



Challenges for SLT in a Heterogeneous Space

Udaya Narayana Singh

Head (Amity Centre for Linguistic Studies)

Amity University Gurgaon, India

Received: Apr. 02, 2017

Accepted: Apr. 02, 2017

Online Published: May. 27, 2017

Abstract

The paper looks into the Indian scenario where English Language Teaching issues and strategies are thought to be very different from teaching/learning of major regional languages as well as Hindi as under Second Language Teaching (SLT). That English Language Teaching (ELT) will have to be different in a heterogeneous space such as India will have to be realized. This is because English is not a part of the learners' repertoire. Fear of Second Language Learning has discouraged many children who preferred to quietly drop out. The fields of Readability, Gradation of Vocabulary or Language Testing have now emerged as important research areas in India, thanks to some non-governmental initiatives. But much of the crisis facing SLT or even FLT is because of multiplicity of theoretical claims and counter-claims with not much convincing evidence. Rapid expansion without proper planning and development of infrastructure and locating manpower reserve create further problems for the State. In this context, NCERT's two NCF-Documents on 'Language Teaching' – one on English by Amritavalli et al (2005) and the other on Indian languages by Rama Kant Agnihotri et al (2006) are taken up here to discuss the problem areas in SLT as well as problems with their premises.

Keywords: ESL Strategy, Heterogeneous space, NCF-Documents, Means of Communication

1. Introduction

The challenges of teaching a language not rooted in the soil of the learners is very different from teaching the same language to its neighboring speech communities. What one finds difficult in a classroom in France or Germany where English has to be taught cannot be

compared with the difficulties of teaching and learning English in a diverse country such as India. The ESL strategy faces a greater challenge because of a formula under which most Indian schools will impart instructions in both Regional or State language as well as in Hindi, the federal official language which also happens to be a Language for Wider Communication (LWC). The matter is more complicated in some pockets where the mother-tongue of the learner is none of these three sets of languages. Tackling a heterogeneous situation such as this needs some genuine ground level research and experiments which need to be reported and discussed. That Language Teaching is very different from Science teaching or imparting instructions in Geography or History is realized at an early stage. There is no doubt that there is a language learning component while children are picking up technical subjects as well. However, the personnel engaged in Second Language Teaching (SLT) usually shy out in bringing in or focusing on these comparisons, or in flagging these issues. This paper attempts to flag some of these challenges faced by the SLT community in India.

The ESL research community in India is a very silent lot. They have not made any attempts to contribute to policy changes by engaging in a public discussion on the do's and the don'ts of the teaching tools and strategies. Interestingly, language teachers work on the 'noise' factor, as the basic linguistic textbooks tell us, but are not good at making them heard among the specialists of pedagogy. One reason could be that allocation for research or experiments on teaching/learning of languages is abysmally low compared with allocation Science and Technology (S&T) Institutions. Obviously, S&T programmes and institutions need more money for various reasons, but one does not realize that given the challenges like bringing all children to school under well-meaning programmes such as Education For All (EFA), or in removing the difficulties of schools and colleges in respect of media of instruction, investment on SLT research will actually benefit the other sectors. Thanks to the efforts of some major teaching institutions such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) and the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), it is being realized gradually as to how important is this investment – to improve the quality of our education system in general - if not for what is regarded as more esoteric disciplines of 'Linguistics', 'Literary Studies', 'Comparative Literature', 'Folklore' or 'Translation Studies.' Even these noble efforts have very low reception compared to the actual demand for English learning, which the private sector has picked up through its "Spoken English" coaching centers or remedial courses in private institutions.

The fields of Readability, Gradation of Vocabulary or Language Testing have now emerged as important research areas in India, thanks to some non-governmental initiatives as well, such as the findings of the ASER survey conducted by *Pratham Educational Foundation*, or that of *Ekalavya* and *Room to Read*. Many private sector initiatives could also be seen now to help the students in cracking the TOEFL kind of tests. Phonics for English learning in different ESL/EFL countries has also picked up. The Pratham intervention and experiment in Rajasthan have also shown that it works well.

But much of the crisis facing SLT or even FLT is because of multiplicity of theoretical claims and counter-claims with not much convincing evidence in support of any of these positions. While reviewing Hector Hammerly's (1982) *Synthesis in Second Language Teaching*, Thomas S. Parry (1986: 165) writes:

“Few if any professionals in second language education will deny that second language teaching has experienced frequent and at times drastic changes particularly within the past three decades. Much of this change has been characterized as being unprincipled and lacking direction as evidenced by the lack of a coherent theory of language teaching. At the very root of the problem is a dearth of empirical evidence to support the numerous claims and counter-claims of success being made by advocates of one or more “innovative” methodologies. It is no wonder that today's foreign language teachers are in a quandary, running from here to there, from fad to fad, in search of something that they hope will work.”

