

TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract:

The article aims at exploring the ways of learning English in a non-native background and the limitations of effective teaching in a non-native country like Bangladesh. An attempt has been made at the very beginning of the article to differentiate between the process of learning a first / native language and the process of learning a second / target language for the learners' better understanding of the ways of learning English. Causes of failure for both the learners and the teachers have been identified and ways have been suggested to overcome the problems. Effective teaching techniques have been discussed and suggestions have been made for effective English Language Teaching at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

A. Introduction

There are some studies related to the teaching and learning scenario in various contexts in Bangladesh. The article *To west or not to west? The question of culture in adopting / adapting communicative language teaching at the University of Dhaka*¹, for example, discusses several neglected and overlooked aspects of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), discovers the inevitable interrelatedness of language and culture, identifies cultural problems associated with the implementation of CLT at the University of Dhaka and explores ways to overcome it. The article *Communicative English Language Teaching in Bangladesh*² discusses the existing scenario of English language classes at the tertiary level and identifies the barriers of applying CLT at this level in Bangladesh. The article *English Language Problems among Female Students of Rajshahi University: An Empirical Study*³ explores the problems faced by female students of Rajshahi University as far as English is concerned.

None of these articles seem to have attempted to explore the area that I have undertaken to study. That is why it seems to be worthwhile to work on this area, and my article is a modest attempt to fill up this gap.

English teaching and learning in a non-native background is not an easy process. And this process is not clear to most of the teachers and learners of our country. So we need to know the process and find out the obstacles to implementing the process. If this can be done, improvement of English Language Teaching (ELT) at the tertiary level will be easy for us. In this article we will try to differentiate between the process of learning a first / native language and the process of learning a second / target language for the learners' better understanding of the ways of learning English. An attempt will be made to identify

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learners' and teachers' problems for solution and discuss effective teaching techniques along with suggestions for implementation.

B. The process of learning a first language

First language acquisition⁴ is the learning and development of a person's native language. Regarding the processes by which children learn their first language Chomsky (cited in Richards et. al. 1993, p.140.) argues that:

- i) children are born with special language learning abilities
- ii) they do not have to be taught language or corrected for their mistakes
- iii) they learn language by being exposed to it
- iv) linguistic rules develop unconsciously.

Children are said to "acquire " the rules of their mother tongue by being exposed to the language and by using the language for communication.

Some researchers have suggested that children show evidence of the use of universal rules and principles in language acquisition, which are independent of the particular language they are learning, and pass through similar stages in language development.

C. The process of learning a second/ target Language

A second language is not the native language of a country but it is widely used as a medium of communication (e.g. in education and in government) and usually used alongside the native language.

In learning a second / target language, exposure to that language is vital. For the learners of a non-native country, where the environment of the target language is absent, the receptive skills -- reading and listening --can be a substitute for environmental exposure to a limited extent. Continuous reading and listening can develop a linguistic insight of the target language. This linguistic insight helps the learner to identify the structural problems of the language he comes across i.e. to be able to recognize the mistakes of the language he/she commits in productive skills-- speaking and writing.

In learning a second / target language the receptive activities -- reading and listening -- should come first, because learners of a second / target language can understand the language before being able to speak. Receptive activities help the learners in passive learning that is needed first for self-expression.

Language learning is not a matter of erudition. It is a practice-oriented skill and only through continuous practice a learner can learn a second / target language. The learner has to practice the language consciously. Like practicing football, cricket, swimming etc under the guidance of a coach, sincere practice of the four skills under the guidance of a teacher in a self-access center can help a learner to master the second /target language.

Since environmental exposure, which sharpens linguistic insight, of a second / target language is not available in a non-native country, an artificial environment of the second

/target language can help the learners to a large extent. A self-access center can provide the artificial environment where the learners can practice the four skills:

Listening
Speaking
Reading
Writing

Besides the above skills, thinking in the second / target language can benefit the learners. It would be an effective tool to facilitate their productive skills: speaking and writing.

Listening helps a lot in improving speaking skill. It gives an effective exposure to the target language and helps in attaining accuracy in the productive skills.

