

## Approaches to English Language Teaching in Secondary Schools of Khagaria District in Bihar: An Investigation

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### ABSTRACT

With the need for the English language on the broader perspective and critical interest in it shown by every section of Indian society, efforts have been undertaken by all concerned, to enhance the efficiency of language instruction in a functional framework, presuming that English teaching helps facilitate the learning of the English language. How the English teachers in rural or suburban areas of the country approach language training, and how much the learning of a new language enhances the way they teach English, is the central question. The present research investigates this apparent problem at the high school level in the framework of Khagaria, an under-developed district in Bihar, India. The investigator surveyed the randomly chosen English language teachers in secondary schools and witnessed the teaching and learning activities. The analysis shows that English teaching is no different from teaching other subjects in the specific context of Khagaria. Method of translation is the overall approach to teach English, and learners barely have any opportunity to exercise their linguistic competence at this level of their study. The attributes for this approach to English language teaching are the shortage of adequately qualified staff, lack of in-service classes for the teachers, memory-driven assessment program, overcrowded classrooms, the workload for students, and lack of funding and supporting network. The present research indicates that, unlike others, the English teachers should be equipped well with a focus on the teaching of English as a language.

**Keywords:** *English Language Teaching, Language Learning, Language Training, Secondary Schools, Rural & Sub-urban Contexts*

### INTRODUCTION

The increasing demands and significance of English today have made it an essential precondition for today's students to acquire this language. Because English is considered an indispensable tool for survival in the global economy, an increase in English language demands has been noticed (Paik, 2008), given the significance or the necessity of English. Undoubtedly, it has been increasingly recognized in a country like India, especially in Bihar, that learners with high language skills can quickly enter tertiary education. In contrast, those with limited English backgrounds are refused this entry. As the secondary level education is the period of transition, which determines whether the students with a firm grounding enter a higher level of studies or become financially viable person in the family, the demand for English is even more robust. As Jimenez and Rose (2010, p.411) believe, "Without a sustained and systematic effort, students in the process of learning English have almost no hope of acquiring the kinds and amounts of cultural, social, and academic capital that they need to move into higher education or meaningful work."

Consequently, knowing English seems to have been an essential requirement of accomplishment. This understanding is confirmed by Zeegers (2005) when he suggests that language facilitates all other learning. Failure in learning is language failure.

Because teaching has a significant role to play in making English simpler to understand, English is indeed a matter of grave concern for teachers and learners. The objective behind teaching English is much more than mere transmission of information; it aims to enable them to speak, read, and write correctly and fluently (Patil, 2008). Besides this, prevalent reflections in Bihar, especially those living in rural settings, show that school leavers have little control over language proficiency. It has been a common belief that the learners can have a better command over language usage if they get exposure to activities related to language development (Watkins, 2007). It leads to the query on if the English language teachers strive to achieve a holistic and sustainable advancement of the core skills of the language, mainly in rural or sub-urban part of Bihar with particular reference to the Khagaria district. The objective of this research is to investigate the teaching methods applied by secondary-level English language teachers with a purpose to better understand their perspectives and attitude to English as well as the magnitude to which they introduce students with diverse language skills.

## **BROADER PERSPECTIVES OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH**

A widely accepted truth is that the outcome cannot be accomplished unless one becomes conscious of the aim. If the teacher intends to make learning effective and systematic, he should have clarity about the objectives behind English teaching (James, 2001). The purposes of teaching the English language to secondary school students are numerous, including equipping students with the language skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing (LSRW). Undoubtedly, an essential ability in every language is listening, which lays the foundation for many language abilities. According to Shahid, (2002, p. 210), "Listening is a process which involves perceiving that there is a systematic message, in a continuous stream of sound and then apprehending and identifying within this stream bounded elements the listener has never heard in exactly this form before." It refers to the fact that a comprehensive understanding of the sound system in any language is deemed necessary for listening. Following the natural approach to learning a language is the first prerequisite to acquiring the language. Activities for listening practices must be designed carefully and logically, following gradual progress (Brown and Yule, 1999). Some scholars strongly argue for rigorous training of listening skills to the learners before introducing more complex oral activities (Barton, 2006). The teachers must check that students understand the expressions that appear during the listening practice, whereas students are expected to be aware of what they are being taught and why.

