

TEACHING ENGLISH IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES: LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND CULTURE

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Abstract: Every language has its own culture and identity. With the growing importance of science and technology, commerce and management, economics and administration, research and development the world is forced to voice in one language. Keeping this in view my paper focuses on English language and how it affects the individual identity and aims at elevating the challenges encountered by the English teachers in the creation of neutral culture and understanding. Also there is special focus on important observations regarding how cultural differences could create textual differences in interpretation.

Keywords: Language, identity, culture, pluralistic, teacher, interpretation, text, marginalization

1. Welcome to the Garden of Eden

Language is one instrument that human species is endowed with and it quickened the evolution of human beings. Language is essential for thought process. All our thoughts are in verbal form. It also helped human race explore and utilize the collective experience and memory. So unlike other animal species the social conditioning and behavioral regulation strengthened and became the culture of individual tribes. It also strengthened the institute of family, society and the idea of associated living and collective responsibility. In the process, thinkers were born and the peasantry was too happy to give them exemption from hard labour. And this leisurely class evolved into leaders. They acquired individual identity. Some assumed political leadership and others religious. One wanted to strengthen the social contact and the other moral and ethical binding. Identity can be established through eloquence of language and thought as Dale Carnegie once said that somebody is our boss because he knows more words. Modern societies are ruled by communication experts and it is doubly true from American President to evangelical Christianity. One commands, the other persuades but the weapon is the same – words, words and more words. That is the precise relationship among language, identity and culture.

2. Origin and evolution of Language

Every tribe evolved its own coded sounds which today we call language. The languages have become so numerous that those who travel a few hundred miles in India encounter 30 to 40 languages. Every language has its own culture and identity. Languages are like living organisms throbbing with life. In a pluralistic society one has to accept multiplicity of languages but they are leading to fragmentation of general will and political mandate. Modern states are huge and require the collective strength of its population to establish their executive authority. So they short listed the number of languages on the basis of their demo-graphs. Even then multilingual, multi-religious secular country like India is forced to form its local administration on the basis of language its people speak. Still disgruntled elements go on protesting against the so called injustice meted out to them. With the growing importance of science and technology, commerce and

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management, economics and administration, research and development the world is forced to voice in one language. As individual countries cannot resolve their own problems, they accepted the idea of global village.

Technology made the world so small and brought the people so close and our remotest relations are just a click away. As we all know our growing human family improves its quality life only by remaining together and sharing its problems and solutions. Here English played the key role for historical reasons.

3. Cultural challenges in teaching English

To regain the lost paradise, to outlaw the satanic forces and war mongering the world community must assert in one voice preferably in one language. English language is gradually gaining acceptance even among linguistic chauvinists like China and Russia. The research done in the area of science and medicine, forces the few reluctant individuals to interact with the international community through the medium of English language. So all over the world English teachers encounter many challenges. Western idiom is difficult to digest for Orientals. A language evolves on the basis of its historical bedrocks, climatic conditions and religious beliefs. Certain ideas like ‘Achilles’ heel’, ‘a black mark’, ‘empty vessels make much noise’ etc. are there in both Anglo-Saxon and Hindu mythology. But expressions like ‘warm wishes,’ ‘cold response’ etc., have negative reciprocation in tropical Asian and African population. Even the cultural practices like pecking, shaking hands, hugging which have exclusive promiscuous significance to eastern people fall under the ban of religion. When it goes deep into vernacular idiom and dialect English teachers are frequently found in the crossroads.

English language teacher is uniquely placed in the comprehensive educational system as he/she gets an opportunity to give talks on western culture through its literature asserting Asian and African identity and set up the border line posts to prevent cross language violations. To explain poems like *The Unknown Citizen* by W H Auden and *This is a Photograph of Me* by Margaret Atwood pose certain cultural, political and economic challenges for the non native students of English language. Teaching English drama and poetry to the Eastern and African students pose unique challenge to the teachers. Western humour, satire and protest give a different connotation to these students. Even the idiom of modern poetry either British or American is not universal in nature. To understand modern European/American poetry one is forced to understand their standard of living, their social interaction and the historical background. Without properly imparting this information, attempts to teach English poetry may prove futile. Western standards and definition of poverty and mediocre life may prove rich and luxurious to Eastern and African people. Teaching Auden’s poem *The Unknown Citizen* throws these challenges to the teachers.

(To JS/07/M/378) This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State)
He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint
.....
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured
And his Health-card shows he was once in a hospital but left it cured,
.....
Was he free? Was he Happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. ¹

Social security number, insurance and health card are quite unattainable luxuries in most of the developing countries. So poet’s satire is lost in the very primary reading of the poem. The net work and mode of information gathering by government agencies in the poem appears like a virtue for any modern government in the perspective of Asian and African people.

