

What's wrong with English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms? A Case of Patna District

Benudhar Chinara

Professor

And

Kishwar Badakhshan

Research Scholar

Department of Education, Institute of Education, Visva-Bharati University,
Santiniketan, West Bengal – 731235**Abstract**

English language has become an important part of our communication. In the recent years there has been focus on English language learning and especially for those learners who are from the lower socio-economic status. English appears to be a magic wand which opens up doors of opportunities and helps one to live in better living conditions. The state of Bihar is one of such places which are struggling with the issues of quality education. The present study is an attempt to provide a view of what is happening to English language in our classrooms. The paper is a qualitative study filled with narratives from learners who have presented their difficulties in form of their stories. The paper identifies six probable causes for the issues and also lists steps which could be taken to solve them out.

Keywords : ESL, English teaching, English learning, Quality Education

Case 1: Mrs. Singh is teaching to a group of eighty eight learners in Grade VIII. She is teaching a chapter, 'Tess buys a Miracle' from the prose section of English textbook. The primary method of teaching the text includes lecture, explanation and discussion. The medium of teaching English is bilingual, dominated by mother tongue. The class has high Pupil-Teacher ratio. The teacher immediately on her arrival declares the name of the chapter and begins the chapter with asking few questions. While she tries her best to teach the learners, many learners are untouched by the teaching learning processes in the classroom.

Case 2: Maju is giving loud reading in the English class. She is a twelve year old, first generation learner. While reading she often stops as she is unable to pronounce certain words. She then begins by blurting something which is mispronunciation of the word in the text. The children in her class giggles but Maju continues. Mr. Raj, the English teacher does not intervene and the reading goes uninterruptedly. Maju after completing reading the text is exasperated as she feels that she needed a helping at reading but does not have any.

Case 3 Mr. Manjesh, the English teacher reads loudly the text from the chapter 'Tess buys a Miracle'. Plains The learners keep on listening without intervening. The teacher in between stops and explains the text. The process continues till the period is over.

Case 4: Mr. Ajay is teaching the chapter 'Tess buys a Miracle'. He picks Snigdha to read the text.. She reads the text with good pronunciation and voice modulation. Snigdha is his daughter and is perhaps a smart girl in the class The other learners in the class are waiting for their turn. The next one to read is Mridula, a first generation English learner. The teacher despised her for mispronunciation and asks her to sit down. Mridula feels quite disappointed.

The goal of these four English classrooms were to make the learners adept in acquiring skills in LSRW, but none of these teachers in the four cases reported above did any activity to motivate the learners in acquiring any single skill or skills in general. The teachers as well as the learners in these classrooms appear passive

and least bothered with the interaction in the class. None of the teacher when questioned on the point what their aim of teaching that particular lesson emphasized developing the skills of language learning.

The learners in all these classrooms were unable to reply the questions when asked in English. The word meanings given for the words from the text were mostly in Hindi. The readings were done mostly by handpicked learners who were mainly wards of teachers or bright learners of the grade. The majority of the learners were left to fend off with their poor reading, mispronunciations and non comprehension of the text. The learners are thus equipped with poor vocabulary, wrong grammatical structures, poor sentence structure and overall weak in English language.

The questions thus which haunts us at the moment what went really wrong in these classrooms and what needs to be done to help these learners.

What went wrong in these ESL classrooms?

• Language Acquisition Versus Language Learning

When it comes to mother tongue, language is often acquired but this is not the case with English as a second language. English comes to the learners as a language which they need to learn in a formal setting. The role of the formal setting is to provide enough learning stimulus to the learners in the targeted language (English). As the learners of the second language have a limited exposure to the targeted language the question of qualitative and quantitative opportunities becomes important. It was observed that these classrooms failed not only in providing in series of qualitative opportunities but also their quantity was limited. Thus failing to limited opportunities in the limited learning environment the English learners are at the disadvantaged side.

• Overdependence on the Mother Tongue

It was also observed that the teachers were highly dependent on the mother tongue during the process of teaching of English. It is no doubt a proved issue that the bi-lingual method is an ultimate winner when it comes to teaching of a second language. This is because the learner is often assisted with co-relating a new word or terminology with an object, word or expression which he/she is associated to. But why this becomes a hurdle in this case is because of the grade of the learners. The child in Grade VIII, has definitely been exposed to many words and phrases in his/her seven years of learning. If we go ahead with this assumption we can easily conclude that a learner at this stage may not be well versed but be quite all right with the basic vocabulary and grammatical structure of the second language (English). We accept the fact that there may be few exceptional learners in the classrooms who may not be at par with the language requirement, but to have a majority in a classroom that is way below in performance is a serious issue to be considered by the teacher. It was noted during the observation that the primary medium of teaching English is mother tongue (Hindi). The explanation, pronunciation, word meanings and even the questions done by the teacher to evaluate the learning is done in mother tongue. Thus the overdependence on the mother tongue acts as a barrier and hurdles learners' language development.

