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Effectiveness of ELT in Rural India: A Study Based on Learners of Suburban India

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Introduction

In the context of India's heterogeneous and complex cultural reality, the presence of English language is undeniable. It is rapidly growing in the social, cultural, and economic lives of people. Every year, more and more people, especially from the younger age groups, acquire proficiency in the language, which guarantees them better opportunities in a job market that is steadily becoming more demanding and competitive. Like the English game of cricket, the English language has found a ready home in India. By 1978, there were about 3,000 English newspapers in India, which is only second in number to the Hindi newspapers, in a country with at least five indigenous languages and over 50 million speakers for each of the five languages (McCrum et al., 1988). English is an 'associate' official language in India and is spoken by about 4 percent or 37 million of the Indian population (Crystal, 1997). However, a survey conducted by the Indian magazine *India Today* in 1997 put forward the fact that while almost one third of Indians understood English, only 20 percent of them could actually speak the language with confidence (Graddol, 1997). Therefore, English language is also giving rise to an economic and cultural chasm by acting as a divider between those who are proficient in the language and those who struggle to communicate in English. It is an accepted norm that English in India exists mainly for communicative purposes. Therefore, those who can communicate better in English have a better chance of getting career opportunities. A reality is that even though English is a compulsory subject in almost all colleges in India, most graduates lack proficiency in the language.

This paper attempts to investigate the level of communicative competence in English possessed by students with rural backgrounds. Although the context of this study is limited to suburban colleges in four regions of North East India, findings from the study mirror the reality of English language learners from most rural and semi-urban regions of India.

Current Model of Undergraduate General English Courses in India

The Report of the Education Commission of India (1996) clearly states the purpose of *English in Education*;

> For a successful completion of the first-degree course, a student should possess an adequate command of English, be able to express himself with reasonable ease and felicity, understand

lectures in it, and avail himself of its literature. Therefore, adequate emphasis will have to be laid on its study as a language right from the school stage. English should be the most useful 'library language' in higher education and our most significant window on the world. (p. 15)

Therefore, the expected outcome of teaching English is that a learner who completes the first-degree course will be reasonably competent in comprehension and expression of English and will also possess fairly sharp listening skills. The study of literature in any language assumes proficiency in the given language. However, in India, the target language is taught through traditional literary texts which are generally British, giving students a dated foreign model in the belief that it will result in the acquisition of communicative English for current times (Kaushik, 2011:143). Kaushik (2011) in a study conducted with BA III English (compulsory) students at Punjab University, Chandigarh discovered that the ELT model employed at the university (teaching materials and tests) did not include speaking skills thereby giving the impression that it was not regarded as a part of linguistic expression. This was clearly against the prime objectives of the Education Commission of India (1966). Moreover, no marks were allotted to the testing of listening and speaking, which means that the objective of training students to "understand lectures" was never tested (Kaushik, 2011:144). The risk is that when something is not tested, neither students nor teachers pay attention to it in the classroom. The existing English syllabi prescribed for the undergraduate courses of Indian colleges which form the context of this study have papers aimed at the improvement of written communicative competence in English. It is presumed that activities such as letter writing, précis writing, report writing, note making, transcoding, memo writing etc can help learners improve their writing skills in English. However, in excluding the skill of speaking, the researched context ignores a very important component of linguistic expression. The current paradigm of ELT in India is largely based on the grammar translation method (Dutta, 2012; Rahman, 2013). This method has a focus on the view of language as a structured system of grammatical patterns, with a trend for formal and bookish language, with the aim to have students producing formally correct sentences; and in terms of skills, an emphasis on reading and writing (Nunan, 1988). How far this approach has been able to develop the verbal communication competence of students is something that needs to be investigated to judge the efficacy of the method. Since most of the students in the researched context came from a rural/semi urban background, their primary and secondary level education is inevitably in vernacular medium schools which means that they have been subject to a single method of ELT from school, i.e., the grammar-translation method. Hence, these students provide an excellent sample to evaluate the effectiveness of the grammar-translation method in developing the verbal communication skills of the learners.

Objectives

Through investigating the level of communicative competence in English of students in suburban colleges who come from rural areas, this study intends to provide an insight not only into the proficiency level of the students but also into the effectiveness of ELT methods employed in the schools and colleges of rural and suburban India.

Methodology

Two colleges were selected from each of four suburban regions (states) of North East India. North East India is comprised of seven states, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Participants in this study were identified from colleges in the states of Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Most of the students in these colleges come from villages and tea gardens in the four states since the catchment areas of these colleges are rural. An overall 400 participants comprising of a proportionate mix of male and female students were selected from eight

colleges in the four states with around 50 students per college. All students were assessed through the following tasks:

1. They were made to read out a paragraph from a lesson in their textbooks. Their readings were recorded.
2. Each one of them was engaged in a conversation where some questions were asked on general matters relating to day to day life and their responses were recorded.

Students participating in the study were informed beforehand about the purpose of the study and that their readings and conversations would be recorded. These recorded speeches and interviews were subjected to intense scrutiny to identify the level of communicative competence in English of the speakers.

