



Be Pragmatic, don't be Idealistic

Dr. Chetan Mewada

H.A.College of Commerce, Opp.Law Garden, Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad-6

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I would like to identify and discuss an approach that may provide a practical approach to teach English language in the Indian multilingual educational context. The issue touched upon here concerning with teaching and learning English language could be applicable at the any stage of life. My views, opinions and suggestions put forward in the following paragraphs are based on my observations as a teacher of English and Communication at undergraduate level and professional courses. I would like to draw the conclusion that the simplest approach to teach English language to Indian learners is to follow a pragmatic approach in teaching rather than being too much idealistic to get the best results.

KEYWORDS: idealistic, pragmatic, approach, Indian multilingual educational learning English

At a very early stage of learning, a child views and imitates language, at a latter stage the child catches the language and at the higher stage of learning, the child who is youth now, learns the application of language in various fields. Let us try to evaluate the situation, very objectively in Gujarat. The trends in Gujarat as far as language and medium of instruction in educational institutions are concerned; most of the learners would like to study in English Medium. This situation has demanded a rise in a new pattern of teaching and learning in schools and colleges in Gujarat. The teacher wants to teach in 'English language', the students are keen to study in 'English medium' as a result, while the teaching - learning process goes on, both the groups, the teacher and the learners, feel that 'something' is missing in the class room teaching-learning act. The interaction between both the groups demands the local fervor or regional shade in communication process to make the class room interesting. This need may be fulfilled by developing and accepting a pattern of learning through 'a rational use of mother tongue' in the class room, i.e. either bilingual or multilingual approach in teaching. It is observed that at all the stages of learning; the learner has to learn two or three languages simultaneously. On the contrary, this approach or method concerns with students, parents, and educationists who often consider learning several languages either simultaneously or successively within the school curriculum is a burden imposed on the school children with no explicit benefits either to them or to the nation.

To follow a bilingual or multilingual approach for teaching English in India does not indicate that teachers follow a wrong pattern of teaching, in fact, it is one of the practical approaches. In 1957, the UNESCO issued a formal declaration announcing the right of every child to be educated through their mother tongue. Supporting this declaration, Skutnabb-Kangas (1994) argues, "In a civilized society there should be no need to debate the right to maintain and develop the mother tongue. It is a self-evident human right....Observing linguistic human rights implies at an individual level, that all people can identify positively with their mother tongue and has that identification accepted and respected by others whether their mother tongue is a minority language or a majority language" 1.

To support the topic, I put forward here some of the guidelines, provided by experts and the authentic educational agencies, highlighting the importance of mother tongue while learning English language. Prof. Uday Ravi Shashtry, Pallagatti Adavappa, First Grade College, Tip-tur presented a paper titled 'let's Stop Pretending' where he pointed out, "Most of the ELT materials, methods and testing patterns are devised for teaching urban learners. These tools, strategies and techniques work with students who already have some basic knowledge of English. But, I contest; ELT has to be rewritten, remodeled, liberating ourselves from the readymade, imported strategies and compromising with the ground reality, to suit our requirements. In India which is dominantly rural, we cannot afford to ignore the prevailing reality. The rural learner who has absolutely no prerequisite knowledge of English (Which we always take for granted) is completely ignored."

Yes, don't pretend because the existing status of learning through English medium exposes the loopholes in the system and demands for a bilingual or multilingual approach in teaching English in India. Refer to the report, published in Ahmedabad Mirror, dated 2nd July, 2008, under the headline 'It's Gujlish in our Colleges' that 'Studying in English

–medium colleges is just for namesake. The learning is carried out in Gujarati or Hindi'. The report further reads, "while some colleges simply don't have the lecturers capable of taking classes in English, the others say they have to consider the fact that a large number of students have cleared their class 12 exams in vernacular medium and they 'deserve at least six months' to get into the groove when it comes to studying in English. In many of these colleges, the professors actually ask the students their choice of language during the lectures. Even if the students opt for English as their medium of learning, all they get are a few English words thrown in while the bulk of learning is conducted in Gujarati or Hindi."

The Indian linguistic landscape presents a picture of coexistence of more than one and sometimes more than two or three languages almost throughout the country. Any discussion on language teaching should take this factor into consideration.