• Burden of non comprehension

It was observed that a majority of the learners in these classrooms were swinging on the lap of non comprehension on the pretence of 'all is well' in the English classroom. There was a quite good number of learners who were just mumbling with a seriousness of 'yes Sir' and 'No Sir' when they actually were nowhere in the class. The affirmation from these learners made the teacher boast with pride that they have willfully succeeded in their attempt of teaching, while there were learners who sulked inside. What was the reason that the learners pretended to learn when their learning was zero is the atmosphere of peer pressure and unkind responses from the teacher.

Stories from the ESL Classrooms

“Didi...Samajh mein nahi aata hai, par isliye nahi poochte hai kyunki dost log mazaak udayega, pehle poochte they tab sab kehta tha ki takla dimaage nahi hai toh samjhega kaise.... Ek baar ek miss boli, ki angreji padhne ke liye thoda dimaagh bhi toh chahiye... aise koi aira ghaira thodi seekh jaata hai... Ab jab sablog aisa bola bahut baar toh hum bhi nahi poochte hai... class mein kabotar ki tarah enne unnoe dekh lete hai...koi ko fark nahi padta... baad mein koi English spoken ka tuitoni kar lenege”

(I do not understand, but I do not ask because my friends make fun of me, earlier I used to ask but they used to tell baldheaded you have got no brain how will u understand then....once a miss told, that to learn English language one needs to have a brain...not every naive can learn English...when everyone says this so many times I do not feel like asking...I sit like a pigeon in the class pretending to look at everything with comprehension...it's make no difference to anyone...I will later take tuition classes in spoken English, it will really help me).

Ranju Kumari Class VIII

“Madam mein parivaar mein badi hoon... ..pitaji aur maa kabhi school nahi gaye hai...jo school mein seekhte hai bas yahi hain. Angreji mein dikkat bahut hota hai kyunki koi batane wala nahi hai ...baar baar miss ke paas agar jaate hai toh kabhi kabhi who bhi ukhadh jaati hai bolti hai kiya karegi angreji seekh kar baad mein toh jhaadoo pocha karna hai...dukh hota bahut par kiya kare...hum bhi tv par logon ki tarah angreji bolna chahte hai ...”

(I am eldest in the family. My parents have never been to school. What I learn is in the school only. I face too many difficulties in English. If I go to the teacher time and again she gets irritated. Madam says that what I will do if I learn English after all I have to do household chores. I feel sad. I too want to speak English as the people on the T.V.).

Mita Kumari Class VIII

“Hum sab subject mein achcha number late hai but angreji mein toh bahut dikkat hai... pehle ke school mein humare angreji teachers hi nahi they..ek sir they who kabhi kabhi aate they phir kabhi nahi bhi aatey they... hum teen saal tak bilkul bhi angreji nahi padhe ...ab achanak itna hard wala angreji ka book hai ki humko kучо samajh mein nahi aata. Lagta hai ki hum matric mein angreji ki wajah se hi doob jayengey”

(I am good in all the subjects except in English. I face too many problems with it. We did not have a English teacher earlier, then came a teacher but he was often irregular. I have not studied English for almost last three years. Now in this class I find English very difficult. I am unable to understand anything at the moment. This way it seems that I am going to fail in English in Class X and spoil my results.)

Md. Kallu, Class VIII

On being further probed on what they were unable to comprehend in the classroom the responses were...meaning of words, structure of sentences, series of activities and also when the questions were in English. There were many learners who said that if they are provided with enough cues in the targeted language they could somehow makeup with broken words and sentences.

• Faulty Pronunciation

The learners in these classrooms were brave enough to accept the fact that they have poor pronunciation when compared to their friends who are studying in private schools. The reason behind this has been blamed to the Language itself which is marked with confusing homophones to nonsensical idioms, English can be a notoriously difficult language to learn, especially for younger student. The teachers who are teaching these students are also equally prone with faulty pronunciation, but not as brave as their children to accept their weakness. The teachers are unwilling to de-learn and relearn the basic which proves a big bane to the learners.

