
Strategies to Enhance English Language Skills in Students at Secondary Level

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ABSTRACT

Language is essential for communication. Communication of ideas, thoughts, knowledge or information cannot be thought of without language. This makes it essential that we have a sound command on language skills which can facilitate smooth communication. English as a global language has made its significance felt all over the world in various important fields. An effective communication skill in English language thus opens the doors of opportunities for an individual. Language competency becomes even more important at the secondary stage which is considered as a transition stage in education. However, in our country students' communicative competency in English has always been a matter of concern. English language incompetency acts as a hindrance in students' progress. Humans have an innate capacity to learn language. This innate capacity to learn language helps us to enhance the language when they are effectively taught or learnt. Language learning is related to learning the basic language skills. The four basic skills of English language are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. English language cannot be mastered without mastering these four basic skills of language.

This paper is a humble attempt towards recommending different strategies to enhance English language skills in English at secondary level.

Keywords: *Strategies, Enhance, Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing (LSRW) Skills, Secondary Stage*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a tool which helps individuals to share their feelings, thoughts, ideas etc. and thus assist them to communicate. It also helps to have an access to the worldly knowledge. Aggarwal (2003) defines language as a set of symbols used in more or less uniform ways by a number of people, who are thus able to communicate with each other. Language is a carrier of one's thoughts and ideas and facilitates to give them a form. Though communication may not be the sole function of language, yet it serves as the best tool for communication. However, communication competency in a language is guided by the competency in the basic language skills. These basic skills are Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). To have required competency in a language, mastery in LSRW skills is a prerequisite. In an era of globalization good communication skills are the keys to unlock the doors of success. Furthermore, good communication skills in English are also considered important in getting employable. It is also found that Individuals who speak English fluently earn more than those

who don't speak the language, confirming the link between an education in English and scope of employment opportunities.

The need to enhance students language competency is felt at all levels; it is more so felt at secondary level. Secondary Education is a crucial stage in the educational hierarchy. At this stage of school education, good command over the language is quintessential. By the time a student reaches at secondary level he/she becomes more of an autonomous learner, where adequate competence in language plays a vital role. However, this expectation to a large extent can be met if the learner is provided with an environment which facilitates him/her to develop the required competency in the target language. It has been mentioned in the Report of the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53) that the methodology adopted should stress on LSRW skills of the language so as to develop the competency in the language. The reality as found by Joseph (2003) that it is surprising that after learning English in English Medium School for more than eight years a student is still found possessing inadequate knowledge of the actual conversational aspects of English, throws light on the sorry state of English language teaching learning process. Transacting of teaching learning needs to be based on a multi-skill, activity based, learner centered approach wherein the teacher acts only as a facilitator and motivates the students to use English for the purposes of communication. Only then can students have required language competency.

SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

English is a language which is considered as a means of opening not only the doors of opportunity but of success too as it plays an important role in the domains of education, administration, business and political relations, judiciary, industry, etc. and is therefore considered as a passport to social mobility, higher education, and better job opportunities. Hence Working knowledge of English has become a requirement in a number of fields, occupations and professions resulting in over a billion people speaking English to at least a basic level. Crystal (2011) mentions that of the two billion people in the world who use English, only some 400 million are native speakers. The remaining 1.6 billion are speakers of English in countries where the language has some sort of official status or in countries where it is the first foreign language taught in schools. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations. It has become a lingua franca and is used and understood by many nations for whom English is not their first language. Crystal (1997) estimates that 85% of international organizations now use English as one of their working languages. It is a working language of international organizations and conferences, science publication, international banking, economic affairs and trade; Advertising for global brands; Audio-Visual cultural products, International Tourism; Tertiary education; international law; As a relay language in interpretation and translation; Technology transfer; Internet Communication. Murali (2009) states that English undoubtedly has become a world language rather than the language of only the English speaking countries such as the UK and the USA because the number of people who use English as a means of communication exceeds much more than the number of people who speak it as their mother tongue.