Language teaching comprises three basic aspects: Approach, method and technique. (Anthony 1972). The Context of evolution of an approach towards language teaching is an important issue. Every approach towards teaching language has evolved in a defined social and linguistic context. Every approach is 'context-sensitive' and is 'context-defined' (Anthony 1972). Thus, the linguistic context will define the approach to be followed in teaching languages in the educational institutions. Attempts have been made to evolve and practice the language teaching methods and approaches mostly in monolingual and rarely in bilingual contexts, in some of the educational institutions. These approaches and methods usually assume ideal conditions of language teaching and language learning since Indian schools and colleges present a bi/multilingual situation, we may have to have a second look at the approaches currently used for language teaching.

While discussing the teaching of English to language minorities in the US, Sandra Lee McKay, San Francisco State University, USA, "To begin I describe existing educational program for second language learners of English, indicating the assumptions that each of these programs makes about the relationship between first language literacy and second language literacy, as well as each program's assumptions about the value of bilingualism." 2 The trainer further adds, "In general, most educational programs in the US for second language English learners today are ineffective because they fail to take into account the social dimensions of language learning." 3 By providing the example of the situation of second language learning/teaching in the US, I, by no means intend to suggest that the America and India face identical educational challenges. However, I believe it may be helpful to us as second language educators to consider the situation of second language teaching in the US. Existing programs for English language learners in the US can be distinguished on two primary levels: their assumptions about the value of mother tongue education and about the relationship between first language and second language literacy.

Ruiz (1988) distinguishes three prevalent orientations toward multilingualism -- *language-as-problem*, *language-as-right*, and *language-as-resource*. In the first orientation, language-as-problem, members of a society tend to see multilingualism as a problem that on a social level can result in a lack of social cohesiveness and on an individual level may result in cognitive deficiencies. In the second orientation,

language-as-right, the promotion of bilingualism is viewed as a legal mandate involving the right of individuals to use their mother tongue and to not suffer discrimination for this use. Finally, in a language-as-resource orientation, individuals view multilingualism as a social and individual resource that can reap economic, political, social and individual benefits. This last perspective is, of course, could be taken into consideration while talking about teaching English in Gujarat in particular and India in general. Kelly Louis, (1969) talked about three major aims of Language teaching: language for communication, language for artistic and cultural appreciation and language for linguistic analysis.

Cummins (1979, 1981) was the first to put forward that literacy abilities as well as content knowledge acquired in the mother tongue will transfer to the second language. He argues that there is a threshold level of linguistic competence that a bilingual child must acquire in order for bilingualism to provide beneficial cognitive growth. Hence, in Cummins' view acquiring strong skills in at least one language is a necessary but not sufficient condition to avoid deficits in the cognitive development of bilinguals. If this hypothesis is accurate, then bilingual children must be provided with the opportunity to develop at least one of their languages to this threshold level of proficiency. Cummins further argues that once learners have acquired literacy skills in their mother tongue, learning literacy in a second language is facilitated since learners transfer these skills across languages. Cummins terms this idea the developmental interdependence hypothesis.

Existing programs for English language learners in Gujarat must take into consideration, these different assumptions regarding the value of mother tongue education and the transfer of literacy skills from one language to a second. While considering any model for second language learning in Gujarat, the linguists and the educationists should

show a positive attitude, regarding the value of bilingualism.

I believe that a key factor necessary in designing locally appropriate educational alternatives is to consider the social context of language learning. Two major assumptions could be made in this regard:

First, I assume that schools and colleges alone never had and never will have the ability to meet the needs of language minority learners in isolation. As Paulston (1981: 476) points out, "Educational institutions have limited power in dealing with language acquisition or the lack thereof, a learning process which is primarily the result of social factors."

Second, I assume that educational programs, to be effective, must be designed to meet the particular needs of the students, parents, and community that are being served. I would like to mention some of the social contexts such as 'class room', 'institution', 'home' and the 'community' that need to be considered in designing locally appropriate educational alternatives.

Ultimately, it is important for educators in any country to recognize that whereas schools are given a public mandate to educate the young people of the country, in reality, learning takes place in a variety of contexts - the home, the community and the workplace. What educational planners need to do is make the classroom a place where this learning can come together with young people from all backgrounds, learning from one another and critically developing the knowledge they have. However, I believe that the need to focus on the social context in designing educational programs is essential for any country. And one of the important features of the language learning process, keeping in mind the social context is to find out an apt system where the mother tongue of a learner is used judiciously by a trainer to teach English language.

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