An Exploratory Study on Teaching English— Teachers' Perspective

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Abstract— In India, though English language education started in the pre-independent era, it gained more prominence particularly in the post-independent era and today has entered all the fields of study. Now, English language has become necessary for mobility, social and economic success in the world. Lucas says that in the last few decades, the importance of English language raised to an incredible and wider extent (Lucas, 2004). In the current scenario, English language has become mandatory to attain success in all the fields of study. A person with good proficiency in English has high success rate irrespective of the field he works in or belongs to. So, it becomes necessary to acquire English language proficiency. English is considered to be the second language in India and it has been taught in schools, colleges, private institutions, through online classes, etc., Though the means to learn English language is numerous, everything has its own challenges and obstacles involved in teaching and learning a language. This paper focuses on teaching of English in schools and it further discusses the teachers' perspective on English language, the challenges and obstacles they encounter in the teaching process.

Keywords— Teaching, Learning, English education, Language Skills, Rote Learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, British imparted English education for the purpose of trade and commerce during the colonial rule. Macaulay's minutes played a vital role in educating Indians with English knowledge. In 1835, Macaulay's minutes insisted on educating Indians with English language to recruit Indians for serving the colonial government. Gradually, the people of India understood the importance of English and the privileges or the benefits of knowing English. Meanwhile, English language entered all the fields like law, politics, medical, science and technology etc., and spread worldwide. Vast people started learning English and today this language has become mandatory to attain success in any field. In the post-independent India, the Indian government ensured successful teaching of the language by appointing various committees to monitor teaching of English right from the school education. In spite of all planning and efforts to teach English successfully, there are many setbacks and teaching learning process remains unsuccessful.

1.1 Background of the Study

According to the EF English Proficiency Index 2024, India has been ranked in the 69th position and referred as a country that entitles Low Proficiency Status in English Language Proficiency based on the research and findings done among 2.1 million adults. The Annual Status of Education Report (2023) says, "42% of adolescents aged 14 to 18 face difficulties reading Basic English." NITI Aayog report confirms that graduates are unable to find employment due to their poor English language proficiency. It has been observed from the above reports that, in India, children, youth and even graduates lack English language proficiency. Several other reports have also stated that graduates in India remain unemployed as they neither have receptive nor productive skills in English. It seems mandatory to address the issues involved in English education as it affects the placement opportunities of young Indian graduates. To address these issues, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth study on how English education is imparted in schools and colleges.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The time span for learning English is almost thirteen or fourteen years, i.e., twelve years at the school level as a compulsory subject and one or two years at the tertiary level or college, based on the field of study chosen. As mentioned in the above reports, even after learning English for a lengthy duration most of the students lack language skills. The school education system provides more number of years to learn English compared to the tertiary level but still it's a question why the students still lack proficiency in English. Hence, this paper attempts to study how English language is taught in schools and also tries to get the teachers' thoughts on English language teaching as they play a vital role in English education. The focus of this study is on government schools in three districts of Tamil Nadu, namely, Chennai, Kanchipuram and Tiruvallur.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are challenges, obstacles and the problems the teachers encounter in teaching English?

2. What are the measures taken by the teachers themselves to overcome the challenges, obstacles and problems encountered while teaching English?

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Various committees have been set up by the Indian government to probe into the needs and make necessary changes in education throughout India. Most of the policies made by the committees focused on English education both at the school and tertiary level. In the year 1948, Radhakrishnan Commission recommended that, in order to keep ourselves updated with the living stream of ever growing knowledge, English should be studied both in high schools and in universities. The recommendation of this committee had a wider impact in the Indian education system. Kothari Commission started in the year 1964 recommended that as English is considered to be the library language, a strong foundation has to be laid on English language right from the school stage. In addition, at the tertiary level, a student should possess adequate command over English language at the completion of the first-degree course. Both the above committees emphasized that children should be bilingual from the younger age itself and students should be proficient in English at the time of graduation. In spite of the recommendations of various committees on English language education, it has been observed by Pathak that the difficulties, challenges and setbacks still exist and the

recommendations of the committees have been not successfully implemented.