Research Instruments

A voice recorder was used to record students read aloud sessions and their conversations. Excerpts of lessons were randomly chosen from their textbooks for this purpose.

Findings

Before analyzing the findings of the study, it is imperative to look at the type of English used in the Indian socio-linguistic domain. It is worth mentioning here that the English used in India is also referred to as Indian English. Talking about the different types of Indian English (IE) found in the Indian linguistic ecology, Pingali (2009), in her book *Indian English* makes the following observation:

> Kachru (1965, 1982) makes a distinction between the different types of IE that are used in India, ranging them on a cline of bilingualism that consists of three measuring points. The lowest ranked are the uneducated speakers who are at the zero point or the basilect – these include such people as guides, vendors and domestic staff. The central point or the mesolect consists of speakers who are less than well educated and generally are clerks, notaries etc. The ambilingual point or the acrolect is that of educated speakers such as civil servants, educationists, creative writers etc. Indian English as used by the third category of people is even equated with British standard. Kachru's cline is also acknowledged by other scholars such as Lukmani (1992). The division among the varieties is not absolute and there is considerable overlap in this cline. That there is a standard variety of Indian English is accepted. This standard has been called educated Indian English. (p. 4)

IE must be viewed more in terms of a set of features that may manifest themselves in the speech of individuals rather than as a constant. Individual variation is quite considerable in IE. The extent to which Indian features of pronunciation will occur in the speech of an individual varies from person to person (Pingali, 2009). The study, therefore, reflects by and large, tendencies rather than absolutes. A cline of proficiency, especially in grammar, exists for IE as may be expected for a second language. Similarly, a cline of pronunciation exists that sets the standard variety at one end and the markedly regional varieties at the other end.

Pingali (2009) terms the standard variety as Standard Indian English Pronunciation (SIEP) and the regional varieties as IE. The SIEP has certain pan-Indian features and is free from regional features that have a strong presence in the speech of most Indians. The non-standard IE is spoken by a majority of the Indians whose accents are regional in nature and can be classified on the basis of four geographical regions and further regions within them. Considering Kachru's (1982) cline of proficiency and Pingali's (2009) interpretation of IE, this study explores the type of English spoken by the participants in the researched context.

Findings from the Reading Aloud Exercise

Students who participated in this study were assessed on a reading aloud exercise with the following parameters in focus: pronunciation, accent and fluency.

Pronunciation. Most of the students could not read the entire paragraph correctly. All of them were rhotic, i.e., pronouncing the /r/ in words like card, bird, heart etc. where the letter r comes before a consonant sound and also in word final position as in car, bar etc. (Pingali, 2009, p. 19) unlike SIEP and SBrE where /r/ is not articulated in these situations. They also had a very strong influence of their mother tongue in their utterances. Their readings were laboured to the extent that 46.25 percent of the students could not complete the exercise and gave up midway through their readings. The region-wise breakup appears in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Regional Break Up of Students who Participated in the Reading Aloud Exercise (n = 100 per region)

Region	Completed the Task	Gave up midway	Read out fluently	Made pronunciation errors	Non-rhotic speakers	Rhotic speakers
Assam	46	54	21	79	0	100
Tripura	60	40	24	76	0	100
Meghalaya	51	49	15	85	0	100
Arunachal Pradesh	58	42	18	82	0	100
TOTAL (n = 400)	215	185	78	322	0	400

Accent. The accents of most of the speakers were heavily influenced by their respective regional languages. Their reading lacked intonation and in majority of the cases, syllables were uttered without any stress. Table 2 shows the region wise breakup of the findings pertaining to accents.

TABLE 2
Regional Break Up of Students who Were Assessed for Accents (n = 100 per region)

Region	Speakers without regional accent	Speakers with regional accent	Speakers using intonation and stress on syllables
Assam	0	100	23
Tripura	2	98	35
Meghalaya	0	100	32
Arunachal Pradesh	3	97	29
TOTAL (n = 400)	5	395	119

Hence, it is evident from the collective figures of the four regions, that only 5 students out of 400 (0.01%) spoke English without any regional accent. A total of 395 students (98.75%) had a strong influence of their mother tongue on their reading and hence they spoke English with strong regional accents. Out of the total 400 students assessed, only 119 (29.75%) could use intonation in their speech and made use of stressed and unstressed syllables. However, most of them could not do so throughout the process of reading the complete passage; nor could they read it without making any mistakes.

Fluency. The laboured pronunciation of the words meant that there was hardly any fluency in the reading of the text by most of the students. The region-wise breakup of findings linked to fluency appears in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Regional Break Up of Students who Were Tested for Fluency (n = 100 per region)

Region	Speakers who read out fluently	Speakers who ade pronunciation errors
Assam	21	79
Tripura	24	76
Meghalaya	15	85
Arunachal Pradesh	18	82
TOTAL (n = 400)	78	322

Findings make it clear that in all the regions, the number of fluent speakers of English was very low. If all the 400 students are taken into consideration, the tally of fluent speakers stands at only 78, which constitutes only 19.50% of the 400 students. The number of speakers, who lacked fluency, struggled to pronounce simple monosyllabic words correctly and could hardly pronounce most of the tri syllabic and tetra syllabic words stood at a significant 322 which is 80.50% of the total number assessed.