Today's is a global world and individuals keep travelling across borders for work. Working knowledge of English clears a big hurdle in this process as English undoubtedly has become a world language. Around 16 million Indians are scattered across the globe making it the

largest number of migrants. Thus, working knowledge of English language opens up the doors of world of work not only nationally but also internationally.

The advantages attached to English language competency has been well understood and accepted in India. It has come a long way in India, since its acquaintance to the country.

OBJECTIVES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT SECONDARY LEVEL

Language competency is one of the objectives at secondary level. CBSE has laid down the following objectives of teaching English language at secondary stage

- to build greater confidence and proficiency in oral and written communication
- to develop the ability and knowledge required in order to engage in independent reflection and inquiry
- to use appropriate English to communicate in various social settings
- to equip learners with essential language skills to question and to articulate their point of view.
- to build competence in the different registers of English
- to develop sensitivity to, and appreciation of, other varieties of English, Indian English, and the culture they reflect
- to enable the learner to access knowledge and information through reference skills (consulting a dictionary / thesaurus, library, internet etc.)
- to develop curiosity and creativity through extensive reading
- to facilitate self-learning to enable them to become independent learners
- to review, organize and edit their own work and work done by peers

These objectives clearly emphasize that at secondary stage a level of proficiency in English language is expected to be acquired by the students. Students are supposed to achieve an intermediate command of language skills by the time they leave school. To achieve this, students should be given enough practice in all four language skills. A variety of tasks facilitate in development of these skills. Focus should be on comprehension skills which will enable the students in finding, processing and re-expressing information wherein emphasis should be more on language rather than literature.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCY AT SECONDARY LEVEL

It was the recommendation made by The Education Commission (1964-66) that English will continue to enjoy a high status so long as it remains the principal medium of education at the university stage, and the language of administration at the Central Government and in many of the states. Even after the regional languages become media of higher education in the universities, a working knowledge of English will be a valuable asset for all students and competency in the language will be necessary for those who proceed to the university. It has also been opined by Dyvadatham (2012) that as long as English continues to be the medium of instruction at the university level it has to be strengthened at secondary level.

As secondary Education is the supply chain for higher education. The students at this level are expected to have sound command of LSRW skills in English. The students have to use the language for listening to lectures, taking down notes, reading extensively, outlining and

summarizing, writing for social use such as article writing, letter writing etc. writing of poems and stories and so on. Meganathan (2009) states that, one of the objectives at secondary stage is to enable learners to use the language appropriately.

Secondary education fulfils large manpower needs of the semi-organised and the organised sectors of the economy. English Language skills are important employability skills for one to get absorbed in the world of work.

Banerjee (2006) stresses that language competency depends on repetition and practice. Thus at secondary level where the students already have an acquaintance with the language, giving them an environment rich in language activities to practice the usage of language in real life situations will help them to enhance their language competency.

HINDERENCE IN ACQUIRING ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCY

Though English has been there in our education system for more than a century now and occupies an important place in school curriculum; students still struggle to attain required competency in it. Nair (2012) reported that majority of our students lack listening and speaking proficiency in English. Their skills in these areas were measured and it was found that they were not up to mark, despite schools conducting tests to improve them. Even though English is introduced from class I in many schools, students do not have the expected competency at secondary level. Shermila (1999) puts forward her views that in general, students are not found to be competent in English because of lack of skill-oriented teaching. Even after being exposed to English language for years they do not have required competency which can be contributed to various factors. Apart from teaching of English without emphasizing on language skills following factors also pose hindrance in acquiring the required competency in English language by students.

- Meaningful language education requires teachers who are skilled and knowledgeable as well as contextualized materials (print and others). However, the real picture is different. Jaishree & Tamilselvi (2012) make a mention that many teachers of English enter the profession without proper training. They lack not only the teaching skills, but even the basic English language proficiency.
- Lack of competent English language environment in the school many a times acts as a barrier to enhance students language skills.
- English is being taught as a subject in schools rather than as a language. Sindkhedkar (2012), states that the teacher has to attempt to train the students in accomplishing the skills of language and there is no need to acquire knowledge about the language. If the teacher explains the meaning of a text, the teacher is teaching the language as a subject. On the other hand, if a teacher trains the students in the skills of the language and gives enough practice then the teacher teaches the language as a language.
- With the conservative situations where the teachers are required to finish the syllabus, the teachers are left with no time to emphasise skill building. Sindkhedkar (2012), states that, teachers are hard pressed for time to cover the syllabus and cannot spare much time to handle the language items.

