the famous television serial C.I.D.

During this question- answer process the teacher focused on the certain aspect that revealed a well-developed assumption regarding the teaching of the second language. These aspects are correct pronunciation of words, grammatical mistakes. Although the emphasis was on the speaking of grammatically correct sentences with correct pronunciation, the complete classroom interaction took place in the first language except for the question-answer part.

Episode 2

Class: Prose lesson

The teacher instructed students to open their books to the particular chapter. Meanwhile, the teacher wrote the name of the chapter with the page number on the blackboard. Students opened their books; the teacher started reading the first paragraph. After finishing the first paragraph the teacher stopped and started explaining the meaning of the paragraph in Hindi. After that, the teacher asked a student to read the same paragraph aloud. When the student finished reading, the teacher explained difficult words from the paragraph. Again, the teacher read the second paragraph followed with an explanation in Hindi. The process of reading and explaining the meaning in Hindi continued for the entire lesson.

This above mentioned episode of teaching English in classrooms is very common across the classes.

Features of Teaching English as a Second Language

The motive behind this section is to present some features of teaching English in government schools.

English as a Content Subject. English is taught as a content subject like Mathematics, History, and Geography. The purpose of teaching English is to know the information given in the textbooks. Basically, a conventional textbook contains a number of essays, a few short stories and some poems. The contents of text materials are treated as information.

The medium of Instruction. The medium of instruction in the Government schools during the teaching of English is also mother tongue like other subjects. In other words, the mother tongue is invariably the medium of teaching all the subjects. No doubt the lesson and the difficult words are explained in mother tongue by the teacher; equivalent words are also given in mother tongue. But of course, when the lesson is finished, the turn of doing exercise comes and then the exercises are done in English. At this time, the use of English is prevalent.

Focus on Grammar and Translation. Separate periods are allotted for teaching grammar and translation. The focus is on the rules of grammar. Students are supposed to remember the definitions and rules of grammar. Translation is also a major part of language teaching. From mother tongue to English and vice versa are prevalent in classes for translation. The major part of learning the use of English takes place in these periods. The process of teaching translation is based on a structured practice and the rules of the translation.

Four Basic Skills. When the process of any language teaching comes in the discussion, one has to take into consideration of the four basic skills of any language learning. Listening and Reading are receptive skills, as opposed to speaking and writing are productive skills. In the classroom, the teacher reads the text, so the

learners are supposed to listen to a good model of English. After that, the students were supposed to read. It means both the receptive skills are being practiced on a large scale. The productive skills are also being practiced but in a very limited manner and only to meet out the purpose of examination. In other words, the students used to write the question-answer on the dictation of the teacher who provides them with the answer to such questions which are expected in the examination. It is not so that the writing skill is practiced by the students on their own, making use of their creativity. Similar was the case with speaking skill. The students spoke English while giving answers to the questions which were expected in the coming examination. These answers, they learnt by rote. There is no scope for use of English in its written or spoken form for purposes other than the examination point of view.

Examination Pattern. As soon as the examination is taken for discussion, it is havoc among the students. The fear attached to examination is not limited to English only rather it involves all the subjects. Off course, English remains apart from the other subjects in that major part of the time is used to prepare for the examination. Thus, the preparation for examination is dominant during the classes. So, for that purpose, the focus of every class is limited only to meet the examination. The interest of the students is in suggestive questions; teachers provide them such questions with answers which are expected to come in the examination. So, the students learn (by rote) answers provided by teachers and reproduce that in the examination. Though on the top of every question paper, it was written that students should answer in their own words, but this instruction remains ornamental only.

Conclusion

The position paper on teaching of English laid out suggestions as far back as in 2005. Now after, twelve years, the condition of English is not up to the expected level drawn by the position paper on teaching of English.

Position paper on Teaching of English suggests that language is learnt in a meaningful context, when the focus is not on the form of language but on the meaning. So, the focus on using language in a meaningful context can provide a positive learning opportunity instead of teaching the form of language. Further, it also emphasises on input-rich communicational environment. Inputs include textbooks, classics, books from different genre, newspaper, magazines and much more. However, the prevalent practices of classrooms do not reflect these things.

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