



Role of phonetics in mastering spoken English in India

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Abstract

Being the Global language, English enjoys a supreme position amidst the languages across the globe. Because of this popularity, English language proficiency has almost become a vital life skill for Indians who learn this language as their second language. But the faulty education system in India and the lack of attention of curriculum makers and syllabus designers have made the language learning course only textbook oriented, giving less emphasis on the skills side. This article demands a revision in Indian curriculum to resolve the dilemma of backwardness in the acquisition of four necessary skills of communication –Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. It also demands the introduction of phonetics in the Indian School curriculum to master spoken English in India.

Keywords: English language teaching (ELT), phonetics, spoken English, language skills

Introduction

English is known, spoken and read by educated people everywhere in the world. As the mother tongue, it is spoken by the British, the Americans, the Canadians, the Australians, the New Zealanders, and the South Africans. Since English is used as an international language of trade, commerce, travel and tourism, it is used as a second language for administration, higher education, interstate communication in a number of countries which are even outside the European continent. Children in different parts of the world learn it either as their mother tongue or as their second or foreign language. Majority of the countries of the world include this language as their second language in the syllabus for its cultural and utilitarian values. The people of India are no exception to it.

David Graddol once said, "Throughout India, there is an extraordinary belief, among almost all castes and classes, in both rural and urban areas, in the transformative power of English" (2011) [3]. Various factors have helped to raise English to the position of a global language. The importance assigned to the mastery of English language in the Indian Educational system, the role of English proficiency in career success, the symbolic prestige that English continues to enjoy in India, the role English is currently playing in sectors like medicine, engineering, education, technology, banking, computing, tourism, etc., are a few noteworthy ones among them.

Officially English has a status of assistant language, but in fact it is the most important language of India besides having twenty two other scheduled languages in the country. After Hindi it is the most commonly spoken language, and probably the most read and written language in India. Indians who know English will always try to show that they know English. It serves as the communicator among Indians who speak different language. As a result, English has now become not just another useful tool, but a vital life skill for all students.

In the present scenario, schools in India that emphasis English are considered better schools and the same is the case at university levels, even though there is a trend towards Indianization. For the last three decades, there have been attempts to establish, and institutionalize, an Indian accent of English or standard Indian English. This should not surprise anyone, for the existence of one common accent of English, in a country which has various mother tongues, that too as many as twenty two, the varieties of English bear distinct marks of differences.

Hence, for teaching English pronunciation in India, there must be a recommended model, which is widely accepted by everybody. Those recognized as good speakers of English in India, namely those who are easily understood nationally and internationally are recognized as such only by virtue of their attempt to use a native accent of English called Received Pronunciation or RP. The reasons behind choosing such a model are various. First of all, it is better understood in this country than other accents of English. Secondly, it has a fair amount of prestige and best Indian speakers attempt to approximate to it. A number of teaching –training programmes choose it as a model for description and practice and books, recordings, and practice materials on it are readily available.

English is taught as a second language at every stage of education in all states of India and has been accepted as the state language of two states in eastern India, Meghalaya and Nagaland. English has become an integral part of the curriculum almost at all levels of education. However, there are various social, political and cultural factors that affect the position of English in different boards, universities and other institutions. Even the curriculum offered and evaluation tools employed are diverse across the country.

In several languages there is no one-to-one correspondence between the letters of the alphabet and the sounds they represent. The total number of speech sounds and the manner

of articulating them differ from one language to another language. There are forty four sounds in English, but the number of letters to represent them is only twenty six. This mismatch causes considerable difficulties for those who learn English as a second language and a root cause for pronouncing and spelling words incorrectly. Regarding this, Tench (1981) ^[4] says that “pronunciation is not an optional extra for the language learner, any more than grammar, vocabulary, or any other aspect of language is. If a learner’s general aim is to talk intelligibly to others in another language, a reasonable pronunciation is important”. But a variety of reasons such as inadequate exposure to language practice activities, an unsatisfactory teaching method, unscientific teaching methods etc. hinder Indians far short of RP.

