

Cultural Dimension in learning English language: Indian Approach

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Short Abstract:

It is essential to harmonize endeavours in building bridges across communities and continents in the twenty first century, as no one can survive in isolation. Language is a major tool in developing communication between countries and communities.

Long Abstract:

Language is known for its dynamic nature as it never stays static. It constantly under goes transformation at different levels. It preserves and transmits culture. Other forms of preservation of culture are architecture, painting, music, performing arts and folk forms of artistic expression. Culture specific words in any language make it all the more glorious. Communicative competence and linguistic competence appear to be distinctly different, but there are areas of contact and overlapping. In a way, linguistic competence is integral to communicative competence. Language used, establishes the social status and extends identity to the speaker. Social stratification results in diglossia or polyglossia.

The primary aim of language teaching is to open up its resources to the learner in order to make him/her find the right words and use sentences to convey the intended meaning. Bi-cultural awareness and competence are pre-requisite for any language teacher to communicate aptly and create inquisitiveness in learning a foreign language. Learning involves better inter-personal relations and interactions. In a rapidly transforming global context and emerging new economies intercultural awareness, respect for all languages and cultures are of paramount significance. Language as the chief tool of communication makes it imperative to pay attention to socio-cultural aspects of a speech community in detail. It is essential to harmonize endeavours in building bridges across communities and continents in the twenty first century, as no one can survive in isolation. This paper seeks to throw light on Intercultural dimension in English Language Teaching/Learning in India.

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India is a multilingual country with many subcultures finding respectable place where people belonging to diverse faiths live peacefully amidst cacophony of various ideological affinities. A subcontinent under the subjugation of different foreign invaders for nearly one thousand years survived in maintaining her tradition and culture intact to a greater extent, purely on account of her resilience and ability to absorb and radiate diverse cultural impacts impressively. As Dr Abid Hussain, a former Indian ambassador to U.S.A had asserted, perhaps, India is the only country where faiths born from within and without have been co-existing harmoniously for more than a millennium. This has been the land of learning from ancient times, as has been recorded by the visiting travellers from Europe, China and other Asian countries. Establishing trade and cultural contacts, a two way exchange has been going on with neighboring and far off countries

from time immemorial. Among the several languages introduced by the former rulers, English alone has acquired an eminent stature and enjoys a unique status in India today.

Contact with diverse cultures, languages and life styles fused fascinatingly in making India a veritable crucible of multiculturalism, a tag which many emerging and established economies have espoused quite enthusiastically. Multinational and multicultural communication is of great significance in the changed context of globalization. Just as no man is an island, no country is unwanted now. Regional cooperation besides sharing and reviewing information garnered propel nations in forging abiding bonds of fraternity and conviviality.

English long ago shed the tag of a foreign language in India. It was taught and sought to be treated as a second language for a pretty long time. Today it has become one of the Indian languages for transactions in administration, education, commerce and international relations. This has become possible on account of numerous steps taken and strategies employed in teaching English in the country. Pragmatic selection of tools, transforming teaching methods, and creatively framing syllabi with foresight have ensured emergence of a new breed of English language users, who demonstrate delightfully the art and science of survival in a rapidly changing scenario.

Use of English in India is undoubtedly a British legacy. Post- Independence era continued the policy and curriculum for quite some time. As the postcolonial administration comprehended the aspirations of the people and had a vision, numerous initiatives were taken to refurbish the syllabus and focus of study, setting suitable and sustainable bench marks to reach envisioned goals.

Most of the Indians speak or have knowledge of more than one language, L1 mother tongue and the language of the neighbours. Medium of instruction has its own typical role in shaping the linguistic competence of learners. Teachers' competence, energy and motivation levels and desire to expand territories of knowledge too are vital for the progress of the taught as well as the society.