Speaking develops from listening and visual information and subsequent role-play activities.

Reading is the core of all the four skills. It is the base upon which develops other three skills. It helps to improve the efficiency in listening, speaking, writing and of course the process of thinking as well.

Writing is like a mirror to the learners. It acts as an instrument of self-evaluation by comparing their present and previous compositions. A learner can measure his learning by going for writing practice. Writing gives a concrete shape to the learning of learners.

Motivation is the most important factor in making students earnest in their effort to learn a second language. If a learner is motivated enough, his learning of the second / target language will be rapid through continuous practice of the four skills. Motivation⁵ means the factors that determine a person's desire to do something. In second language and foreign language learning, different types of motivation may affect learning differently. Two types of motivation are sometimes distinguished:

- a) instrumental motivation: desiring to learn a language because it will be useful for certain "instrumental" goals, such as getting a job, reading a foreign newspaper, passing an examination.
- b) integrative motivation: desiring to learn a language in order to communicate with people of another culture who speak it.

D. Causes of students' / learners' failure in learning English

The primary causes:

Students in Bangladesh fail in English for the following reasons:

- i) English is a foreign language.
- ii) Very few of the students are earnest in learning English.
- iii) What the students seek is to cross the stairs of examinations.
- iv) The teachers fail to motivate the students to master the four skills of language, though motivation is a prerequisite to learning a foreign /second language.

- v) The teachers cannot make the students understand that there is no easy way of learning a foreign language.
- vi) The teachers fail to make the language learning interesting to the students.
- vii) A teacher of English can hardly find out a technique suitable to learners with different competence levels.
- viii) The textbooks in different classes are not harmonious with the stages and the standard of the learners.
- ix) In the college level, the text topics cannot draw the attention of the students.
- x) The purpose of the questions (faulty evaluation system) in the public examinations encourages cramming rather than learning the language.⁶

The secondary causes:

Even after becoming interested in learning English, the students face the following odd situations:

- i) Actual process of leaning English is not clear to them.
- ii) Classroom environment does not appeal to them
- iii) Self-access center and learning materials are not available.
- iv) Teachers are not efficient enough to make them practice the four skills
- v) Teachers do not allocate additional time for them.
- vi) Students suffer from hesitation in speaking or interacting within or outside the classroom.
- vii) Students do not get enough scope to utilize the knowledge of English.
- viii) Some of the teachers are not cordial in their classroom behavior with the students.
- ix) Sometimes teachers are not sincere in their teaching and encourage students for private coaching in their language centers.

E. Limitations of the teachers in Bangladesh

The teaching of a foreign language is not an easy task, because a native language is acquired while a foreign language is learned. In speaking a foreign language we cannot help getting aware of language symbols, sentence patterns and grammatical points but there is no such question in the case of native language. So a foreign language teacher needs special procedures and technical methods.

One particular problem encountered by the language teachers in Bangladesh is that they cannot keep up the interest of the learners in learning English and consequently the ratio of participating students in the language class decreases by a good number.

Teaching English as a second language is based on particular language teaching methods and emphasizes the teaching of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). But most of the teachers in our country are neither well acquainted with nor trained in those methods and they do not have enough logistic support to orient their students to the learning of the language skills.

The main cause of ⁷ unsatisfactory standard of ELT (English Language Teaching) in Bangladesh is lack of competent English teachers in language classrooms as well as lack of effective teaching approaches. The teachers try to teach the language adopting the easiest methods. They emphasize grammatical rules and structures, which are ineffective for the teaching and learning process. The students cannot utilize their grammatical knowledge for the communicative purpose. For evaluation, the teachers give importance to reading and writing leaving speaking and listening untouched due to either lack of physical facilities or their ignorance of the importance of speaking and listening.

In Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) ⁸ grammar has only a limited role. In fact, according to the pure CLT, grammar has little or no effect on the acquisition of communicative competence. The students in Bangladesh who have memorized grammar and structures of English as a way of learning the language for twelve years find it difficult to respond to the Communicative approach at the tertiary level of education. They deliberately avoid communicating activities for the fear of making mistakes.