A powerful English language instruction programme, therefore, is very crucial. The need for learning spoken English has, over the last few decades, grown enormously all over the world. With the tremendous increase in the volume of international tourism, travel, trade and exchange of experts in various fields and professions now, the demand for acquiring the spoken form of English has grown up considerably. But people are no longer content with acquiring only the reading and writing skill of the language. They want to be able to speak it, and that too in a way they understood by the inhabitants of the English continent.

But the model of English offered to the learners lack uniformity and this is a question that continuously challenge the policy makers and education planners. Although some language scholars do not believe in the one true model of English and speak of “world English’s”, everyone agrees that there are some central features of English that all students of English to be taught. Though perfect RP may not be attained by Indian speakers, a good approximation will do. And that can be achieved only by setting up RP itself, rather than any other accent, as our aim.

Though the sudden raise of English medium schools in India came to resolve the situation of backwardness in English up to some extent, a stage was never reached when all our pupils pass out of schools with good spoken English. Many learners will therefore have to learn spoken English as a special course at a later stage, especially when they look for attractive careers or advancement in their chosen professions. This is again a waste of time, effort and money since the acquisition power decreases as the person grows from child to adult.

The aforesaid dilemma of attending the separate course can be avoided if the curriculum and syllabus was sufficient enough to satisfy all the four soft skills of language-listening, speaking, reading and writing. But the current scenario indicates that the language teaching system in India is not sufficient enough to provide a better scope for speaking the language, especially English, though it functions as the medium of instruction at higher education level. Indians face some common difficulties when it comes to the speaking of English.

To learn the correct pronunciation of words in English, it is necessary to have a sound awareness of the letter combinations used to represent each sounds and the symbol they are transcribed with. This is possible only if, Phonetics – “The Linguistic branch which deals with the production, transmission and reception of the sounds of human speech”

(1981). as defined by Balasubramanian – is taught from the school level itself. Phonetic transcription is a useful device using which the problems of mispronunciation can be avoided. But the curriculum makers spoil the listening and speaking activities for the learner in India. They are not concentrating on the importance of phonetics in the curriculum to include it as one of the main components. Till tertiary level, the students in most states in India do not have the phonetics in their syllabus. It is necessary to incorporate the phonetics from school studies so that the learners may habituate to articulate words in a correct way.

There is an alphabet called International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) which has symbols to represent all the sounds that exist in the languages of the world. If the students learn all the phonetic alphabets along with the English alphabets, and then think of the letter or alphabet combinations which make a sound, the pronunciation task will be much easier one. That means, the traditional ‘A’ for ‘Apple’ and ‘B’ for ‘Bat’ must be replaced with ‘/ə/’ for ‘Apple’ and ‘/b/’ for ‘Bat’.

The age old vocal tradition of teaching letters results only in making the students passive receptors. But if a multisensory approach mingled with a play way method is adopted to teach alphabets and phonetic sounds, making use of the language labs and provide access for auditory and oratory tasks, it will surely activate students and make them interested in learning. The curriculum makers must bear in mind that language studies must be skill oriented rather than textbook oriented. Equal allotment of language hours for all the four skills are necessary to give individual attention for each specified skill.

The entire English syllabus in India is needed to be revised and divided as-English Language Teaching (ELT 1) and English Literature Teaching (ELT 2); making the former a practical oriented one, concentrating on Phonetics-the pronunciation and articulation of English language. Doing the same will ensure better speaking and listening skills for the students. The latter on the other hand, can provide assistance in enhancing writing and reading skills, through different genres of literature. ELT 1 Classes must be lab oriented with advanced computers, speakers and headsets providing speaking-learning experience to the learners whereas ELT 2 Classes must be textbook oriented.

If this method practiced successfully, there will be an all-round development in the required four skills of English Language and increase the acceptability of Indians among English language speaking community.

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