

PROBLEMS IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: Language acquisition is highly an internalized process of absorbing the rules and nuances of the language and correcting one's language constantly with the observation of the feedbacks picked up in the exposed situations. This process is natural in the case of the mother tongue where child listens to the conversations of his or her elders and get feedbacks and make corrections without the fear of making mistakes. But it is always a challenge for the second language learners as getting the right exposure in the second language is a pipe dream for many of them. The case in point is the second language learners in English. This paper is analyzing general problems faced by the second language learners in English as a second language and the specific problems faced by the learners in Indian context: social, cultural, psychological and academic. Keeping in mind the natural development of the first language, it compares the processes of acquiring the first language with that of the second language and, then, prioritizes the problems of the second language learners based on their importance. While prioritizing, it also provides due importance to the role of the teachers, the powerful source of inspiration in the professional explorations of the students.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a human phenomenon and every human child is endowed with the natural gift of learning and using languages of its living environment. A child hears sounds from other users of the language, understands something systematic in the sounds: then it internalizes the rules of the language spontaneously. Feedback from others leads to its awareness of the systems of the language. From then on, the utterances of the child are constantly framed on the basis of the awareness. The process of acquiring one's own language differs very much from that of the second language. Deliberate efforts at developing a command and control of the different components of the second language are needed. The learner is very conscious of his/her utterances. In the beginning of the learning process itself the learner tries to learn the new language logically; and this is to be practiced enormously and continuously.

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So it is a real challenge for one to become competent in a foreign language. His roots must have gone so deep in the language of his immediate surrounding whose interferences are dominant in the process of acquiring the second language. Generally the second language learner has two main problems. The first problem is that the second language learner has inadequate exposure to the second language. The second language speaker, who is very much exposed to his own language at home and outside, is exposed to the second language only on rare occasions like academic lectures, conferences and social events. There is no possibility for informal and fearless communication, which is natural and healthy for the learning of a language. So it becomes very difficult for the learner to become competent in the foreign language and they cannot learn it within the comparatively short time it takes for children to become competent speakers of their mother tongue.

The second problem is caused by the mental dynamism working on the second language learner. His mind has been chiefly influenced by the previous knowledge of his mother tongue and his logical internalization has been deeply ingrained in the reflections of his mother tongue. Consequently, he speaks his second language through his first language. This transformation from the first language to the second language takes place all the time. He can get native-like competence only after the habit of transformation has become natural in him. Another evidence for the psychological problem is a constant emotional resistance in the second language learners, which slows down the learning a little too often. This emotional resistance is clearly cited by Joll Bowiner (1996) in his words:

Learners may have an emotional resistance where they feel, consciously or unconsciously, that the learning of the language is being imposed on them, or that they are excluded from a worthwhile role within an English speaking society (Mercer & Swan, 1996). Both the problems disturb his 'linguistic sense' in the second language learning. Actually the linguistic sense is highly developed in the case of native speakers. The difference between the second language learner and native speaker with regard to the linguistic sense is analyzed by D.A. Wilkins. He is of the view that the native speakers are in an advantageous position and acquire the language skills whereas the second language learners take a lot of time to acquire the same quantum of skills.

In India the division of the country into different states has been done on the basis of the language spoken in different regions. Each state in the country has its own language. Besides the languages of the states, there are also several other languages. The Indian Parliament passed in 1963 a bill declaring English as the official language along with Hindi. In this multilingual country English serves as not only a link language but also as a window to world knowledge and culture. Now, even in the post-colonial situation the influence of English is on the increase.

In spite of the fact that English has an important place in India, people do not have real exposure to English. So, if at all they want to learn English as a second language they have to create situations that would offer real exposure to English. While the first

language learner begins his acquaintance of the language at home, the second language learner does it mostly away from home. For the second language learner the home environment is not at all favorable to the learning of a new language. Home is an informal school, where the child learns his language from the conversation of all the members of the family. It provides for the first language learner an atmosphere in which informal and fearless exchanges of words are possible and errors are not taken into account. However, even for the second language learner some homes provide the proper motivation and necessary atmosphere for the learning of the second language. As Carroll says,

The greater the parent's use of the foreign language in the home, the higher were the mean scores of the students. Thus, one reason why some students reach high levels of attainment in a foreign language is that they have home environments that are favourable to them, either because they are better motivated to learn, or because they have better opportunities to learn (Spolsky, 1972). But most Indian homes have an atmosphere which does not provide the conducive atmosphere. In Indian houses where there is a vernacular atmosphere, the learner does not hear any utterances in the second language. Some educated parents do use English at home, sometimes for the sake of their children's learning and sometimes as a matter of social prestige.