In Bangladesh, most of the teachers do not get the logistic facilities ⁹ like photocopiers, overhead projectors, TV or videos for developing teaching materials. While Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) specialists encourage teachers to create culturally appropriate teaching materials, teachers do not have any other choice but to follow the books appropriate for the ESL (English as a Second Language) context and to teach the language with the help of material with which our students have no or very little orientation.

F. What should the learners do to learn English?

Learners should have the determination to explore the ways of learning English at the cost of any sacrifice on their part.

Learners have to shrug off their shyness or hesitation in the case of speaking or interacting with their fellow students or friends or relatives or neighbors. At the initial stage a learner can practice speaking with his own self in his private room, standing in front of a mirror and thinking in English while taking rest without any companion. Speaking develops from listening and visual information and subsequent role-play activities. For listening and visual experience, audio-visual aids like cassette players, multimedia, projector, VCD in computer, video etc are essential.

Learners have to be conscious of their learning and remove their dependence upon teachers.

Learners must use an English-to-English dictionary to know the meaning and the use of unknown words. This will develop their understanding of English rapidly.

Learners must maintain a vocabulary notebook to increase their stock of words. Without knowing the meaning and the use of sufficient number of words, a learner will not be able to communicate properly and understand any written text while reading it.

Learners should maintain a list of problems in language faced by them at the time of their study. Using that list they can take help from the classroom teachers at the time of discussion.

Learners must develop a habit of reading any book or journal or magazine in English. Importance should be given to the reading of simplified literary writings in the target language because this sort of reading helps the learner to learn the language of expressing his / her own thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions. Reading newspapers and magazines of the target language helps the learner to learn the technical and official use of the target language.

Learners should try to write regularly on any topic in their own English and get it corrected by someone who knows English better. This effort will show them their frequent mistakes and weak areas.

Learners should do listening whenever possible using audio-visual aids. English TV serials, films of Hollywood of 1960s and 1970s, TV documentaries on various issues like sports, nature, scientific discoveries on BBC or National Geographic Channel or Sports Channels, real life situations in audio cassettes etc. can be used for listening.

Learners should be motivated to learn English to achieve "instrumental" goals, such as getting a job, reading a foreign newspaper, passing an examination.

Students should be responsible for their own learning¹⁰ and they should not be entirely dependent on the instructions of teachers. Teaching procedure or style should vary according to the participation of the students in the classroom activities.

G. What should the teachers do for classroom teaching?

Teachers must preplan the lesson before going to the classroom.

Teachers should behave in a friendly manner with learners

A teacher must understand the learners' psychology, their expectation, their problems and their level of language competence before imparting a lesson.

Teachers should consider the classroom situation before selecting teaching technique. A teacher must be creative and innovative in applying teaching techniques and must use practical language activities. He can create a funny and lively environment to teach something serious.

Teachers should use both instrumental and integrative approaches for motivating learners.

Language teaching should be contextual so that learners can communicate in the real life situation.

Teachers must encourage students' participation in the classroom teaching and must give them feedback to let them know about their development in learning the language.

Teachers ¹¹ in communicative classrooms will find themselves talking less and listening more -- becoming active facilitators of their students' learning. The teacher sets up the exercise, but because the students' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe, sometimes acting as referee or monitor.

H. Effective teaching methods and techniques for classroom teaching

Communicative language teaching ¹² makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. Unlike the Audio Lingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can leave students in suspense as to the outcome of an exercise, which will vary according to their reactions and responses. The real-life simulations change from day to day. Students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. Students do most of the speaking, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active, with students leaving their seats to complete a task. Because of the increased responsibility to participate, students may find confidence in using the target language in general. Students are more responsible managers of their own learning than passive learners sitting quietly in the classroom and listening to their teachers.

At present, the Communicative approach is the most widely used method for teaching English as a second language in the world. The Communicative approach considers language as a system for expressing meaning and the main function of the language is interacting and communicating. In the Communicative approach a syllabus ¹³ is centered on the notions and functions of the language unlike the Grammar-Translation method where syllabus and classroom activities are centered on the linguistic components of the language.

