

LEARNING ONE'S LANGUAGE AND ANOTHER'S: A PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING ENGLISH TO INDIAN LEARNERS

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English is being learnt all over the world by individuals and by groups of individuals. Why they learn English, how they learn it, what English they learn will naturally differ. The why(s) will decide the how and the what. To Indians, English has become as much an essential medium as their own tongues or as their respective State vernaculars when they are different from their own tongues. In view of the key role the English language plays in the lives of the Indians, a comparative analysis of why, how Indians learn their tongues and why and how they learn English is in well in place. Also because it might be very revealing.

When and why do today's Indian children learn languages that they later know to be theirs? Right from babyhood

- to instinctively satisfy needs
- to be communicated to and to communicate

to be responders to or initiators of a piece of discourse, to be silent partners or to be or to be all these alternately as and when they wish (not) to – an environmental necessity or a basic human urge

Why do they continue to do so?

- to be literates
- to be counted among the educated

decisions by elders to which they comply most probably with hardly a thought spent on it – at least in the early stages of their growth.

- to be hopefully employed or
- to hopefully run a business

in order to exist, to survive or to live in several roles they do take on, willingly or otherwise, greedily or contentedly as providers of sustenance to themselves and to others, as relatives, as husbands or wives, as parents, as neighbours, as citizens.

How do today's Indian children learn their languages? Even in the womb if we are to believe the mythologies through continuous bombardment [around them, in dreams and in silences] of noises (un) accompanied by non-verbals that seem to take on meaning with time through involuntarily repetitive and / or intuitive lsrw experiences natural or planned – in the home , in the neighbourhood, in educational institutions, in other varied organizations. This bombardment occurs through gradually ever- enlarging sets of models – relatives, neighbours, strangers, teachers, print media, visual media and society at large. These models who form a live society provide ample instances of thought content clothed in ever changing everyday use of

lexis and structure appropriate to given situations, in given environments [registers, styles based on relationships] which the children's minds [the subconscious and the conscious] receive, evaluate, assimilate, while making meaning, imitating initially, committing errors, gradually weaning the children away from copying, producing own contents using lexis and structure appropriately thereby enabling them to become creators of discourse.

Initial fits and starts mature in these children into spontaneity which adds fluency, appropriacy and even creativity to language use to convey content in some or full measure, depending on the width and depth of their inherent communicative competence, of their desires, of their needs, and of their ability and intentions to develop and use this competence at will, on compulsion or as obligation.

In the process of such learning the conscious mind, voluntarily or compulsively does come in to play as language learning is meant to be tested and measured in its own right and as the varied contents (knowledge areas) are tested and measured through language to declare proficiency level obtain therein. In this formal learning setup, the conscious mind takes over the job done hitherto by the subconscious and gets busy comprehending content, creating content and making meaning. But it is still the subconscious mind that continues to absorb, stored, all the lexis and structure – old and new – that the models provide, it is still the subconscious mind that retrieves and releases these, appropriate to discourse contexts. It is in these contexts of constant interaction between the contents and their languages supplied by the models that the children grow into competent language users. For without content, language is a vacuum, for without content there is no thinking, without thinking there is neither comprehension nor expression and without these there is no language.

What do these children learn? Single noises become multiples which later shape into sounds which in turn become words which in turn form sense groups which further enlarge into larger, longer stretches of discourse. The children pick the sounds, then the words, and the sentences, and with them come meanings, concepts, feelings, emotions, initially discreetly and later coherently which culminate into stored schemata to which new content is added when appropriate. They then fit words into smaller, shorter groups and gradually into larger, longer groups which give them relationships between thought and action, between them and others, between their "me's".

Is learning another's language any different? English in this instance.

When and why do today's Indian Children learn English? Right from the womb in Anglo-Indian homes [first group]. From childhood in educated Christian, Muslim and Hindu homes [second group]. In the former, English is their natural medium for communication. In the later, English is their chosen medium for communication as the elders know that given today's environment for future growth and prospects, their children will have a definite edge over others'. However, in most other homes [third group] which form the majority, children do not hear English used nor do they need to use it themselves.

The children of the first group learn English in the same order in which the reasons appear in the first paragraph of this writing: sets 1, 2 and 3 with their subsets. The children of the second group learn English as stated in sets 2 and 3 and so begin with set 1 to such an intense extent, that more often than not, they turn out to be

week users of their own languages. The children of the third group learn their languages as stated in sets 1 and 2 and learn English as stated in set 3. Because even the parents of these children have seen the need to give English education for reasons stated as corollary in the next paragraph.

Government offices (State and Central), private and public sector organizations are the employing agencies. Government jobs have their inherent constraints: they are not one too many, several positions at different levels in the hierarchy are reserved to be occupied by only specific communities, new vacancies are rarely created even the existing vacancies are hardly filled, promotions are withheld, there are frequent transfers disrupting, very often, children's education. Whereas private and public sectors is where the money in and is where are brighter career growth prospects. And these organizations employ those who can use English as chief performance medium and their business interests are not limited by geography.

