

# **Predicament of Language and Literature Teacher: Teaching to a Group Coming from Semi Urban and Non-English Speaking Background**

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**Abstract.** The English language is a vast flea market of words developed over a period of nearly 2000 years. It is still expanding and is a ragbag of words coming from all over the world. Literature of any language is like a feast to the soul. Literature is the best medium of learning a language. It expands language awareness, and motivates and educates the learner at the same time. However, the experience of teaching and learning can be different in different circumstances. In case we borrow the language and literature teaching methods from the western countries like UK and USA, we are certain to fail in reaching our objectives in India as our concerns and their redresses are different. So, teaching English will most certainly require different techniques under different circumstances. Predicaments of an English language teacher for teaching a student coming from a semi-urban or a non-English speaking background can be summed up as a consequence of the famous line “To be or not to be”. This paper focuses on the elements which can be useful for teaching a heterogeneous group coming from a non-English speaking background. The ideas discussed are based on personal experiences and tested among students of the corresponding background.

**Keywords:** Non-English Speaking Background, Semi Urban, Mother Tongue Influence, Student Learner.

## **1. Introduction**

The English language is a vast flea market of words developed in nearly 2000 years. It is ever-expanding and can be seen as a ragbag of words coming from all over the world. Language is only humane. It is used for expressing our thoughts and ideas by communication. It is a gift to man to interact at personal, social and intellectual levels. Language means a system of sounds, alphabets, words and structures. Language plays an important role in all the activities of life. Language can be seen as the embodiment of culture. The use of language can broadly be attributed for two purposes – speaking and listening; both of which enrich our knowledge and thought process.

English is considered as the international language and a language for the masses. It plays an important and vital role in higher education, research employment and for aesthetic purposes. We are living in a sort of ‘Global Village’ these days and hence, English is the easiest and the most transparent way of communication because of its usage as a link language. Books from many languages have been translated in English and are part of many a curriculum worldwide. So, a sound and correct knowledge of the language is necessary for higher education in general or for professional courses definitely.

## **2. Understanding the Target Group**

English is not the first language of the majority in India. Literature of any language offers a feast to the soul and serves as a balm to the mind. Literature is the best medium of learning a language, a culture, and a civilization. It expands language awareness, motivates and educates the learner. But, the fact of the matter is that teaching and learning experience can vary tremendously in different circumstances. By borrowing language and literature teaching methods from western countries like UK and USA, we cannot ensure that they will have the same effect on the student group in India. In fact, there is a better chance that these techniques fail altogether since the concerns and their respective redresses vary greatly in the two societies. While the USA and UK is a monolingual society but India supports a multi-lingual culture traditionally. So, teaching English can be a vastly different experience. As an example, explaining ‘Daffodils’ to a group of

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students which is not familiar with its physical appearance, can certainly not be expected to enjoy its beauty as expressed in the words of Wordsworth. Similarly, references from Bible or Greek mythology can be made easier by comparing them with local references. There are many models which work on the teaching of literature to beginners and learners. One of them is to treat the culture and traditions of our own mythology and literature at par with the foreign literature and explaining it to the students likewise. Suppose, teaching about 'River Lethe', we can compare it with 'River Vaitarni' according to Hindu Mythology. This is known as cultural comparison and produces good results. Secondly, the language model is used where in the learner is asked to give attention on use of language. The third and last model in this direction emphasizes the use of personal emotions. These three models make use of culture, language, and personal emotions, thereby making the understanding of literature easier for a beginner learner.

Teaching literature and language to a heterogeneous group of semi-urban learners whose background is not English speaking can be very challenging sometimes. They won't understand text at the first go. In that case, the following strategy works wonders. First, you should always hold a pre-discussion on the topic or summarise the thought discussed in the poem or essay. If we talk about a drama, try to show them through the use of 'YouTube' or other search engines, various stage performances of the particular drama before teaching it, to invoke a sense of visualization. This evokes interest and they have a certain layout and blueprint of the story imprinted in their minds. It makes teaching interesting and easier. Our target group is mainly 'Hindi speaking', so, they have to utilise 'local language help' in order to understand the foreign literature. After the aforementioned activities are performed, we read the texts aloud and explain from the manuscript. Then, students are asked to read the text in the class room. When we talk about a play, students are distributed parts of particular characters and they read that character's portion. It makes the class room teaching interesting and interactive. On a broader scale, this, not only, makes teaching interesting but checks pronunciation and rhythm because English is not their L1, and they are making a brave attempt to learn it. All these exercises make the study effective and interesting but there are many obstacles also. Students are so prone to their mother-tongue that they are not able to understand literature in English. One major predicament is also the lack of time given to language classes in the time table. So, it becomes difficult to deal with the students coming from English-medium background and students coming from Hindi-medium background at the same time.