As per the natural order of language learning, speaking is just the next language competence following listening. The ability to speak requires the proper usage of words or phrases and the ability to locate terms, i.e., understanding of syntax accurately. Speaking also calls for other features like correctness in pronunciation, fluency, mastery of accent and intonation pattern, etc. Overcoming these barriers to spoken language learning is one of the most challenging tasks for both teachers and learners (Brown and Yule, 1999). The primary function of the speaking skill is the establishment of social bonds. While learning for the sake of correspondence, a language has speech as the most preferred means of exchange. That is why, among the productive communication skills, speaking with fluency is considered a vital skill required by the learner. According to Wyse and Jones (2001, p. 190), "It is important that teachers recognize their histories and status as language users, and resist the temptation to impose their social criteria on the child's ongoing language development." Therefore, the teachers ought to understand the language learning mechanism, specifically while teaching speaking, and should keep implementing a specific method in their classes. The primary duty is to orient and control the learners' learning activities, i.e., what they are supposed to do, how, and when (Mercer, 1998). Thus, initially, the learners must practice speaking, and the errors committed by them should

be overlooked. As Baker and Westrup (2000, p. 80) opine, "Students are learning when they make mistakes or help to correct other students' mistakes."

Any new piece of knowledge originates across reading, and because of that, the task is quite crucial. A child's schooling is incomplete until he or she can learn and comprehend a reading text's substance. While reading, the reader aims to understand the writer's viewpoints. The learners require a likely reason to read, which can be accomplished by designing a meaningful task (Watkins, 2007). Students of second-language cannot be transformed into effective readers until they learn how reading skills should be taught. Teachers must use a variety of methods for teaching reading to give the learners practical situations. A reading task should slowly shift from easy to challenging. Kropp (1993, p. 28) states, "Some children have never heard the words or ideas they are being asked to read in books. As a result, reading becomes more frustrating." The terms relevant to the learners' perceptions and those familiar to them must come in use in classroom activities. It should start with everyday contexts and not through textbooks or other such means. Later on, they may be introduced to skimming, scanning, predicting, speculating the meaning unknown of words and phrases, etc.

Writing relates to turning ideas into graphic forms. It needs to be exceptionally organized, straightforward, and concise for a reader to be understood easily because there is no direct interaction between the writer and the reader. The errors go overlooked while speaking, but it is not so with written words. Writing skills include proper and thorough instruction by the teacher and consistent practice by students – writing and rewriting - until the best is produced. Writing is not possible until the writing tools are learned and utilized. It is the students' responsibility to look at the required specific techniques for writing. Knowledge of grammar is crucial for writing ability. The learners often have problems with spelling. Like speech, fluency and accuracy are routinely learned while acquiring the skill of writing. Extensive reading and writing activities can tend to overcome all these issues. However, teachers' understanding of these problems faced by learners at different learning stages, and their appraisal and encouragement on students' accomplishments can play a significant role in making learning more accessible.

Communication skill is not merely a blend of knowledge and information. Making the students learn an appropriate, fluent, and persuasive language requires less instruction by teachers and more engagement of students, and this is what the Communicative Approach to language learning advocates for. Students' attention can be ensured by providing them with opportunities to use English in a real-life situation. Allowing them to play with language through language learning activities and games, such as role-play, riddles and puzzles, cartoons, stories, jokes, songs, and other handy learning materials, can make them feel confident and comfortable. Once the fear of making mistakes is gone, they would be able to learn more complex structures and advanced vocabulary items in due course of time.

Only a well-trained teacher can use these strategies, but the lack of experienced and qualified English-speaking teachers has always been a critical concern. In the context of the site for this study, English language teachers are devoid of in-service career development programs since neither government nor any NGO organizes these courses for them. The pre-service courses were already considered obsolete, and the focus is still on philosophy rather than realistic training. The fundamental realities of the rural environment vary from those of other contexts. Therefore, it is necessary and reasonable to investigate the educational experiences of high school English teachers in the area. The paper also explores the justification behind teachers' specific approaches to English teaching.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The present research attempts to understand the current teaching practices and identify and investigate the causes for them. The nature of the study permits the analysis of information using a mixed methodology. To identify teaching practices using the classroom observation list, a quantitative approach was found suitable,

whereas the analysis of information received through interview demanded for applying qualitative approach. Fourteen high schools in Khagaria district were randomly chosen. It was taken into consideration that the selected school should reflect the representation of the whole population in the area. To justify the representation, one government-run, and one public school each was chosen from all the district's 7 blocks. The researcher personally visited these, contacted class X students in each of them, interviewed the English teachers there, and made observations of the teaching-learning practices.

To be used as tools for data collection for this study, a checklist was prepared for classroom observation, and a list of questions was prepared for the interview. The checklist and the list of questions comprised of all relevant areas of training and learning, such as, teaching methods, types of tasks and activities, areas of improvement of language skills and explanations for utilizing specific language teaching methods. The data gathered were organized, analyzed, and evaluated to recognize a pattern common to all.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings are addressed under the topics of daily lesson plans, learning activities in the classroom, factors behind using a particular teaching method, and the English teachers' professional background.