Auden’s cry to reform anonymity, conformity and government control is lost in the wilderness of cultural differences and economic barricades. So the case with Margaret Atwood’s poem *This is a Photograph of Me*, in which she struggles to assert a woman’s identity and her place in the family and society. Her campaign for women’s liberation and a say in running the family and the state is lost in the crossroads of cultural inconsistencies. Her protest is understood as a positive nobility of women. In the poem she says that in the photograph of a woman’s life, woman is nowhere to be seen. The institute of marriage and patriarchal administration of society has crumpled and disfigured woman’s life. One has to carefully

scan to collect the evidence of her existence in her own life. But for Asian teacher to make his/her job easier, it prompts them to re-read the poem and re-interpret to suit to the regional understanding. In Oriental civilization marriage is still held in high esteem and woman is worshiped, if not loved. Like God she is everywhere in the home. The picture-perfect description of the opening stanza --

It was taken some time ago
At first it seems to be
a smeared print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

then, as you scan
it, you can see something in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house. ²

-- suggests the unfailing presence of woman in the home. But the institute of marriage is so old and it is unable to withstand the passage of time changing individual identity. So 'grey flecks' and 'blurred lines.' The poet says that the photograph was taken the day after she was drowned in the lake. And she also says it is difficult to say where exactly she is or whether she is large or small in the water. For Indian students a woman is an integral part of finer social furniture in their life. So it won't surprise them to note that she drowned a day after her marriage in the lake of her family.

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or how small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion.

but if you look long enough
eventually
you will see me.) ³

In the same breath Atwood also says that the effect of water on light is a distortion. In European context it may be that women are not properly represented nor are given proper representation in the handling of family and society. But for Indian reader it may appear that water is life and the light is truth. Life force can never absorb the complete truth so, distortion, discord and even sometimes absurdity in woman's life. That is why in the last line she claims that one has to pay more attention to know the truth. This is how when poetry travels beyond the given cultural boundaries, it assumes new voices and gives new meaning entirely different from what the poet intended.

Language teaching should not be imperialistic. Imposition of British and American texts in the name of standard language for Asian students is causing cultural discord as they cannot accept/understand its cultural context, semantics and diction as they are not familiar with the cultural nuances of those countries. Considering this fact Universities and Governments prescribed the biographies of National heroes in the realm of Science and Politics in the curriculum. They opined that this will not only facilitates students' thought process but also provides regional knowledge. But most of these texts lack not only appropriateness of language but also authenticity. Quite often there is hyperbolic presentation of their lives and successes in the texts but truth is somewhat different if one probes further and the result is not emulation but confusion to the student. Students should be given semblance of truth if not truth. Thereby they try to fit themselves into

their chosen role in their future. Classrooms and text books should not push the students into disillusionment. They must be prepared for the future.

4. Media, Multimedia and English Language Teaching

It is the responsibility of every teacher to see that their students are actively participating in the social activities taking place around them. Individual identity is only asserted when they are opinionated. Closing eyes and focusing on the prescribed syllabi is no more acceptable for students and their future employers. One short therapy for this problem is encouraging students to read a standard daily English News Paper. It not only gives them practical inputs of language in use but also sensitizes them on issues of their region, nation and world. Here English language teacher should ensure, in the initial days that they are regularly going through it and absorbing right vocabulary and structure of the language. It also gives them an opportunity to improve the students' communicative abilities on different issues and impart right terminology for the given subject. My experiments with daily News Paper in technical educational institutions, which previously I worked for, proved to be successful. It improved the quality of understanding of students in other subjects as well. It encouraged them to go for their own science magazines and gave them a chance to see the developments that are taking place in their chosen field of knowledge.

Good English cinema gives better insight and understanding of the European and American life style and culture. After all cinema is a means which reveals truth through the medium of characters. It gives the students an actual encounter with the native language speakers without ever troubling them. Teachers can use some classical English movies to improve the understanding of quality English as well as to create social awareness of alien culture. It can neutralize emotional and linguistic barriers they encounter. Theatrical arts and celluloid narratives buttonhole students' attention and occupy their intellectual space through giving positive insights and enhanced linguistic ability. Learning a foreign language is always a difficult one and requires tremendous patience. It is possible only through trial and error on the part of student. In the process they are afraid of ridicule that they are likely to receive from their peers.

Audio visual education has been on the cards for a couple of decades but for the poor quality material that comes along with it and handling cumbersome equipment dissuaded students and teachers from extensively using them. With the advancement of digital language laboratories the process of teaching became relatively comfortable. Video recording of student talks and replaying them with adequate positive corrective suggestions also directly helped the students know themselves better about their own language. Young students can easily mug up considerable portions of the text. Such students should be slowly but surely nudged towards classroom plays and later theatrical arts. It certainly creates a taste for language and love for literature.

5. English Teacher with human face

In every society there are sections of people who are marginalized. Economic deprivation and social alienation smothered many voices for a long time. All modern welfare states wanted to compensate for their historical injustices. In modern educational system these students were encouraged and even sometimes financed to regain their expression and partake in the development. Now the ounce of responsibility heavily lies in the hands of the teacher. As parents of these students are either illiterates or not adequately educated, the natural guidance in acquiring the language skills at home fails them. In the inclusive educational system a teacher is expected to handle both the advanced students as well as the marginalized ones. For one set of students a teacher has to extend proficiency with professional care and at the same time he/she has to handle the other set of students with love and care, with utmost human sensibility. A teacher is expected to have many voices thereby students can choose that is best suited to their own needs. Any reluctance or harshness in accepting and handling dull students should be treated as sin against God and man.

6. Go home with the saplings

We are all here to ensure that the garden of English language will continue its many blossoms and it shall never wither even in dead winter. I strongly believe that English language will certainly win back our paradise and our human family reunites and celebrates. We all have to carefully harvest this beautiful

language and distribute its seeds to all our fellow human beings. It is in our hands and it is our responsibility as Toni Morrison narrated in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1993 that language is a very precious and delicate bird. Now it is in our hands and its survival depends upon our care and love. For Morrison, ‘word-work is sublime because it is generative.’ She says, ‘We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.’

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