• Cold Shouldered by the Teacher

The learners in these classrooms are often left to fend with their problems without proper solution of their problems. The teachers are either too busy or are not prepared enough to handle the questions on the learners' side.

The story of Biren....

Mam homework deti hai hum apne jaante sab complete karke bhi late hai.. ghar par koi batanewala nahi but pados k eek bhaiya hai jo bank mein naoukri ke liye taiyari kar rahe hain who thoda help kar dete hai... school mein magar kabhi homework check hi nahi hota hai.. toh pata hi nahi chalta ki hum jo kiye who sahi tha bhi nahi ...

(I do get homework by my teacher and I do try to complete it to the best of my ability. There is no one to help me with my work. I manage to get help from a neighbor who is preparing for a bank job. My homework is never checked, thus I do not get to know whether I did my work correctly or not).

• Performance Stress of coping with English

The learners in the second language classroom are often burdened with anxiety, greatly affecting the way they receive and process comprehensible input. The rate of language learning decreases significantly when the learners are undergoing performance stress. Since many of the learners have unequivocally have expected that the class environment during teaching of English should be such where the learners are made to feel comfortable and relaxed.

The teachers of English in these schools need to consider the following points at a serious note:

- How long does it take for the ESL learners to get into the target language?
- What kinds of activities are needed to be designed while teaching ESL learners?
- What are the ways to ensure that the learners are engage with the content at the same time able to develop their skills in English?

How to help the ESL learners in these classrooms?**Stage 1: Starting**

This is the first stage where the learners steps into the world of ESL. It is perhaps the grade I of entry where the learners are introduced to words and basic sentence structure. The duration of learning at this stage depends solely here on the teachers on how well they are able to design the learning opportunities. The learners at this stage are mainly receptive but they are experimenting with lots of stuff practically which cannot be denied. A good reception and acceptance as part of the learners can surely guarantee that they are good producers at the later stage. The teachers need to encourage the parents to help or atleast encourage the learners by providing ample language support. It is evident that in context of Bihar where a majority is the first generation English learners convincing and expecting the support from parents is a difficult task but there is no loss unless one tries upon it. An orientation programme for parents or a self help group at community level could turn into a good initiative to help the learners.

Stage 2: Emerging

This is the second stage of language learning. Learners at this stage have been well exposed to the targeted language as a result of which they begin to produce their needs in broken expression, beginning with words and simple sentences. The teachers need to provide the learners with visual cues and proper reinforcement so as to instill confidence among the learners. This is a very fragile stage of learning as the learners production in the target language is filled with enormous errors. The teachers must not push to fixed technical errors and thus derailing the entire process of learners owning the language development. This stage is often mark with

frequent ups and downs but the teachers effort should be directed to keep the learners move at their convenient speed of language development. A push or a pull at this stage can prove seriously hazardous to the ESL learners.

Stage 3: Developing

This is the stage where the learners have developed considerable amount of language. they often begin to converse with their peers as well as their teachers in the target language. there sentences structures begin to improve as they begin to understand the modified content. they are constantly struggling in articulating their needs and feeling but at the same time are eager to experiment more and more. The teachers need to keep a strict eye on the learners' progress and need to provide them with correct solutions. The same ability grouping can be done at this stage.

Stage 4: Expanding

English language learners at this stage are becoming more fluent. They can highlight important information in a text, use graphic organizers independently, and skim material for specific information; they are also able to analyze, create, debate, predict, and hypothesize in English. However, the writing of ELLs in Stage 4 will still have many errors as the students continue trying to master the complexity of English grammar and sentence structure. The teacher's focus at this stage should be on student comprehension and writing.

Stage 5: Bridging

At this stage, ELLs can perform in all areas close to the level of their native English-speaking classmates. However, they will continue to need teacher support with oral and written use of more complex vocabulary and sentence structure, and may also need support developing learning strategies and study skills. It is important to remember that although students at this stage are no longer in ESL programs, they will still be learning English for years to come.

Conclusion:

The learners in these classrooms are surely on the disadvantaged side and thus the teachers in these schools needs to become more responsible towards the learners. The learners' problems are needed to view with seriousness and effective measures are to be taken to ensure that the learners are not left to fend off with themselves. The issues raised by the learners are some of the serious issues and there is a prompt need for action to help the English learners.

The learners of English as a second language is a highly vulnerable group and any blockage in their learning could lead to severely damage their learning of target language. In the present view of the current situation it is heavily required that the stakeholders in the process-the teachers, the learners, the parents and the school administrations sit down and mutters well on how they are going to sort before it is too late.

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