- There is more emphasis on writing while assessing the students in English language and less emphasis on other skill areas. Moreover as put up by Krishnaveni (2010), performance in examination takes precedence over actual performance in using the language effectively.
- Krishnaveni (2010) also mentions that language teaching in India gives more importance to reading and writing, ignoring the important skills of listening and speaking. Thus students are provided with fewer opportunity to speak and listen in the English classrooms compared to reading and writing.
- Environment and family background play vital role in developing competency in English language. This has been stressed by Lathem (1975) that deficiencies in language teaching in the schools are less apparent where the parents are providing richness and variety of language stimulations and interaction.
- One of the major problems as mentioned by Jaishree & Tamilselvi (2012) is the non-availability of teaching materials. Materials in the form of textbooks, supplementary readers and workbooks are either inadequate or inappropriate.

It is therefore required that some strategic steps be taken so as to overcome the above mentioned hurdles in the process of enhancing language acquisition. As language is best acquired through meaningful interaction and use in varied situations, activity based teaching emphasizing on four skills (LSRW) can help in enhancing language competency.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCY AND LSRW SKILLS

At the core of excellent communication skill in English is mastering the LSRW skills of the language. Aptly put by Stubbs (1985), the knowledge of how to use language appropriately in social situations is termed as communicative competence. One who can communicate well can be considered of having acquired all language skills well. However, learning to use a language in social context has to do more than just learning some grammar and vocabulary. An individual has to have a competency to use the language according to the situation, the participant and purpose. This nature of language used essentially as a mean of communication gives way to communicative approach of language teaching.

There are four main skills emphasised in English language teaching - learning. They are Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). Listening and Reading are considered as receptive skills and Speaking and Writing as the productive skills. Though, the four skills are of different modes - two (listening and speaking) skills are auditory-vocal and the other two (reading and writing) are visual, these are interconnected. This is indicative that developing one skill facilitates in improving the other resulting in effective communication. Enhancing English language skills has a direct relationship with the communicative competency in the language. Therefore while teaching English, the emphasis should be on skill enhancing than on just information passing.

Listening Skill

Communication means interacting with others wherein speaking is preceded by listening. Therefore, listening skill can be considered as the foundation for communication. Listening is one of the most important language skills. For effective communication, listening effectively

is a prerequisite. It serves as a basis for language acquisition and helps the learner to develop other three language skills. Listening is a process which involves hearing, understanding and judging. Listening is to draw out meaning from the utterances and messages by the speaker. It is termed as listening comprehension. The students should be taught to listen, comprehend, interpret, and evaluate ideas and information from a variety of texts, considering the purpose, messages, tone, structure etc. Listening competence has a significant effect on the cognitive development of the students because when a student listens well and understands and comprehends, it implies that the instructions in the classroom have reached the student. This also affects student's achievement in other subjects.

Though listening skill is an important skill to be developed in the students, little or no emphasis is given on the development and evaluation of listening skills in the students at school. Dua (2008) also observed that relevance of listening in communicative competence and its importance in language teaching is generally neglected.

Strategies to enhance listening skill in students

- (i) Students should be exposed to varied listening audios which involve listening to unheard passages in different situations to provide students with the opportunities to develop listening skill.
- (ii) The listening tasks may initially be in teacher's voice that can gradually be replaced with different native-speaker accents. This will help students to become familiar to different accents and to a reasonable pace of speech.
- (iii) Efforts should be made to equip the students with sufficient vocabulary so as to make them competent enough to comprehend listening comprehension.
- (iv) Exercise sheet with the aural input for listening comprehension will help to track student's improvement.
- (v) Assessment can be done either by the teacher or by the peer group. Self-assessment can also be an option sometimes. Assessment acts as a feedback to analyse their responses.

