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Addressing Challenges Encountered by English Language Teachers in ImpartingCommunication Skills among Higher Secondary Students: A Critical Overview

Jiby Jose E
Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Akkara Sherine
Hindustan Institute of Technology and Science, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

Acquisition and extension of communication skills in the English language is a gateway to academic achievements and professional success. English language communicative competence is a necessary prerequisite in a globally interconnected and communicatively-driven world. This is an imperative for the academic, professional and personal growth. However, English language teachers experience varied challenges in developing effective communication skills among higher secondary students. Hence, the objective of the study is to explore the pedagogical practices in English language communication among the higher secondary students and the obstacles encountered by the teachers. The details are collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using the qualitative framework. The participants represent the tutors who teach at higher secondary levels in and follow the SCERT curriculum. Using purposive sampling, the interview and the focus group discussion have been carried out directly, and the data have been analyzed thematically.The study explores diverse factors and nuances that deter educators in the discipline of language training and verbal proficiency.

Keywords: English Language Teachers, Communication Skills, Language Training, Higher Secondary Students, Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication skills are integral for success in both academic and professional spheres. In the context of higher secondary education, nurturing these skills is essential to equip students with the necessary tools for effective expression, collaboration, and critical thinking. The ultimate goal of teaching children English is to help them become competent communicators who can use the language in real-world contexts. Despite the fact that English is a language that is deeply ingrained in our educational system, numerous studies show that students struggle to communicate effectively in English and experience English language anxiety. "After completing their schooling, students are expected to translate a few words into English, both orally and in writing". However, our students fall short of the standards. (Soniya, 2014) [16]. English language teachers play a critical role in facilitating their development among higher secondary-level students. However, despite recognising the importance of communication skills, educators often encounter challenges that hinder their efforts to teach and nurture these skills effectively. This paper explores and analyses the key issues English

language teachers face in imparting communication skills to students at the higher secondary level, offering insights into the complexities of language teaching in this context.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pedagogical Practices and Teachers' Training

Mithilesh (2017), in his article, "Problems and challenges before the Indian learners in second language acquisition", expresses the idea that the primary aim of ELT instructors is to cultivate effective English communication skills among their students within interactive contexts. However, they face constraints with teaching hours, typically ranging from three to six hours per week, which are insufficient for comprehensive instruction in linguistic elements. Additionally, it is observed that some English language educators lack proficiency in ELT teaching methodologies [7]. Sarita Jain (2020), in her paper, 'Problems in Teaching English in Indian Classrooms: Issues and Remedies', states that numerous teachers lack familiarity with recent and extensive advancements in English teaching. There is minimal opportunity to enhance their intuitive and spontaneous understanding of the language. It is imperative to implement mandatory training programmes for teachers. The majority of educators have been trained in outdated methods and have shown little interest in exploring modern and innovative techniques applicable in the classroom [15]. John Sekar Jeyaraj (2017) would argue that every teacher encounter challenge in teaching English because it does not fit neatly into any category: it is not a mother tongue used for primary socialization, nor is it a foreign language that is seldom or never encountered, nor is it a second language taught by native speakers within an English-speaking community [4]. Sudhansu Dash perceives that the teaching of English occupies a pivotal role in the overall educational curriculum. English teachers bear the responsibility of empowering learners to attain both general educational objectives and specific language proficiency goals. Therefore, it is imperative to enhance the teaching of the English language, addressing obstacles and challenges through collaborative efforts involving government, educators, and researchers [18]. Sri Diana (2014) would argue that certain teachers exhibit reluctance to enhance their professional skills in teaching, contributing to a lack of communicative competence among educators. Moreover, insufficient training, limited teaching resources, and low salaries further compound the challenges faced by teachers in the profession [17]. Also, in this perspective, Musliadi (2017) would say that when learners struggle to meet the demands of a situation, it falls upon the teacher to offer guidance or provide relevant language components. As learners engage in activities, the teacher must assess their strengths and weaknesses. At times, the teacher may choose to model language usage. Additionally, the teacher fosters an environment where learners are encouraged to use the language freely without constant correction of their mistakes [8].