Findings from the Conversations

In this activity, students were engaged in some basic conversations related to daily life. Simple questions were asked such as:

- What do you do after going back home from college?
- How much time do you spend at your study table every day?
- What are your hobbies and how do you take out time to pursue them?
- Who is your favourite film personality and why?

The responses were in words and incomplete sentences by a majority of the students. Most of them spoke after much coaxing and were found searching for words. Only 15% of the students could give their responses in reasonably well constructed sentences. The region-wise breakup of the findings is given in Table 4:

TABLE 4
Regional Break Up of Students who Were Engaged in Simple Conversations in English (n = 100 per region)

Region	Spoke fluently without regional accent and pronunciation	Spoke fluently with regional accent and pronunciation	Spoke in words and broken sentences	Resorted to code mixing (English & first language)	Did not utter a single word in English
Assam	0	21	61	14	4
Tripura	2	22	66	8	2
Meghalaya	0	15	62	14	9
Arunachal Pradesh	3	15	67	13	2
TOTAL (n = 400)	5	73	256	49	17

If we refer to Kachru's cline of proficiency (1982) and Pingali's interpretation of Indian English (2009), we find that only 1.25% of the students spoke fluently without any regional accent and pronunciation. However, they did not fit into Pingali's interpretation of SIEP since their English was rhotic.18.25 % of the students spoke fluently but with strong regional accents and pronunciation. The English that they spoke was a rhotic mesolectal variety of IE which has been termed 'General Indian English' by Pingali (2009) and which is spoken by a majority of the educated IE speakers. At least 64.75% of the students spoke basilectal IE where they expressed themselves through broken sentences and words accompanied by hand gestures. 12.25% of the students resorted to code mixing where they tried to drive home their points through a mixture of English words and words from their first languages. 4.25% of the students failed to utter a single word in English and kept silent despite repeated coaxing and encouragement from the researcher.

Implications

The findings from the study imply that the grammar-translation method adopted in ELT in the vernacular medium rural schools across suburban and rural India has failed to develop any communicative skill in spoken English among the learners. Moreover, since the attitude of the students towards English is flawed from the primary level, it is not possible to correct them at the tertiary level. Hence, despite the inclusion of various elements of functional English in the syllabi of the degree courses, students continue to treat English as a subject and not as a skill. The treatment of English as a subject develops extrinsic attitudes towards learning the language and students aim at somehow scoring the pass marks in the subject. Also, searching for words to express their views implies very poor vocabulary on part of the students which is the outcome of lack of reading habits and the absence of intonation and stressed-unstressed syllables in the reading aloud exercise implies that the listening skills of students are very poor.

Recommendations

The students can improve their spoken English if task-based methods of ELT are introduced at the secondary and tertiary levels. Various tasks and activities can also change the outlook of students towards English and they will tend to treat it as a skill rather than a subject. Students should also be motivated towards intrinsic learning through interaction in English in real life situations which they can relate to. They should also be encouraged to read English newspapers, magazines and books which can improve their vocabulary in English and to use their mobile phones to watch and listen to English movies on You Tube.

Conclusion

It is clear that the aim of English education in India as stated in the *Report of the Education Commission of India* is yet to be fulfilled in the case of the students who come from rural backgrounds and have had their primary and secondary education in vernacular medium schools where English is taught as a second language through the grammar translation method. This study also corroborates the conclusion drawn by Kaushik (2011) that even at the tertiary level, the listening and speaking skills of students are never tested and anything that is not tested is never paid much attention to by both the teachers and the students. Moreover, the paradigms of grammatical structures carried by the grammar books along with the idioms prescribed do not relate to real life contexts (Kaushik, 2011).

Although this study was confined to rural learners of only four regions of North East India, the findings mirror the reality of learners from most rural and semi-urban regions of India. This can be surmised from the observation of the editor of *The Assam Tribune*, a leading English Daily from the region:

> The few who have done well in their examinations also fail to get good jobs as lack of the knowledge of English or lack of the skill of communication through English stands as the main obstacle on their way. As a result of this, the number of unemployed youths has been increasing. The present world is fast-forwarding in science, technology, computer and other such advanced studies, and to keep pace with it, knowledge of English and ability to communicate well in English has become the primary need. (Bordoloi, 2001, p. 4)

Therefore, English language is also giving rise to an economic and cultural chasm by acting as a divider between those proficient in the language and those who struggle to communicate in English. Hence, there needs to be an immediate rethinking of the model and method of ELT pedagogies in use at

the primary, secondary and tertiary levels with the aim of enabling students to gain proficiency in English and thereby open doors of opportunities for the rural students of India.

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