Whether colonial hangover is there or not, ability to communicate with members of other speech communities within India is made possible through English, though Hindi is the National Language, *Raj Bhasha*. The utility of the language in fusing bonds of understanding and love for the countrymen witnessed during freedom struggle stretched through many more decades even after political freedom was achieved. Most of the Indians are bilingual to say the least. So, many people are equipped with bi-cultural awareness and bi-lingual competence, very crucial in cementing ties of friendship. Vastness of the country with mindboggling natural, geographical wonders on sight added to the teeming millions of people speaking innumerable apparently incomprehensible languages for men from monolingual contexts, made the colonizer wonder and declare "Inscrutable India!" But the men in the colony loved the language spoken by the ruler, just as they adored men who symbolized liberal humanism like Edmund Thomson, George Orwell, E.M.Forster, Paul Scott among many such brilliant men. Charles Philip Brown, a British official who worked in South India learnt Telugu language, employed Telugu scholars paying from his wages and brought to light thousands of standardized poems of Vemana, a great poet and a social reformer, whose four lined metrical verses in Telugu are eye openers to tradition bound, superstitious people. Many of the poetic lines are used as proverbs now. Brown also composed Telugu-English dictionary and English-Telugu dictionary.

Such being the relationship of Indians with the service motivated English men, it is but natural for them to aspire to demonstrate their love for the language. Creative writers apart from the common man have charted a course of their own in the evolution of Indian English, first referred to with sarcasm and derision, but later accepted with due respect as a variety of numerous Englishes in circulation globally.

Mention has to be made of the painstaking efforts made by the first and second generations of Teachers of English in free India. Sticklers to the minutest of the details, they strove indefatigably to motivate young learners to stick to the basics in learning a foreign language like English. Perhaps, they might have known the way the Right Honourable Srinivasa Sastri, the silver tongued orator as he was known, dared to correct the British Emperor when the latter mispronounced '*Sugar*.' Fowler was their 'guru' as regards proper use of English. Split infinitive so commonly used today was not touched with a barge pole. They were guided by the seminal work of scholars like Otto Jespersen, Harold Palmer, and Michael West. In their dress and address they meticulously followed their colonial masters in a newly liberated country. R.P was accorded the utmost respect. Any deviation invited severe reproach. Eloquence was the hall mark of an English teacher's credentials. Shakespeare and Milton among others were recalled with supreme veneration. Lengthy passages were recited with devotion and peerless passion. Those were the days! Surprisingly not many had been exposed to latest techniques or tools. An innate love for the language sustained by dedication to professional norms and desire for a secure future of the society stimulated them render selfless service so rarely found. They wanted to create better human beings and turn the land into a better place to live.

The concept of communication refers to the psychological, cultural and social rules which condition the use of speech. Communicative competence and linguistic competence appear to be distinctly different, but there are areas of contact and overlapping. In a way, linguistic competence is integral to communicative competence. Language used, establishes the social status and extends identity to the speaker. Social stratification results in diglossia or polyglossia. Verbal deprivation among the less privileged or marginalized is not acceptable because it is the social setting and cultural back ground of the teacher which make or mar the linguistic ability of a learner. One realizes that language is both an individual and social phenomenon. Society reflects social modes of life. Social life depends on variables like language, customs, education, economic back ground, attitude, value system etc. These are generally referred to as 'culture.' So, one may define culture as comprising national, group and /or individual customs.

A language like English known for its catholicity has liberally acquired and absorbed words and expressions from all over the world, enriching its ever expanding vocabulary. Diverse influences on phonology, lexis as well as semantics resulted in a variety of Englishes. Tolerance for different varieties of Englishes is a productive feature of Globalization.

It is true because English in India became a 'network of varieties' resulting from an extraordinary and complex linguistic situation in the country. The net work comprises regional and occupation dialects of English. Social English is a kind of English spoken in all states of India. People with diverse mother tongues managed and manipulated English to suit their convenience. Hence, widely recognized varieties are there, such as:

Hinglish ... spoken in Hindi dominated areas

BinglishEnglish with Bengali accent, words

Kinglish... spoken in Kannada dominated areas.