1. The Broad Issues Involved

Therefore, we begin by looking for the issues that pose challenges for SLT/FLT. In fact, the situation of use of English in India is best summarized by R.K.Gupta (1995: 73)

“The situation of English in India may be likened to that of a loving yet constantly bickering couple who can live neither with nor without each other. Such ambivalence may well be characteristic not only of India but also of other former

British colonies, which seem riven by the conflict between the desire to retain English for its great utility in practical life and the emotional urge to discard it as a symbol and instrument of colonial oppression.”

This, however, creates an impression that educated Indians are bilingual, and the struggle in India is the competition between English and one’s mother language. But in Asia, Africa and South America, and also among immigrants in Europe and North America, many speak three, four or even five languages on a daily basis (Rothman & Treffers-Daller 2013: 14), switching between different languages. Even though their mental grammars are different with respect to each of these languages, it is not surprising to find them mixing two languages.

It was, therefore, heartening to see that NCERT made a move to create two ‘National Curriculum Framework’ or NCF-Documents on ‘Language Teaching’ – one under the Chairmanship of R. Amritavalli (2005) on ‘Teaching of English’, and the other under Rama Kant Agnihotri (2006) on ‘Teaching of Indian Languages’ raised some very pertinent issues. The effort of the *National Knowledge Commission* to recommend setting up of the ‘National Translation Mission’ was also a good move in filling a gap. The ‘National Testing Service’ established by the CIIL was also helpful. However, it is true that the NCF was fully cognizant about the capability and capacity of the education system across rural India to deliver the curriculum or practice they had outlined in the document (is there data to support this? For example, specialist English teachers vs Non- specialist English teachers etc. which British Council might have through some spot surveys, or even with DISE).

However, it is a fact that the country still has no professional training programmed for language teachers. The NCTE and B.Ed. Programmers have not yet taken enough steps to provide either pre-service or in-service training to the vast body of language teachers. There is a growing realization in the world today that new approaches to teacher education are based on the belief that ESL or FSL or SSL language learners' access to challenging content can be enhanced through teaching strategies that provide multiple pathways to the understanding of language and content. But we are yet to engage ourselves in even cataloguing our approaches.

One major concern comes from the global tendencies that are visible in elementary to higher education today, under which rapid speed of expansion without proper

infrastructure or manpower reserve, lack of state support or needed resources for such expansions, a growing tendency to pass on the cost of educating to the parents of the taught, “privatisation and commoditization” of the education sector (Tilak, Jandhyala B.G. 2015: 43) where new marketing modes and techniques win over, and a purposeful neglect of liberal arts, humanities, social sciences, and theoretical sciences make the task more difficult.

To give one typical instance from Second Language Teaching scenario, let us look at teaching of major Indian languages to minor linguistic groups. Here is an experience of this type from the South:

“Twenty-five years ago, when I began my study of Urali, a Dravidian hill tribe in the Sathyamangalam and Thalamalai ranges in the western ghats in Tamilnadu, it was relatively easier to move from one village to another... People were friendly and often frank in their conversations. They, especially women, could not speak much Tamil, but were willing and able to communicate with me in Tamil. Veerappan was still not known to the outside world. The co-operative societies of the tribal people and the forest guards ruled the minds and commitments of the people. I thought, rather hoped and prayed, that a bright future was before them, perhaps within a few years. There was a school meant for the tribal children, and there was a teacher from the plains trying his best to teach Tamil and other subjects. However, socio-economic, linguistic and educational conditions then and now have not really changed. There is more than one school now, and there are more buses plying the route. There are more tribal people who can now communicate well through Tamil.... The new generation, however, has not gone places. Their world is ever-shrinking, practically with no employment opportunities... The drop-out rate continues to be high, and the success stories are becoming fewer and fewer.

How do we keep these tribal children in school? How do we motivate them to learn through a language not their own? How do we teach Tamil to them well enough, and early enough, that these children would use this language to study other subjects?” (Lal, Sam Mohan. 2014. ‘Problems of teaching a literary language to speakers of a pre-literate language’)

We know that students must use language to acquire academic content in mainstream classes, for which our SLT must be integrated with the social, cultural, and political contexts of language use, but it is only now that we seem to be waking up to these issues.

2. Certain Premises that need a careful look

I take it that the moves we are making in language education may be initial steps, but I guess they should catch up like wild fire, given the leadership some of you have taken. Both NCF documents lament that even now most people associated with language teaching (teachers, teacher trainers and textbook writers) themselves have this misconception that language is nothing more than a mere “means of communication.” One forgets that Simplistic “values” vis-à-vis language teaching/learning sell and are marketable, while academic values of language do not. English being “aspirational,” it is almost more than

just a means of communication – because there is the utility aspects of it, especially in income generation and beliefs of people.