One trusted and tested experiment which always works is to boost morale of the student by marginalizing oneself. When I tell my students, about my own Hindi-medium background and the struggles I had to undertake to learn English language, literature and the associated accent, they refuse to believe me. But somehow when I cook-up and tell stories, it increases their confidence level and they are charged to learn correct English. Similarly, their morale takes a high leap when they are told that they should feel proud that they can command two languages instead of only L1.

### **3. Challenges for An English Teacher**

As an English teacher, I find it challenging to prepare my heterogeneous group of learners for better English acceptance. I believe that the 5 I's formula is good one. There are five main qualities a teacher should possess:

- Imaginative
- Innovative
- Independent
- Interactive, and above all
- Intermingling

Albert Einstein always gives importance to imagination. Truly, a teacher has to be imaginative always. Suppose, my students have no idea of 'Daffodils', then why not develop their imagination by explaining about some Indian flower for once and then bringing in the actual object of study. Similarly, a teacher must innovate into new ideas and change according to the situation. We don't need to give examples beating about the bushes but, crisp illustrations from daily life can be used with good effect.

## 4. From Challenges to Opportunities

A teacher should always be friendly with their students. He or she should try to make students independent, meanwhile mingling their opinion with his/her opinion. Many students need special attention especially those, who are not fluent in English. Some students understand L2 with the help of their mother tongue. So, a teacher must not hesitate in using the language they are familiar with for providing instructions at the elementary level. Although regular use of L1 will stop the learners to understand L2 completely but, at elementary level, it might be required to build up the foundation.

The most important step is to mingle the Hindi speaking and English speaking learners to work and learn together because it will help them to grow symbiotically. English speaking students will teach them fluency and rhythm, while learning grammar from them correspondingly. This comes from my own experience of noticing students coming from a Hind-medium background to have commendable command of grammar. Visual aids are also very important. As an example, I show my own students Nissim Ezekiel's poem "Night of the Scorpion" on 'YouTube' before teaching it and the class becomes more interesting.

It is definitely not easy to teach students who are not fluent in L2. When they come for admission they are not able to pronounce 'Literature' correctly. They sound /L/ instead of /R/. It is their local mother tongue effect. But they run after taking English as it is their most important choice. But once, they get admission, some of them improve drastically with all above ideas and experiments. It is always important to spread knowledge, however difficult it is to teach L2 to the students who are not fluent and communicative.

English is an evolving language. New words, new accents and dialects are being introduced consistently. Obviously, no one can claim that he/she has mastered English. We are all learners on this path. The only difference is that we are placed at different levels of learning. Americans, British and many others have their own accent and level of speaking. Even Australians speak their own way. So, MTI (Mother Tongue Influence) is present in absentia. Indians can also learn and write English incredibly; as has been proven all over. We have been the 'torch bearers' to a new accent of English, which is easy to be learned.

Predicaments of an English language teacher for teaching a student coming from a semi-urban or a non-English speaking background can be summed up as the consequence of the famous line "To be or not to be". When a child comes from a non-English speaking background, he/she maybe not lack the skill to learn or speak the language, however, the confidence or the conviction to be able to converse or be opinionated themselves in English will definitely not be present. In fact, such is the case with any normal human's behaviour. We all find it much easier to do the things we are used to or those we have been doing ever since our childhood, or as long as our memory serves us. As an example, somebody from the Indian sub-continent will be invariably find it more comfortable to use a spoon or fork rather than a chopstick, which will be much easier to use for somebody from the Eastern part of Asia. The analogy takes us to the first predicament and its solution for an English language teacher. If you put a student from such a background on a tight spot with respect to the understanding of English language or speaking, he/she is more likely to crumble under the pressure of the situation, rather than sway the stage away with an extraordinary performance. So, instead of making it embarrassing for the student unknowingly, it is important to build and nurture their confidence and conviction from within to be able to talk and understand the language, before asking and expecting them to perform like a day-to-day English speaker.

Apart from the mental blockade, the teacher might also have to do away with the limiting imagination prowess. Now, each language brings its own imaginative literature along with it. Studying English without much background can be of discomfort when poetry with high creative power is taught. The teacher will have to face the problem of limiting imagination, but it will hence become a duty to bridge down the gap by enhancing the thought process in the student. The façade of this imaginative prowess can sometimes take over the aptitude and attitude for learning the language. But, once the creativity in the mind takes over the façade, it becomes much easier for the student to draw conclusions from the paraphrase.

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