Pinglish... impact of Punjabi on English noticeable.

With passage of time some varieties in expression emerged, such as:

Rubber	–	Eraser
Flat	–	Apartment
Out of station	–	Out of Head Quarters
Carrying	–	In family way
Stepney	–	Spare tyre
Cover	–	Envelope
Hold on	–	Stop
Keep	–	Concubine
Family	–	Wife

These are easily understood by Indians and routinely used. Tolerance for queer expressions and experimentation with second language have enriched vocabulary and communication patterns in the Indian context.

In a multilingual country like India where several subcultures coexist peacefully, knowledge of more than one language serves in understanding one another in spite of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and practices. Translation of ideas from one speech system into another and into actions further have made life peaceful to a greater extent. Translation is both a process and product. Though it is famously or infamously said that meaning (of poetry?) is lost in translation, in the prescribed syllabi introduction of translated texts from Indian languages into English and among the languages of the nation proved to be a vital tool in building feelings of brotherhood among the people. Similarly Indian Diaspora writers employed diverse linguistic and narrative techniques in creating literary works of abiding charm. Studying them benefitted the scholar and the lay man alike.

Creative writers of later days unhesitatingly handled hybrid words and smoothly drifted towards *nativisation* of English by innovative use of languages. Interweaving regional terms with traditional English, using hybridized words, unglossed words/ expressions contributed immensely in nativising English in Indian English fiction. Salman Rushdie, Anita Rau Badami, Arundhati Roy among many other reputed fiction writers functioned in a facile manner.

Conversation among people with different socio-cultural-linguistic backgrounds offers interesting instances of Indian Variety of English. Impact of mother tongue L1 is quite conspicuous.

Use of Reflexive pronouns may appear to be very Indian in nature as in the following sentences:

“I myself did it, sir!”

“I did exactly as you yourself told.”

“Even if she does anything herself, she is not happy.”

“Tomorrow itself I myself will to go to Goa, when you yourself instructed me.”

The above statements illustrate impact of mother tongue (Indian Languages) on the speaker.

Peculiar expressions make Indian variety of English look funny at times.

For example: Both he and his brother went to the market.

: Although I told him not to pester me, but he continues to trouble me.

Only is used in different ways to emphasize a point.

For example: I only did it Sir. Kindly excuse me.

: Only Laalu knows how to manage crowds.

: With your help only I can pass the examination.

Sentences like “Kindly excuse me, please” may be cited as examples of adding emphasis for better impact.

Introduction of translation in curriculum is intended to develop international/inter cultural communication. In a multilingual country like India these texts in English translation fortify national integration and stabilize concept of solidarity, when vested interests try to divide the people on petty issues. While several theories are there regarding the art of translation, approximation and pragmatic translation seem to be better target oriented practices. Sensitivity to the cultural, ideological concerns of the target language reader and society is of prime significance. Hence, in the name of fidelity to the source language text if any term, expression or practice is rendered faithfully which may hurt, it will certainly impair inter-national relationships and inter cultural communication.

Language teaching with an intercultural dimension continues to help learners to acquire the **linguistic competence** needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways. But it also develops their **intercultural competence** i.e. their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality. [Michael Byram, Bella Giribkova and Hugh Starkey, 2002 p.10]

Exposure to different varieties of expression strengthens one’s inter-personal relationships. Respect for cultural concepts, concerns, competence to view the other person as a human being first and acceptance of people and languages for what they are and not for what one expects them to be are the most important aspects in international/inter cultural communication.

The primary responsibility of a competent teacher is to equip the learner adequately for fostering feelings of brotherhood and establishing harmony among nations.

As a global language English can integrate countries and people so distinctly different from one another. Awareness of nuances of English usage among nations in Asia certainly bears fruition in better understanding and resolution of conflicting interests, if any.