Certain important premises have been floated and/or expanded in the NCF documents, and the following three points are worth noting:

- Language colors our perception and patterns our thought processes.
- Language defines power structure in our society.
- Language creates unequal opportunities and differential control over scarce resources.

Let us look at the relevant statement carefully to appreciate these broad points: For instance, the position paper of Agnihotri (2006) begins thus: “*Language is... a phenomenon that to a great extent structures our thought and defines our social relationships in terms of both our power and equality.*” Let us consider the implications of this position.

First of all, language helps drawing the dividing line between those who will have power – by virtue of their linguistic controls, and those who would suffer because of a differential access to expressions of power. Secondly, it also assumes that hierarchy and inequality being the order of the day, language somehow enables us to offer identity tags to those who must be equals and be a part of the “inner circle” and those who must be kept outside the arena. Unfortunately, we also get the impression that this is the way our languages will be vis-à-vis our society. In the history of human race, all human cultures are known to be performing a function of ‘assigning values’ to others, because it is in the nature of any tradition of culture to ‘notice’ or ‘mark’ differences between people, objects, events, and experiences. Accordingly, all cultures, including ours, place some kind of value - positive or negative, or even scalar - on those perceived differences which could also show categorial values. When these differences are valued negatively, and as we know - throughout history there have been many instances of such devaluations - society acts negatively towards such entities.

Through the processes of valuation or devaluation, language styles and forms have often been marked with a gender bias or a caste bias, that is pitted against *‘the devalued’ other*. Even though the society at large reserve collective ridicule for certain cultural aggregates or speech varieties, the creative members of such communities (including writers) dare defying such imposed negative values, and bring them up as alternative forms of literary expression. Those who defy the negative assessments do not believe that language is a ‘wicked’ problem, nor can it be like other social factors (like access to food,

clothing, shelter and livelihood etc) that are sources of differentials. It is true that the wicked problems need to be attended to by the planners and administrators. But they believe that differential perception of our languages is purely due to our own legacy. Therefore, it is up to the concerned and conscientious citizens to take affirmative steps to remove this practice that denies placement of equal value tag to all language groups within a polity.

With respect to the Second Assumption, the NCERT-document also states the following: *“In addition to a variety of socio-political reasons that adversely impinge upon our education system in general, some reasons that are primarily responsible for this low levels of proficiency include: lack of any understanding about the nature and structure of our languages and the processes of language teaching and learning, especially in our multilingual contexts.”* There have been many setbacks – because of our decisions like keeping ‘Grammar-Translation Method’ away from SLT. Let us try to guess why this happens. The language we are learning has not ‘practice space’- and unless that happens, at least to me one cannot polish, pick up more, innovate and retain it.

Schools often focus on pushing students to work rapidly and unrealistically to acquire fluency in English (or whichever is language of power in a developing country) without attention to continued first language development. This Failure to see the interconnectedness between first and second languages and cultures is not a healthy trend. I have a strong feeling that we need to bring in additional teaching support materials that will work for different linguistic environments in India, where the same textbook with supplementary materials would highlight the interconnectedness. Yet another problem is the assumption we make about who should be responsible for language teaching – a separate breed of people, or could it be even a science teacher? This strategy of fragmentation and isolation of language teaching and learning cost us dear so far.

It is no wonder that language puritans or those who have appointed themselves as the preservers of cultural purity do not like such admixtures. It is often seen that they lodge a premeditated offence on the usage of English language in India – the lukewarm vehemence and speculations against a “foreign tongue” making its way into our arena as an unwanted intruder has gained acceptance and popularity in certain quarters of India, who have begun voicing the demand for greater use of “Indian” languages. But English has been rapidly gaining popularity because it has a bigger market attracting the best of talents among designers and especially urbanite bilingual authors. This is directly related to what pays them most, because for the regional and Bollywood films, it is the poosite situation

where the rootedness, the rusticity, the indigenusness in language choice and use would get them more money. It is relevant also in the context of a greater number of urban jobs that require a common communication platform. Also, at times the language is used as a metric for meritocracy where the skill and fluency of English is equated to a person's education, influence and upbringing.

Also, we have often adopted a narrow view on language. Teacher education programs often focus on the components of language, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. This narrow view overlooks the social nature of language and a mechanism through which content can be explored and examined. In addition, ways to teach language to different levels of learners ought to be different, and any sensitive language teaching course should cover this variability. Learning to Teach has to be based on Learner Levels. The existence of cultural differences must be made use of positively rather than taking this as an obstacle. The teachers should be aware of the variety of world views espoused by participants in the target culture and the native culture, and of the need to view both cultures from a number of perspectives. Such insights cannot be achieved by simply adding more culture courses to the teacher education curriculum.