Teachers arrange students into groups to help them learn better. Choosing suitable grouping arrangements ¹⁴ should match different kinds of learning tasks, as it is an important aspect of effective teaching. Group size is an important factor which influences learner participation in group work. An important issue in grouping is whether students learn better in mixed-ability groups or in groups of about the same proficiency level.

In communicative language teaching the following five distinct types of co-operative learning activities ¹⁵ are often used:

- i) Peer Tutoring: Students help each other learn, taking turns tutoring or drilling each other.
- ii) Jigsaw: Each member of a group has a piece of information needed to complete a group task.
- iii) Co-operative Projects: Students work together to produce something, such as a written paper or group presentation.
- iv) Co-operative/Individualized: Students progress at their own rate through individualized learning materials but their progress contributes to a team grade so that each pupil is rewarded by the achievements of his or her teammates.
- v) Co-operative Interaction: Students work together as a team to complete a learning unit, as in a laboratory experiment.

In co-operative approach to teaching and learning, classrooms are organized so that students work together in small co-operative teams. Such an approach to learning increases students' learning since

- a) it is less threatening for many students,
- b) it increases the amount of student participation in the classroom,
- c) it reduces the need for competitiveness, and
- d) it reduces the teacher's dominance in the classroom.

I. Suggestions for effective English language teaching

The effectiveness of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) solely depends on the efficiency of the teacher. Teachers are guide and model for learning. In a foreign language context, teachers are the main source of input. An efficient language teacher¹⁶ should have :

- i) encouraging personality,
- ii) adequate command of the language being taught, and
- iii) adequate presentational skill as a teacher.

To engage students in a socially accepted communication or to transfer the spirit of cross-cultural communication to the students, a teacher must have training in EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

For the application of the Communicative approach we must ensure:

- i) logistic support in the classroom
- ii) authentic and culturally appropriate teaching materials.

Only the Communicative approach will not yield the desired result unless we provide enough scope to the learners for their practice outside the classroom. We have to ensure:

- i) small classes consisting of the students with equal level of language proficiency ,
- ii) availability of suitable and effective teaching materials,
- iii) students' exposure to the culture of the target language ,
- iv) orientation of the students to the learner-centered activities and
- v) that teachers spend required time for the students.

Since in reality we cannot ensure the above requirements, we have to fill up the gap resorting to self-access learning center.

Self-access learning center¹⁷ is a room or area in an educational institution containing learning resources of different kinds, which students can use under supervision. It may contain computers for individual student use, video and TV monitors and audio facilities, as well as more conventional learning resources. Students may be directed to certain learning materials (e.g. grammar reviews) designed to complement and support regular teaching activities in a language programme. A self-access center can highlight the real process of learning a target language and can make students psychologically strong in their effort of learning a language. It can reduce the pressure upon the teachers for repeating a particular lesson in the classroom or allocating additional time for students and can substitute the teachers to a limited extent. If the facility can be ensured, the students would not have to rely solely upon classroom teachers and it would be highly motivating for them.

The Government has to initiate setting up Self Access Centers for students in each educational institution so that students can practice listening or understanding, reading, grammatical drills as per their need.

Even after applying Communicative Teaching and setting up Self Access Center, there is no certainty that the level of English proficiency would be much better among the students. We have to compel the students to study textbooks, storybooks, journals, and magazines in English to give them exposure to the English language. To that end, our evaluation system in the exams should give importance to the students' understanding, interacting and writing in English, and syllabus should put emphasis on the evaluation of productive skills-- writing and speaking. Only then the students would be propelled to read and learn English keeping an eye on the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The Government should broadcast regular programmes on ELT in the national television demonstrating ideal ELT situations so that teachers and students in schools of the whole country become benefited. In the long run, this effort would facilitate effective English Language Teaching (ELT) at the tertiary level.

J. Conclusion

The paper attempts to discuss the nature and condition of ELT at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. It also identifies the shortcomings of teachers and teaching techniques in the practical classroom. Finally, some suggestions have been put forward to overcome all those problems. It can be hoped that our present ELT situation would be much better if the suggestions are properly taken into active consideration.

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