### **Daily Lesson Plans**

During the visit to schools for data collection, it was observed that the majority of English teachers were not in the habit of preparing daily lesson plans before entering the class. Many of them had the least idea about it. The situation was a bit different in private schools where the teachers were a little more concerned about it, but that was not satisfactory. Just a few teachers were noticed with complete or limited lesson plans. It was surprising to learn that some of them, especially those with no pre-service/in-service exposure, did not even recognize the lesson plan format. Certain remarks received in this regard are noticeable:

- Teacher 1: I have got my hair grey, teaching English.
- Teacher 2: I prepare myself mentally, and it's all in my head. There is no need for a written record.
- Teacher 3: What to do of lesson plans if students do not turn up to the class.
- Teacher 4: I am assigned lots of administrative works. It is enough for me that I take classes.
- Teacher 5: It is challenging to prepare a written plan as I need to engage classes for 5-6 hours every day.

Although these comments were received informally, they speak the true story of the teaching-learning scenario's pathetic state in the area. The teachers are either overburdened or extremely careless about their social and professional responsibilities as a teacher. It is harsh yet true that approx  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the teachers are devoid of proper training. Whatever may be the reason, lack of planning leads to a lack of learning objectives and unawareness of the learning outcome.

Depending on the teacher-student ratio or the teacher-class ratio, the English teachers were supposed to engage five classes a day on an average. Uneven distribution of classes among them causes dissatisfaction and disinterestedness, which affects the quality and efficiency of teaching.

### **Learning Activities in Classrooms**

While observing the classroom's teaching activity, it was found that the main activities of the English teachers were reading the text and converting it into Hindi. In addition to interpreting the text, teachers were often found introducing students to reading practices. Teachers read and interpreted the written text and

frequently asked the students to read it aloud, believing that it is an efficient technique to enhance students' pronunciation. However, this method was not found to be endorsed by a few of them as they assumed that the students equally need both – the reading skill and the language skills; and reading can simply help them in collecting ideas that can further be utilized in increasing efficiency in writing and speaking.

Another important activity in these classrooms was the teaching of grammar. The students were first taught definitions and rules, followed by examples based on them. The classes were found teacher-centric to the extent that all the grammar exercises given in the textbooks were being solved and explained by the teachers, leaving students with no opportunity to learn and practice by them as they were being provided with the readymade answers.

On the whole, reading and translation were the only activities in these classrooms that left no scope for practice and improvement of other language skills. For the sake of listening, it was only the teacher to whom the students were getting exposed to, and that too while the teacher was reading the text. For the rest of the time, even the teacher was found using Hindi. The teachers were not found in the practice of giving their students the exposure to verbal skills, and hence, this skill was entirely overlooked. No doubt, writing skills could get adequate space in these classrooms in comparison to listening and talking skills. But, this, too, was not being independently taught and practiced.

### **Factors behind Using a Particular Teaching Method**

As mentioned above, the teachers' translation method is widely used in language classrooms, and the students are devoid of any involvement in the activities of language skills development. It is interesting to quote some of these teachers' claims for why they widely use this method:

- Teacher 1: "It is important to see what is asked in the examination. The students are usually asked to translate the text from English into Hindi."
- Teacher 2: "I teach English the same way as my teachers had taught me."
- Teacher 3: "After this much of administrative responsibilities, how can I think of innovative ideas of teaching English, especially when it will not bring any change in learning outcome?"
- Teacher 4: "Can there be some other ways also to teach English?"
- Teacher 5: "We aim to produce a good result, and so, as per the examination pattern, we teach grammar to our students and make them practice previous question papers."
- Teacher 6: "There are no learning resources available to involve our students in interactive language activities."
- Teacher 7: "Listening and speaking are not to be taught by the teachers in the classrooms. They are learned by practice and self-motivation."
- Teacher 8: "Students come from a background where they do not get exposure to English in spoken form, and so, they ask the teachers to explain everything in Hindi so that better understanding can be developed."

Teachers' attitudes and perspectives, especially the ones mentioned above, determine that the ultimate purpose of grammar teaching in the study classes is not to make students aware of basic language structures and use them in actual circumstances, but only to prepare them for the examinations. Overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, lack of practice exercises in the prescribed textbooks, etc are some other factors that can be held responsible for language teachers' attitude. As a result, the "language teacher as a facilitator" theory becomes a false notion in these classrooms where the teacher is most actively involved. All this further poses a question on the academic and professional background of language teachers.

## English Teachers' Professional Background

The credentials of the English teachers in these secondary schools vary from BA, B Ed to Ph.D. Some newly appointed teachers were TET (Teachers' Eligibility Test) qualified and were on a contract basis. The English teachers answered how to improve their teaching, and said that they are trying to improve their teaching style by self-studying. However, it was apparent that they did not feel that they need any training or improvement. They did not get any exposure to Teacher Development Programme – any pre-service or in-service training programme. They were not trained in the teaching of listening and speaking skills – the two most essential skills of communication. The majority of them belonged to the local area. So, they felt more comfortable using their local language than English while communicating with peer-group and students both inside and outside the classroom. Hence, the two crucial factors – academic background and social background – play a decisive role in the said state of learning and English teaching in the area.