Learning Environment

As per the idea of B. W. Raja and K. Selvi (2011), students encounter challenges in English languageclassrooms stemming from various factors, including the learning environment, attitudes towards learning, and the competence of teachers. Teacher competence is a crucial variable influencing second language acquisition. It is essential for instructors to possess proficiency in the language and demonstrate a high standard of knowledge and expertise in language teaching methods and techniques [3]. Nida Qayoom et al. (2021), in their paper, 'Objectives of teaching English skills and their assessment in Indian Schools: A study on the

divergence', would argue that the proficiency of learners in listening and speaking English, as well as the testing of these skills in examinations, remains a relatively overlooked aspect in Indian schools. This neglect contributes to the overall lack of research and scholarly attention given to these skills, both in native and non-native contexts. Notably, state secondary education boards in India have yet to formally assess the active language skills of listening and speaking in their examinations [9]. Rafeeque Ahmed (2014), in his article, 'A Study on English Acquisition in Kerala Primary Schools: Present Scenario; Issues and Concerns' considers the issue of creating an English atmosphere, which is lacking in school, is one of the pertinent problems in English acquisition [12]. Y. Jaya (2019) views that given that English is a skill-based language, English teachers must adopt a systematic approach to training students, placing emphasis on developing language skills. Teachers should design a variety of engaging activities to actively involve students and enhance their enjoyment, thereby boosting their morale and confidence. Unfortunately, this process does not occur frequently and sufficiently [20]. Suresh Mallavarapu (2019) presents that language trainers ought to foster a democratic and enthusiastic environment and actively engage with their students. They should act as facilitators in the classroom, aiding the process of language acquisition. Teachers should strive to interact with each student individually, creating an atmosphere that encourages collaborative participation and interaction [19].

Socio-cultural and Linguistic Awareness

R Abilasha and M Ilankumaran (2018) regard English language learners in India differ from their counterparts in Western countries in that they predominantly communicate in their local dialects or regional languages, rarely using English consistently. As a result, it is challenging to reinforce what they learn from their English language teachers. Effective language teaching and learning require socio-cultural and linguistic awareness, necessitating active involvement from students, teachers, and parents alike [11]. Ramanujan Meganathan (2015) claims that in a country with a significant demand for English language teachers, there is a notable absence of undergraduate or postgraduate courses specifically focused on English language education or language education, with only a few higher education institutions offering such programmes. Furthermore, there is a lack of recognition for continuous professional development among teachers as a crucial component for enhancing teaching quality in the classroom [13]. A Delbio, R A (2018) posits that educating students in English presents a formidable challenge, requiring adept guidance from qualified English instructors. Employing visual aids and auditory techniques is essential for effective instruction. This approach not only enhances students' chances of success but also opens avenues for new experiences and opportunities, particularly beneficial for young learners [2].

Approach towards the English Language

L. M. Sowmiya (2015) argues that English language instruction often revolves around preparing for examinations, with a strong focus on writing skills. Many students prioritise obtaining marks solely to pass exams, leading to a narrow attitude towards learning English. This exam-centric approach diminishes students' interest in genuinely engaging with the language [5]. Ramandeep Mahal (2023), in her paper, 'The Obstacles Faced while Teaching English as a Second Language in India', postulates the idea that the primary issue with the teaching

approach is that both the teacher and the pupils view English as a topic rather than a language. They do not consider English as a communication language [14].