Teachers' initiatives

Language teacher plays a crucial role in helping students to be a good listener which will help them in having competency in English language. The teacher has to make students aware of the goals of the listening tasks, to comprehend aural input and to identify relevant and non-relevant information. Immediate feedback must be given by the teacher whenever possible which will encourage students to examine how or why their responses were incorrect.

Speaking Skill

To develop oral skills in English, the students should have an acceptable pronunciation, intonation and learn conversational English. Banerjee (2006) gives the views of the psychologists that good speech generates confidence and a feeling of security in relations with others. She also states that if oral work is well handled, difficulties in written work will be reduced to a minimum. The skills acquired in speaking do transfer to writing and reading. Moreover, speaking skill is widely used by students throughout their academic life. Once the students are out in the world of work, this skill is still more needed. Speaking skill is an important ingredient for better communication.

Strategies to enhance speaking skill in students

- (i) Initially group activities can be emphasised, such group tasks would help in confidence building.
- (ii) A fixed time limit should be assigned for the preparation (e.g., 10-15 min) which will enable students to generate ideas from their knowledge and experiences and planning the presentations.
- (iii) Gradually students should be given more opportunities to speak individually. This helps them to remove fear of speaking in public.
- (iv) Benchmarking in the form of feedback would facilitate learning as it would allow the students to know about the improvement in their level.

In the process of assisting students to develop their speaking skills, what is important is how these exercises are to be conducted so that they do not become monotonous and emphasise on developing speaking skill. Mohan (2012) states that during tasks for speaking, it is very important that students should be instructed to use various oral strategies such as, description, simplification, use of direct speech, illustrations, use of narrative techniques, use of idioms and phrases, natural use of connectors, use of intonation, stress etc. as per the topic and the use of non-verbal communicative strategies etc.

Teachers' initiatives

While learning English language skills in India, students depend greatly on the environment provided by the language teacher in classrooms. Therefore, the teacher becomes the epitome and students learn by imitating the teacher. Teacher's speaking should set a standard to be followed. Banerjee (2006) feels that the teacher can provide an environment wherein the students hear clear, vigorous, idiomatic English.

During the speaking tasks the role of the teacher should be of a coworker and stimulator wherein the teacher observes the students usage of grammatically correct and coherent sentences, intonation and acceptable pronunciation. Feedback is vital and should be provided in such a way that it helps students to develop real-life communication.

Reading Skill

Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all formal education depends. Reading doesn't just mean decoding the written text. It is much more than that. It is a complex mental process wherein the reader reads a text as input and comprehends and analyses the written text and the output thus is the understanding of the written text and drawing out meaning. This helps the reader to add to his/her existing knowledge. Reading skill enables a student to comprehend and gain information from the printed text. A student requires this skill throughout his academic career as well as in everyday life situation. Moats (2004) stresses upon the importance of reading skill saying that in today's literate world, academic success, secure employment, and personal autonomy depends on reading and writing proficiency. The more one reads, the larger his or her language base becomes. Indubitably, the future success of all students depends upon their ability to become proficient readers. However, the fact that cannot be denied is that even after many years of schooling and acquaintance to English reading and text, not all learners succeed in becoming proficient readers.

Strategies to enhance reading skill in students

- (i) The students should be made familiar to reading strategies, such as, reading with a purpose, reading to comprehend, reading to establish the gist of an unseen passage etc.
- (ii) All conventional reading practice should be given to the students. Such as Model reading, Loud reading by students, Silent reading and Reading comprehension.
- (iii) Reading of the texts should be followed by post-reading activities. Initially it can be group and pair activities which can gradually be shifted to individual reading activities
- (iv) For assessment of students' reading competency, along with the response sheets, post-reading activities should be conducted which will reflect the real-life uses to which students might put information they have gained through reading. It can be in the form of speaking or writing.
- (v) Reading assignments which are given to the students should have activities based on it so as to give them enough motivation to read and thus inculcate in students the habit to read independently and develop interest in reading. The students can be encouraged to read the following.
 - a. A range of grade appropriate texts both orally and silently which should be followed by some writing activity such as writing a review, a report, paraphrasing, etc. Speaking activity based on reading can also be planned, such as group discussion, speech etc.
 - b. English newspapers, Magazines, etc., for gathering information. This can later be shared in the class.