## ANALYSIS

The above details invite serious discussion on the teaching-learning scenario. The initial aim of English teaching is to make the learners capable of using English while listening, speaking, reading, and writing comfortably in formal and informal familiar situations. Ideally, the teachers are supposed to give their students exposure to these language skills through classroom activities. However, as this study shows, the students hardly get any such environment for developing these skills in their language classroom. What is the most neglected part of it, is listening. Except to listen to the teachers, they do not get any context for the practice of listening. As per natural order of language acquisition, listening is the first skill to be acquired, and once it is neglected, acquisition of other language skills also gets affected.

On the other hand, students' reading skills are almost satisfactory, as they spend most of their time reading. The practice of reading is somehow adequate as they are asked to read aloud. Still, there is no denial of the scope for improvement as reading and comprehension should go side by side. The teachers' claim of progress in pronunciation does not seem to be appropriate here because it has a connection with speaking, and not with reading.

The second significant but highly neglected skill is Speaking. It is because the teachers are not interested in designing lessons and planning activities, which can create curiosity among the learners; neither do they ensure that the learners have sufficient opportunities to communicate. Likewise, the students are not appropriately trained for developing the writing skill. Several prerequisites are taken together, such as the imaginative mind, knowledge of grammar, aptness of vocabulary, etc. to make writing skills challenging for them.

Practice is the key to language learning. It is the responsibility of language teachers to create a learning environment and give their students an exposure to it. The present classroom learning situation in itself is not sufficient. It is unfortunate to note that classrooms are simply meant for transferring information from the senders' end (teachers) to the receivers' end (students) where the role of recipients is that of a passive listener without any involvement in the activity. Several authors have expressed their concern in this regard. The learners find themselves encouraged once they find classrooms and resources fascinating, and the teacher motivating. Studies show that students are not fascinated by the traditional, teacher-centric learning environment. Littlewood (2001) observes that these students want purposeful and active participation in the exploration of knowledge. Xie (2009) writes about how these students are devoid of their autonomy to increased learning process engagement despite their interest. Stern (1983) finds the language teachers accountable for this as they do not make sincere efforts to use innovative teaching methods and stick to the grammar-translation approach in the classroom without putting any emphasis on the learning of necessary language skills.

The textbook is the most popular source of information in the classroom. How the book is designed and how the exercises are created to determine to learn has a great impact on the whole teaching-learning process (Sahu, 2004). It is a sad state of affairs to acknowledge that the activities are not designed as per the targeted learners' language learning requirements. However, the textbooks are not the only thing to be blamed. They need to be restructured. The books must contain a focused learning objective and outcome, appropriately designed exercises, and guidelines for both teachers and students.

The biggest impediment of English language teaching, especially in the area chosen for this study, is with the testing and evaluation pattern. The teacher has to complete the syllabus within the given timeframe. Introducing an innovative technique or enjoyable activity beyond the syllabus does not earn any appreciation. Even if it is done so, it does not match with the existing testing and evaluation pattern. Ultimately, the examination-oriented teaching leaves students with no language skills.

Teachers' education and social affiliation influence the quality of their teaching. If the certificate of training is the criterion to become an English teacher, most teachers are eligible to teach English at this level. Still, it appears as if they have either not got proper training or cannot apply English teaching techniques in practical terms. They are rarely introduced to in-service courses, helping them remain aware of the latest concepts and techniques. Siddiqui's (2010) opinion is relevant here when he very bluntly says that the teachers typically teach English with no skill in English, and these teachers teach the way they have been introduced to it via the translation method. Although different governments and NGOs have launched some in-service training programmes for teachers' professional growth and self-development, they are either merely a get-together or under-utilized. A well-structured full-proof strategy is a must to achieve the desired goal.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the English language teachers' existing teaching methods are not satisfactory as they failed to develop the students' language skills. In this respect, however, teachers alone cannot be blamed. If they are held solely responsible for improving the students' language competence, the goal perhaps would be too unrealistic to be achieved. The education system must integrate pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes, education policy, analysis and reassessment of the learners' needs to develop language skills, a supportive and conducive learning environment, testing and evaluation patterns, and many more things.

To develop language skills, students need to interact with one another (Siddiqui, 2010). Teachers are to be made accountable to encourage students to adopt English as their habit, as learning a language is a process of habit formation (Richardson, 1983). Also, revision in textbooks, inclusion of language activities based on all the four skills and construction of the sound base at the primary level, will certainly help the students learn English with the desired level of accuracy and fluency.

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