In addition to these Indian adolescents and adults [unlike those in China, Russia or Japan] need to have sufficient mastery in using English in order to pursue higher studies, especially in sciences, engineering, business administration, commerce. Because Indian languages were stunted in growth for several centuries for various historical, political and social reasons and hence do not qualify as mediums of higher learning. Because even after five decades of independence, practically no steps have been taken to equip Indian languages with the capacity to handle the academic and professional needs of learners. Besides, since Indian children who happen to receive quality education listen to, speak, read and write higher knowledge in English, they do not develop thinking competence in their languages or in vernacular. Or having learnt their basics in their languages they find higher learning in English so foreign and so difficult. As neither group is able to make any genuine contribution in their languages to knowledge in science and technology and other areas, the Indian languages continue to lack the qualification of mediums of higher learning.

How do today's Indian children learn English? In the case of Anglo Indian children (first group) through natural immersion process of continuous bombardment of sounds, words, sentences to comprehend and convey content with the help of family, friends, relatives, teachers, course books, print media, visual media that provide content clothed in everyday use of lexis and structure which the children's minds [the subconscious and the conscious] receive, evaluate, and store and retrieve before and during schooling. This process continues with the constant interaction between content and English, and they grow as competent English users. In the case of the second group, the English learning process and growth is akin to that of the first group.

But in the case of the third group, who form the majority, different processes are at work. For some of them, serious contact with English begins when they learn to use it as medium to learn all subjects in English medium schools, since their economics permits payment of fat tuition fees. Though these children are three years behind the children of the first two groups their immersion process takes off early enough in the school environment for fourteen long years to become as natural and as proficient. For them the bombardment is for the whole day every day and the models are the teachers and the coursebooks in addition to parent inmost cases and the peers are also available for interactive practice. For some other children of this group contact with English begins when they learn it as one of the subjects and when they use it as medium to learn all subjects in English medium sections in otherwise vernacular medium schools. The immersion environment is thus restricted to within

the four walls of the classroom learning and they achieve tolerable levels of proficiency.

But for the sizable number of the third group [in small towns and villages which abound in India] contact with English starts at least five years behind the others and begins and ends within the confines of just 40-50 minutes of learning a day when they learn it as just one of the subjects even though they also have the teachers and books as models. Nowhere else do they hear or speak English, they have no contents, no thoughts other than what they have in English class, they have no opportunity, no occasion, no immediate reason to strengthen classroom learning and become proficient in the use of English for pursuit of higher learning. Their learning remains at the surface level also because the testing is probably kept intentionally at elementary level of comprehension and so stops with the conscious mind. and the immersion is almost nil. It is the abysmally minimal interaction between content other than that of the English text books and the English language that prevent them from growing into competent users of English even though they also do possess communicative competence like other Indian children, which of course they do exhibit while using their languages.

Is learning English any different from learning one's language?

In learning their languages, Indian children have live society to learn from in order to speak, to read, to write, imitating, emulating, creating, comprehending, and expressing varied discourses. In learning English, a live society of sorts is available for the Anglo-Indian children and for the children second group. But for the third group there is no live society that can provide the natural immersion process they need to make do with teachers and the coursebooks as models, as providers of content, as base for learning English lexis and structure. And if the models are imperfect learning is automatically imperfect. Thus the burden of these learners to learn well is too much. Little wonder, if they lack confidence in themselves in their capacity to learn English and lose heart and give up midway as they find in their adolescence to their utter dismay they are no match for their peers.

The above analysis confirms that whatever be the motives to learn one's language or others the process for learning them is common and that both require models to provide content and language use and to immerse learners.

This sorry reality gets worsened with the kind of teaching that goes on in Indian schools and colleges today. Teaching English has been regulated by the mercurial changes that have occurred over the past few decades in the dictation of how to teach English to nonnatives. Grammar – translation mode with literary texts gave way to structural approach. Now skill- oriented and task-based English teaching goes on with discrete content items. The teachers and the coursebooks have stopped being models for quite sometime now. Long stretches of unified, coherent content, for the purpose of interplay between the minds and the English language is no longer of any significance. For it was declared that their teaching resulted in rote-memory as a result of testing the level of comprehension of the content of the 'seen' passages. It was said that the English language was being learned with out understanding that only passive learning was occurring as the teacher did most of the talking, that testing was not subjective and hence could not measure the learner accurately but also did not reveal the learners' ability to successfully handle 'unseen' stretches of discourse written or spoken. It is said that involving students in tasks and getting them to develop skills will make them confident in the use of English.

In summary, a comparison between what is needed and what is being offered to learn English reveals holes to be plugged. It must be realized that tasks and skills are not ends in themselves but are only language actions. It must be realized that in the absence of live society only by imitation of the two available models for expressing content through rote-memory, say, in the first six years of schooling with the subconscious playing its role to perfection and only by emulation of the models through intentional learning during the next three years of schooling with both the conscious and the subconscious being active to assist learners in their growth will they become creative through weaning themselves away in the last three years of schooling when both the conscious and the subconscious continue to coact. And it must be realized that for all these coursebook content and the teacher as models are vital. Of course, by implication. We have to have tolerably blemishless teachers and coursebook.

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