Chaudhary (2015) has identified that even after years spent in learning English, fluency and accuracy elude the learner, which had adversely affected the morale of many learners and this has given rise to many private sectors for teaching English. But the private sectors too failed in imparting English proficiency and now the situation is that English language teaching has become a challenge where success in life depends on success in learning English or attaining proficiency in English.

Manoth (2024) emphasizes the fact that English should be taught as a skill subject rather than a content subject. Interaction with teachers and among peers should be encouraged in the classroom. Mere teaching of what is there in the textbook, giving them written grammatical exercises and drilling method of teaching will not enhance English language proficiency. In order to satisfy the demands of globalization, language usage in the real time scenario has to be practiced.

A discussion paper series by Azam (2010) reveals that those who communicate excellently in English are paid thirty-four percentage high wages than those who posses low proficiency in English. This again highlights the necessity of English language in the job sector.

A study done by Chattaraj (2015) recommends that until English is considered as a content subject in the schools, there could be no room for improvement in language proficiency. Adhering to the regular practice of teaching English as a subject, it has been forgotten that usage of language is more important than knowing what it what. Within limited time constraints to teach English as a subject, only little can be achieved or students will be benefitted only to a certain extent and their language proficiency remains unachieved. With more input there is a better chance for language acquisition.

The study by Kalia (2023) discusses the syllabus of English language in detail. It suggests that the syllabus that has been framed for English should deal more with the usage of English that is used in the real time scenario in day-to-day life. Curriculum redesigning which happens once in a while should be done at frequent intervals to cater to the needs of globalized community. Along with curriculum, the teaching strategies should also be revamped to successfully improve English language proficiency. This should be done at all levels of education, starting from elementary to higher studies.

Konig, Ligtvoet, Klemenz and Rothland (2024) in their article highlight the necessity of incorporating design of pedagogy as a curriculum component in the teacher education programmes. Teachers when exposed to

curriculum pedagogy would have a better comprehension of the process of education and would contribute to a larger extent for the welfare of the students.

According NCF 2005, Input-rich communicational environment is considered to be the prerequisite for any language learning. Input refers to text books prescribed for the students, the textbooks the students read extensively if any, the teaching methodology, the teachers themselves, teaching aids and other authentic materials. These inputs contribute a lot to language acquisition. Though NCF has given valid recommendations, it is a question of matter to what extent this has been understood by all the stake holders, like, the government, teachers, students, etc.,

The works discussed in the literature review of this paper clearly highlights that there is a lacuna between the suggestions by the committees and the current scenario. Moreover, the success rate of English language teaching still struggles because of the setbacks. This paper explores the factors those hinder successful language teaching in the classrooms at the school level. This research article is grounded on Descriptive theory of teaching which predicts the relationship and effectiveness of variables of teaching. This article gives a detailed description of the effectiveness of factors involved in English language classrooms through classroom observation and from responses from the teachers.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study has been conducted in selected high schools and higher secondary schools of three districts, namely, Kanchipuram, Tiruvallur and Chennai in Tamil Nadu. The schools were selected through Random Sampling Method from both urban and rural areas. The population of this study is 86 high school English teachers. The teachers were given a questionnaire in person, interviewed and classroom observation was also done to collect data. The questionnaire comprised of four types of questions- open ended, closed ended, dichotomous and ranking questions. The interview was a semi structured one. Forty hours of classroom observations were done to comprehend the real time scenario and to ensure the validity and reliability of the responses by the teachers in the interview and questionnaire. The data collected was then analysed quantitatively and qualitatively to explore more on imparting English language education.

IV. FINDINGS

The issues, obstacles and challenges encountered by the teachers were identified from the teachers' responses to the questionnaire, from interviews and also from the classroom observations.

4.1 Findings from the Questionnaire and Interview

The questionnaire was distributed to eighty-six teachers of English and nearly forty teachers were interviewed. Questionnaire and Interview with teachers revealed their perception towards teaching of English. Below are some of the challenges faced by the teachers.