Mallika Tripathi (2014) puts forward the claim that there is a concerning trend of restricting the autonomy of language teachers. It is crucial to respect the freedom of teachers and allow them to work independently, enabling them to introduce creative techniques in the classroom. Working with a sense of freedom will undoubtedly enhance their productivity and the quality of their work [6]. Abida Farooqui (2015) would consider that despite investing considerable time, energy, and effort into developing their linguistic abilities at spoken English centres, students often find themselves frustrated with their progress. Both students and teachers frequently encounter difficulties when attempting to express themselves verbally or in writing [1]. Pertin, C., & Singh, V. (2022) affirms that most of the problems identified by the teachers are interrelated. Issues such as lack of fluency in English, literal translation, the influence of code-mixing, student defensiveness, limited parental English language skills, etc., as well as concrete factors such as lack of proper infrastructure and resources, etc., are all interrelated [10].

METHOD

This study examines the instructional methods and the challenges English language teachers face in their attempt to impart verbal skills. The study is based on the higher secondary students in Kerala who follow the SCERT curriculum. The details are collected through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews using the qualitative framework. The participants represent the tutors who teach at higher secondary levels in Kerala and follow the SCERT curriculum. Using purposive sampling, the interview and the focus group discussion have been carried out directly, and the data have been analysed thematically. This method also allowed the researchers to study the perceptions of English language teachers about the various factors that obstruct training in the field of communication and verbal skills.

FINDINGS

The researchers have used focus group discussions followed by in-depth interviews to collect the data. The participants were 25 teachers from different higher secondary schools who consented to participate in the study. The researchers identified themes to guide the focus group discussions, and these were followed in all the sessions. The findings from the focus group discussions were used to frame the in-depth interviews, and five English language teachers were interviewed as part of this process. Later, the data were analysed thematically. The data analysis could unravel the issues and challenges encountered by English language teachers at the higher secondary level.

Traditional Pedagogical Practices

Traditional teaching practices and methodologies impede interactive communication exercises. Most of the teachers interviewed were traditional teachers who adopted traditional classroom teaching based on the lecture method and based it on the textbook. Hastening to complete the portions/syllabus remains a major objective, and preparing the students for examinations becomes a herculean task where the importance of imparting communicative skills is undermined or overlooked because of the undue importance given to scoring of marks in

examinations than the imbibing of concepts. Hence, teachers ignore improving the students' language skills, especially communicative skills.

Inadequate Curriculum and Instructional Materials

Inadequate curriculum and instructional materials create ambiguity among the teachers and make them indecisive about what to teach for communication skills. Neither proper instructional materials are provided to the teachers from the state board of education, nor are they adopted from different sources as it demands more time and effort to create content for teaching communicative skills to students. Curriculum revamping/designing, pedagogical correctness, the availability of instructional materials from SCERT and an implementation strategy, and incorporating dedicated hours for communication skills training will definitely improve the skill sets of the students.

Deficient Technology Connect

Higher secondary schools need more technology connections, especially in rural areas, resulting in poor exposure to communication opportunities. Most state-owned higher secondary schools lack technological infrastructure, such as inadequate computer access, poor internet connectivity/bandwidth, and irregular electricity connection, and their failures lead to students having no access to communication competence. Redrafting the state policy on education and investing in the technological advancement of state-owned schools are inevitable and decisive in promoting a better educational ambience.

Linguistic Proficiency of the Students

Focus group discussions among the teachers led to the conclusion that students' lack of linguistic proficiency poses a significant challenge in training basic communication skills. Students need to be trained in lower classes and be interested in communication upskilling; hence, it makes classroom learning more tiring, complicating the task of teaching communication skills. Teachers find it extremely difficult to teach communication skills to students who are not given basics in lower classes, which results in their low comprehension abilities and will create challenges in implementing proper training sessions. Incorporating communication skills modules in primary-level education can change this scenario.

Influence of Native Language

Native language or mother tongue influences the culture of communication and communication competence of instructors and students. It affects the teaching process as teachers tend to instruct even the English language in their mother tongue. The mother tongue influences the accent, pronunciation, vocabulary, and usage of phrases, and this indirect methodology mars learning English language communication skills.