As the social situation does not offer any opportunity for the second language learner to get the needed exposure in English, the only place where the learner can hope to get such an exposure is academic institutions where formal education is provided. Indian schools can be divided into three categories based on the medium of education available there: (1) Schools that offer only English medium (mostly private schools). (2) Schools that offer both English and vernacular mediums. (3) Schools that offer only vernacular medium of instruction. In the context of Indian schools, J.A. Bright says that even students of English medium schools have exposure to English only in limited fields of studies like History, Geography and the Sciences. He also argues that the children of non-English medium schools do not have even that kind of exposure in their classes.

Education in India is chiefly examination-oriented. Everything is decided by the examination which a student takes at the end of the year. All academic activities are narrowed down or geared up to prepare merely for the examination. In such a context, the second language learner seldom learns the language; instead he learns essays from notes and makes use of readymade answers and uses shortcuts with a view to getting through the examination. They miserably fail to acquire linguistic skills which will help them in practical situations. In this examination-oriented system, even the highly motivated students fail to see language as something living, and join the race to score marks in the final examinations through readymade shortcuts that take away all their creativity. So, for all students the second language learning becomes boring. Consequently, the students are tied to their text books; they never turn to other pleasurable activities of language learning like the reading or the writing of stories and poems. Even interesting plays become dead pieces to be struggled with for

preparing answers to questions that are likely to be asked in the examinations. Very rarely does one find a teacher encouraging the students to do play reading in the class room.

The activities in the school are restricted to the syllabus, and even at home the students do not explore anything outside the prescribed texts. Libraries are there for their name's sake. The books remain there, never to be touched by any students with the desire to involve themselves in reading. For the under achievers and the less motivated, English classes are an ordeal to undergo. They struggle so much that, as Bright says, "By the time they reach the secondary school they will have got very firmly hold of the idea that education is a race that a few can win" (Bright, J.A. & Mc Gregor G. P., 1970).

In the vernacular medium classes the time allowed for the second language learning is very little. Students in a bilingual situation do need several hours of exposure to English in order to overcome the hurdles of the bilingual situations and the mother tongue influences. But in a school where the children have to learn several subjects cannot afford to spend all the time in English classes. So a new methodology should be adopted in order to put the limited English hours to the maximum hours. On the other hand, this system does not give any chance to the teacher to concentrate on the standard of the students' language and their originality. The inadequacy of teaching materials is a general problem in Indian private schools. Most of the schools function without aids such as gramophone records, radio, television, maps and charts. Even very inexpensive aids are not available in some schools. C. Paul says, "In India teaching English suffers as a result of the inadequacy and poor availability of these resources (teaching materials and audio-visual aids)" (Verghese, 1989).

A language laboratory can help the learner a great deal in practising the second language. Some schools have no library for extra reading. The students in schools only get acquainted with their prescribed lessons and they have no knowledge of anything outside their texts. Reading habit gives abundant general information to students and courage to be self-dependent. Also it develops their language unconsciously. The teachers in the present system depend only on the prescribed text books. But the problem lies in the use of defective text books. These books have not been systematically written and no care has been paid to the selection and gradation of language items in them. Some schools often change their publishers and jeopardize all attempts at organization, planning and gradation. Besides the problems in the methods and materials, there are also problems arising out of the poor physical infrastructure. Most classes in Indian schools are overcrowded. As Paul observes, "One of the reasons why teaching English in India does not leave the desired impact on the student is that the class is too big for the teacher to do any worthwhile job" (Verghese, 1989).

Schools catering to the needs of the rich can afford to limit the number of students in each class and maintain an appreciable student – teacher ratio. All the Government

schools and many private schools have unmanageably overcrowded classes. Teachers have many difficulties in managing these overcrowded classes. The teacher cannot give attention to the needs of each student though he/she is willing to do so. The teacher's attention is usually on covering the syllabus and there is no possibility for feedback in such big classes. The students are engaged mostly in the listening activity. Only very rarely are they allowed to read lessons and poems. The written exercises are seldom practised and, if practised their manuscripts are never corrected carefully. So, even recurrent errors in their conversations and essays are not corrected till the end of their schooling. Consequently, English becomes an impossible subject to reach and a difficult subject to learn. It is seen as a fearful thing. As Prof. V.K. Gokale says, The teaching of English in our schools is in a chaotic state today. Pupils are taught English for about six period a week for six years. But it has been estimated that they hardly know 150 words by the time they join a university. This meant that they have hardly been able to learn English words at the rate of one word per period. They do not know how to use the commonest structure of English (Mullick, & Ghosh, 1993).