Teachers' initiatives

Role of the teacher is not so much to teach reading as to help children to read but to encourage the students to read enthusiastically. The teacher is the one who can influence the reluctant reader to read. For this the teacher needs to model his/her reading engagement. Loh(2009) opines that reading be perceived as important by the teachers themselves; and only when the teachers feel that it is important, will the students perceive it as such too. The teacher plays crucial role in motivating students to read. The teacher can pose as a role model and needs to make students aware of the purpose of reading and to use strategies while reading. The reading inside the classroom needs monitoring of the teacher by using activities related to the reading and by providing feedback.

Writing Skill

Writing system has a great contribution in the progress of human civilization. Be it sharing of information in the field of art and culture or science and technology, written texts have helped in enriching our knowledge. Written text is the basis for storage and transmission of information and knowledge. Writing as a communication tool is a mean of conveying one's thought in the written form. The writing process involves certain linguistic skills. Aggarwal (2003) puts down that effective writing should have clarity, conciseness, correctness, strength, coherence, unity and completeness of the matter. The process of written communication starts with the planning for written text which requires the thought process to work with the knowledge of certain essential literary devices. Dua (2008) emphasized that the achievement of coherence and unity in text depends on the appropriate use of different kinds of cohesive devices such as syntactic, lexical and semantic and several cognitive processes such as ability to plan execute and evaluate the written text.

The different forms of written text in the modern society such as letters, articles, applications etc. require a person to have various skills and competence in writing. There is a huge production of diversified written texts in today's world. Therefore, there is a need for people to be competent in producing quality written texts in its basic forms if not in specialized form.

While teaching secondary level students to write, there should be emphasis on producing organized and systematized text, usage of required literary devices and appropriate format.

Strategies to enhance writing skill in students

- i. Students should be taught to write with a purpose.
- ii. The writing tasks which are taken up should emphasize on formulating ideas, and organizing them systematically.
- iii. The tasks should emphasize on correct usage of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, punctuation and to restrict themselves to the word limit.
- iv. Students should be provided them with various activities to increase the speed. E.g. timed writing on given topics, dictation exercises, close tests, etc.
- v. The assessment criteria should be explained to students and they should be taught to keep in mind the assessment criteria while expressing themselves while writing.
- vi. The feedback given by the teacher should not only help in error correction but should give encouragement as well.

Teachers' initiatives

Reluctance in writing is because students are afraid that their writings can be full of errors, more if it is writing in English. They may also find it difficult to put their ideas and thoughts in English. Thus it's the teacher who acts as facilitator to implement the activities to teach them the required skills in writing. The teacher needs to provide de guided practice and expose the students to standard written materials. This will give them an idea of accepted format and other required information to proceed with the writing task. A student needs to be encouraged to proceed from easy short compositions to complex and longer ones. Appreciation to students for the work done followed by feedback for required improvement by the teacher will motivate students and develop their interest in writing.

CONCLUSION

Language learning is an important component of education and all round development of a student. The foremost goal of language teaching should be developing communicative competence wherein students are facilitated to develop the body of knowledge by providing with authentic practice that prepares students for real-life communication situations. The students should be helped to develop the ability to produce grammatically correct and logically connected sentences that are appropriate to specific contexts using comprehensible pronunciation.

English language taught at primary and upper primary classes basically focuses on acquaintance with language and structure building. By the time learners reach secondary classes they have a sound foundation of the language and the basic skills of the language.

Therefore, at secondary level where the learners are equipped with knowledge of English language, their communicative competency needs to be stressed upon. This is required as the learners at this stage are prepared to contribute to the socio economic development of the community, equipped with the required skills. Moreover, at secondary level, the learners are also prepared for entrance to higher education; where again intelligible use of language is expected. Thus learning a language for these purposes at secondary level becomes mandatory for the learners. Dyvadatham (2012) in the same line added that the chief objective at secondary level is to improve students' skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The students need to be exposed to activity rich English language learning which focus on enhancing English language skills in them.

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