Skilling, Upskilling and Reskilling

Limited exposure to advanced teaching practices and inadequate professional development programmes in communicative language teaching aggravate classroom challenges. Shifting from traditional methodologies and skilling themselves in communicative competency, teachers need to focus more on training, skilling, upskilling, and reskilling themselves in English communication competence. Lack of interest, inadequate motivation, and lack of opportunities

in skill training led to inadequate teaching skills, which results in poor student performance. Upskilling oneself needs to be an obligatory criterion for attaining benefits from the government.

Personalised Attention and Differentiated Teaching

Every child is unique and different, and the skill sets are different; hence, personalised attention and differentiated teaching are the demands of the time. However, it becomes a daunting task for teachers as they cannot give personal attention and training to the students due to limited classroom time and a large classroom population.

Faulty Evaluation of Assessments

The students should benefit from proper feedback. The evaluators do not give effective feedback at the culmination of the evaluation of the answer scripts after each assessment. Individual attention and correction of errors are essential for students so that the same mistakes are not committed a second time. English language teachers should plan specific time slots for students to recognise their mistakes. Effective rewarding by word or by kind may reinforce the importance of recognising one's mistakes. The recognition and correction will result in effective learning.

STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE THE CHALLENGES

Pedagogical Reform

Methodological reforms are required, and their implementation has to be binding on the teachers. Training for the instructors, evaluation of the instructor's competence, and implementation of the curricular plan imparting communicative skills for the students are to be made mandatory.

Curriculum Revamping/Redesigning

Revamping or redesigning the curriculum can bring about changes in communication competence. The planned design of the curriculum to boost communication skills is to be carefully made to improve the quality of communication upskilling of students and instructors.

Motivation

As socio-cultural factors affect the students' communication competence, motivation to learn or upskilling in communication competence needs to be ensured by different strategies. Rewards andrecognition will motivate the students to improve their communication skills.

Awareness and Orientation

Proper orientation and awareness can create a conducive atmosphere for learning or acquiring communication skills. Students require proper orientation regarding the need for communication competence as it becomes detrimental to career advancement in the future.

Basic Level Training at Primary Level Education

Basic communication training has to start in primary education. Starting language training at an early age will ease acquiring communication skills. Spoken English has to be a significant priority in the early stages of learning as it better impacts communication upskilling.

Class Strength

The ideal class strength must be specified and maintained for the perfect teaching-learning experience in English language learning. The student strength in class is noticed to be high, which limits individual attention from the educators and also restricts student participation in classroom activities.

Teacher Orientation Workshops

Regular attendance at Teacher Workshops and Faculty Development Programmes on the new teaching strategies in English teaching and learning should aid in effective teaching. Teachers should also be trained to use new technologies in all realms, including assessments.

Professional Advancement

Encouragement from management and the government to upgrade academic degrees and attend short-term courses to improve skills will also result in effective teaching and learning.

Resource Talk

Eminent educators from India and native speakers from abroad will also be catalysts for promoting English language learning. Recognising that communication proficiency in a foreign language such as English will widen the mental horizon and pave the way to the outside world will also act as an incentive for bettering communication skills.

Systemic Reform

To enhance the efficacy of English language education, the state will implement a conducive learning environment with targeted intervention and policy changes. It demands comprehensive changes which involve the committed and ongoing reflection and innovation of all the stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

English communication skills are essential for the student's academic success and future professional endeavours. However, higher secondary-level educators encounter vital issues such as student proficiency levels, teacher training, classroom dynamics, curriculum constraints, assessment practices, and societal influences. Understanding and addressing these challenges are crucial for devising strategies to enhance communication skill development in higher secondary English language education. It encompasses targeted training for educators, curriculum reform, technology integration, promoting multilingualism, and fostering a communication-friendly environment inside and outside the classroom. Also, it demands more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments that empower students to develop the communication skills needed for academic success and beyond.

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