Learning a language well usually involves knowledge about the culture of that language. Communication that does not have appropriate cultural content often results in humorous incidents due to miscommunication and misunderstanding. [Maria Lorena IRMIA, 2012 p.325]

Maria further states:

So language teaching with an intercultural dimension aims not only at helping learners to acquire the linguistic competence needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways. It also develops their intercultural competence *i.e.* their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality.

As a consequence the 'best' teacher is neither the native nor the non-native speaker, but the person who can help learners see relationships between their own and other cultures, can help them acquire interest in and curiosity about 'otherness', and an awareness of themselves and their own cultures seen from other people' perspectives. [Maria, 2012 p.327]

Learning involves inter-personal relations and better interaction between the teacher and the learners. Patience, understanding, tolerance for the habits and views of others makes intercultural learning a pleasure and rewarding experience. Learner-centric activities and language games strengthen efforts of a teacher in this regard. A teacher becomes an interlocutor between the cultures. Dominant cultures always try to impose their value system on less important or less known cultures. Excessive coercion from the teacher generally vitiates the environment, jeopardizing the very purpose of intercultural learning. Over enthusiasm and the desire to feed what one cannot chew, leave alone digest, hamper progress in executing the task.

Pluriculturalism is the desire and ability to identify with several cultures, and participate in them. Interculturality is the ability to experience another culture and analyse that experience. The intercultural competence acquired from doing this helps individuals to understand cultural difference better, establish cognitive and affective links between past and future experiences of that difference, mediate between members of two (or more) social groups and their cultures, and question the assumptions of their own cultural group and milieu. [Byram, 2009]

Pluriculturalism - identification with two (or more) social groups and their cultures – and interculturality – the competences for critical awareness of other cultures – may complement

each other: active discovery of one or more other cultures may help learners to develop intercultural competence.[Byram, 2009]

'Intercultural dimension' in language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity. Intercultural communication is communication on the basis of respect for individuals and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction.[Byram, Giribkova and Starkey, 2002 p.9]

So language teaching with an intercultural dimension continues to help learners to acquire the **linguistic competence** needed to communicate in speaking or writing, to formulate what they want to say/write in correct and appropriate ways. But it also develops their **intercultural competence** i.e. their ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality. [Michael Byram, Bella Giribkova and Hugh Starkey, 2002 p.10]

Intercultural learning helps one acquire intercultural attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction besides critical cultural awareness. The teacher need not visit the country or have first hand information of related aspects. He needs to develop curiosity and desire to learn about cultures of different people and countries. Emphasis is on identities, cultures and ability to treat all as equals, not so much on linguistic competence, though it is equally important.

An intercultural dimension involves learners in sharing their knowledge with each other and discussing their opinions. There need to be agreed rules for such discussions based on an understanding of human rights and respect for others. Learners, thus, learn as much from each other as from the teacher, comparing their own cultural context with the unfamiliar contexts to which language learning introduces them [Byram et al, 2002 p26]. An honest assessment by the learner leads to emergence of new ideas, awareness and recognition of rights of others to live with honour and dignity.

One often comes across parents and teachers lamenting that students are attracted to English medium schools and western culture. What they fail to comprehend is that their wards are moving in the right direction in learning a language and that is the only way to survive if not to dominate in the rapidly changing scenario. Cultural dimension in language learning/teaching is imperative in the contexts obtaining in developing nations and dominant economies in Asia. Nationalistic fervor should not make one blind to the growing demand to evolve as a decent human being who is capable of building bridges across cultures in order to foster internationalism in perception and practice. Employing and encouraging cultural dimension in teaching/learning a language is the only means to sustain mankind and ensure development of all societies. In India it is realized and sincere efforts are on view in this regard.

The teacher remains a learner all through his life enriching his competence and inculcating human values among his students by focusing on intercultural approach. Use of technology makes the job easier and pragmatic. Shift in emphasis from text to real life situations, using audio, video equipment and ability to relate unknown to the known aspects create not only zeal to learn a language but enhance scope to observe, absorb and radiate newly acquired cultural awareness among learners.

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