Let us consider the third assumption now: The initial statement, namely that *language structures our thought* assumes that if we were left to think outside of language or without our languages, our thoughts would have had a different organization. At the current state of knowledge in the area of Cognitive Sciences, we are unaware as to what such structures might be. However, because we are forced to think through our languages, and as they act as mediating elements, they demand that the agenda of our thinking be defined by our languages – their nature and structure. This leads us to this assumption that the teaching community generally lacks the appreciation of language both as a means of construction of knowledge as well as a possible source of generation of knowledge. I am not sure if archiving of knowledge and the necessary progress in this area has reached a stage where language is no more an essential pillar of knowledge construction, preservation and dissemination.

I think yet another problem lies in our decisions on what we consider as the 'standard' of the target language(s) in the educational arena. This covers all issues of standard-formation, such as

- Standard Language (in a multilingual set up)
- Standard Style (once a language choice is made)
- Standard format (once stylistic choices are made)
- Standard strategies (of use of the tools)
- Standard testing (once the tool is used)
- Standards of information processing and archiving (creating standard references and search engines at each level)
- Standard use of the medium acquired for any given area of activity – socio-economic, technical or scientific

The biggest question is: Should these be unified standard or be pluralistic, right from the word ‘go’? Many of us think it is scandalous to even entertain a thought about creating a scope for plural standards at each level. It is our tendency to bind disparate strands or forms and fit them into one stream, and our legacy of cultural uniformity (the stand like ‘unity in diversity’?) that are responsible for this state. It is this hardening stance that has done a great harm in development of promotion and teaching of Hindi as the second language across many states. Setting up an artificial standard at the cost of multiple standards has seen a wide gap developing in Communicative Hindi and Written Standard Hindi. We forget to learn from history because de-Sanskritization has been a ‘real’ trend even in the past to break away from Classical Sanskrit. Therefore, one could easily break new grounds in thinking of ‘Prakritization’ of our *bhasha* tradition, and bring it also in the context of teaching and learning.

3. Conclusion

In this brief paper, the focus was on the Indian scenario where English Language Teaching is twice removed from the learners whose mother-tongues are not school languages, and are often taught the languages of their state and/or Hindi which is itself a difficult step. On top of that, they are imparted instructions in English which is usually not a part of the learners’ repertoire. Further, learning the other subjects well depends on their mastery of these Second Languages as all instructional material is written in those languages. Bringing in or retaining children in Schools has, therefore, been a major problem for implementation of EFA goals in India. The fields of Readability, Gradation of Vocabulary or Language

Testing have now emerged as important research areas in India, thanks to some non-governmental initiatives.

It was also pointed out that much of the crisis facing SLT or even FLT is because of multiplicity of theoretical claims and counter-claims with not much convincing evidence. Rapid expansion without proper planning and development of infrastructure and locating manpower reserve create further problems for the State. In this context, NCERT's two NCF-Documents on 'Language Teaching' – one on English by Amritavalli et al (2005) and the other on Indian languages by Rama Kant Agnihotri et al (2006) were taken up here to discuss the problem areas in SLT as well as the premises based on which teaching curricula are designed.

4. References

- Agnihotri, Rama Kant. 2006. 'Position Paper: National Focus Group on Teaching of Indian Languages,' New Delhi: NCERT, NCF 1.3. 57pp.
- Amritavalli, R. et al 2005. 'Position Paper: National Focus Group on Teaching of English.' New Delhi: NCERT, NCF 1.4. 35pp.
- Dasgupta, Probal. 1993. *The Otherness of English: India's Auntie-Tongue Syndrome*. LAD/1 (Gen eds, Udaya Narayana Singh & Probal Dasgupta). New Delhi: Sage.

- Gupta, R.K. 1995. 'English in a Postcolonial Situation: The Example of India.' *Profession, ofession*, 73-78. Modern Language Association.
- Parry, Thomas S. 1986. Review of *Synthesis in Second Language Teaching* by Hector Hammerly (1982), and *An Integrated Theory of Language Teaching and Its Practical Consequences* by Hector Hammerly (1985). *The Modern Language Journal*, 70.2 (Summer, 1986): 165-167.
- Rothman, Jason & Jeanine Treffers-Daller. 2013. 'Multilingualism in an international context.' In Vivien Berry, ed. *English Impact Report: Investigating English Language Learning Outcomes at the Primary School Levels in Rural India*. London: British Council, 15-20.
- Sam Mohan Lal. 2014. 'Problems of teaching a literary language to speakers of a pre-literate language.'
- Singh, Rajarshi. 2017 (Forthcoming). English Language in India, Chapter 12 in Singh, Udaya Narayana & Rajarshi Singh, *The Other India: View From Below*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.