Learning the second language is mainly dependent on the student's interest and self-confidence. The degree of variation in the levels of proficiency attained by the learners differs according to the student's attitudes on the second language. Speaking of the learner's attitudes, Spolsky says, "The learner, the teacher, the learner's peers and parents, and the speakers of the language, each relationship might well be shown to be a factor controlling the learner's motivation to acquire the language" (Spolsky, 1972). The attitudes of the learners determine their motivation in the second language learning. While discussing the attitudes of the second language learners, he says, "His attitude to speakers of the language will have a great effect on how well he learns [...] A person learns a language better when he wants to be a member of the group speaking the language" (405). Another important attitude is the presence of the native speaker which is a strong motivation for successful mastery of proficiency in the second language. It makes the learners develop the native-like accent and the ability to think like a native speaker. Motivation by the teacher is also an important factor in the second language learning. Lambert says that a teacher himself is a sustained motivation in the second language learning. His words about the teacher's contributions are:

A number of recent students have pointed up the importance of the attitude of the teacher to the learner for the latter's achievement. Teacher's expectations have been shown to make a great deal of difference to student's success (Spolsky, 1972). The dearth of competent teachers of English is also a major problem in India. The English Review Committee appointed by the U.G.C in 1965 made the following comment about English teachers in India:

There is a shortage of teachers. Those available have just passed the school final examination, having themselves studied English in village school for 4 or 5 years. They have little idea of correct usage and none at all of correct pronunciation. Their vocabulary is limited as is their reading (Mullick, & Ghosh, 1993). Considering the great number of students undergoing the courses in English there is still a dearth of

teachers who can handle English effectively. In Indian schools meant for the common people there is no insistence on the teacher's qualification either in English or in English teaching. While the science teacher is expected to be at least a graduate in science, no specific qualification is expected of the English teacher. In most schools all teachers, except those teaching the vernacular language, are allowed to handle English classes.

Most teachers of English avoid doing extra work to understand the various aspects of the language; they do not read anything other than the prescribed texts; they simply look for the simplified materials available, which are often substandard. Their only objective is to complete the syllabus.

Most teachers do not have any interest in what they do. They have interactions neither with their own colleagues nor with experts on the subjects; never do they attend seminars and workshops on their own. While discussing the in-service training and academic interaction, J.A. Bright expects the teachers to have contacts with forums like the Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (ATEFL). He suggests that the senior English master be in touch with the representatives of the British Council and the institutes of the teaching of English. An area that causes much concern is the negligence of the students' feedback. It is a task of an efficient teacher to get the necessary feedback from the students after or during the completion of every unit of teaching. Apart from the feedback the teacher gets in terms of oral answers and short written exercises in the class, the teacher is also expected to have periodical assessment of how his teaching goes. In most Indian schools the teacher is an unquestioned master and the student is a bonded slave who is expected to meekly obey his instructions. There is no clarification of doubts, no encouragement of the students' views and no appreciation of their creativity.

The importance of feedback has been rightly observed by C. Paul, who says:

In the case of the second language learning the feedback should be the responsibility of the teacher. The teacher's correction of mistakes through the feedback should be cautiously and sympathetically carried and so that the learner does not become self-conscious about making mistakes in his utterances. (Verghese, 1989).

But the atmosphere is so rigid that the Indian teacher rarely gets the expected feedback. Very many schools have composition exercise in the periods allotted for them, but not many teachers go through the student's work. On the other hand, the teacher himself is in a helpless state. There are several factors that throw a conscientious teacher into despair.

In many schools English teachers are paid a paltry sum as salary and their energy is frittered away in other activities which they are completed to take up for their living. In the school itself all their energy is spent on maintaining discipline in a class with enormous strength of students. In most Indian schools the teachers work continuously for several hours, often moving from one class to another. Their work puts a great stain on them. It is a problem faced by both the language and the other teachers.

In addition to the above problems, there are problems in the methods adopted by English teachers in most Indian schools. There is scope for using various methods sometimes either in combination or in isolation, as Ellis says, "There is no single way in which learners acquire a knowledge of second language" (Mullick, & Ghosh, 1993). However, it becomes necessary to analyze the problems that are there in the use of these methods in Indian schools.

One of the common methods used by English teachers in India is that of translation. The chief merit of this method is its help in building vocabulary. It is direct and effective in handling signifiers that refer to signifieds familiar to the second language learners. For example, to the Tamil speakers, the definition of the word 'scorpion' as 'small creature of the spider group with lobster like claws and a poisonous sting in its long jointed tail', is far less revealing and meaningful than its Tamil translation '*thel*'. In the bilingual situation the translation method can be used for an understanding of structures and uses; the contrast and similarities between the vernacular and the second language help the learner appreciate the workings of the foreign language.

However, the method has its own problems and the overuse of the vernacular takes away the time meant for exposure in the second language and does not allow the student to think in English and it neglects habit formation. While the use of the vernacular in the teaching of English is still a matter of controversy, there are schools which strictly forbid the use of the first language and insist on what is known as 'direct method'. This method is very effective in a well-planned curriculum where there is a graded and greater exposure to the second language. Often in classes where students are not proficient enough to understand even the simple instructions and explanations of the teachers, the students find language learning very hard. For a meaningful use of the method, the system requires more hours of exposure and more effective teachers. As this method totally neglects the vernacular, the teacher has to be exceptionally flexible in adopting the method.

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