4.1.1 Students Level of Proficiency

The teaching methodology, the teaching materials etc., has to be decided based on the proficiency level of the students. For a successful teaching-learning process it is important that the materials and methods employed for teaching caters to the needs of the students. A teacher must be aware of the proficiency level of her students to choose suitable materials and methods for teaching. So, the researcher felt it is important to raise a question regarding the proficiency level of the students, for which the teachers responded that fifteen percent of their students were of high proficiency and forty-five percent were of low proficiency, whereas a majority of forty percent students were of medium proficiency. This streamlining of students by the teachers was completely based on the marks scored by the students in the written exams. The marks scored by the students are considered to categorize the students as low, high and medium proficient. Fig. 1.1 shows these students' proficiency levels in English.
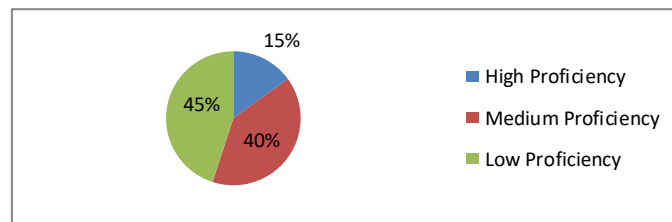

Fig. 1. Students' Proficiency Level

4.1.2 Importance of Language Skills

In learning a language, it is paramount to give importance to all the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. In order to be proficient users of a language one has to be proficient in using all the four language skills. So, it is necessary to teach all the four language skills with equal importance. The teachers in this questionnaire ranked all the four language skills and it was found that there is a vast difference between the importance given to all the four skills in English language. Fifty-two percentage teachers gave first place to writing, twenty-eight percentage gave first place to reading, twelve percent considered speaking as the most important and only eight percent felt listening should be given first place. Fig. 1.2 shows teachers' ranking of language skills.
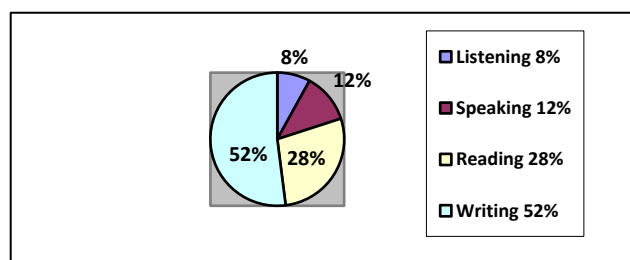
Fig. 2. Ranking of Language Skills

From the questionnaire it was found that listening and speaking skill were given least importance at the school level. This made the researcher curious to know why speaking is given least importance during the school education and the reason for the same was explained in the interview conducted with the teachers. It was told by the teachers that writing and reading are the two skills tested in the exams and so it has been given more importance than the other skills. From the above response from, it has been understood that the washback effect of testing has impacted language teaching today. If listening and speaking were to be tested, teachers will be forced to teach those skills too. Moreover, the teachers also said that speaking is needed only at the workplace and the students could practice and enhance their speaking skills once they go to the college. The school teachers have an assumption that the teachers in the colleges do focus on speaking to a large extent by training the students in their spoken language. They are unaware of the fact that students struggle and suffer to communicate in English once they enter the tertiary level without having practiced or enough exposure at the school level. On the other hand, there are some teachers who are willing to teach speaking skills to the students but still not able to do it because of lack of time, teacher-student ratio, overloaded syllabus, examination pattern and insufficient infrastructure. The need of the hour is that speaking skill should also be practiced from the earlier stages of education and it is the responsibility of the teacher to make conducive environment for developing speaking skills. For effective communication, Patel says, "I have to create opportunities for students to use English effectively" (Oxford, 2020)

4.1.3 Reasons for Students Lack of Proficiency

Language is a vast area and language proficiency refers to being proficient in all the components of a language- the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, writing along with its subskills and vocabulary, grammar. The teachers were asked to list out the reasons for students' lack of proficiency. The teachers gave the following reasons for students' lack of proficiency- most of the students are first generation learners and so they are

exposed to English language only when they are in the school premises, they do not have the opportunity to listen to English speeches or usage in the real-time scenario, they lack grammar knowledge, because of the hectic syllabus, the focus is more on rote-learning, which is memorization and reproduction, as a result they find it difficult to write or speak on their own in English in the real-time scenario. They even find it difficult to reproduce the concepts they learn in other subjects on their own. They familiarize themselves only with what has been memorized. Reading too is limited to question and answers given at the back of each lesson in their text books. They are not able to read fluently as all the students have not got practiced to reading in the classroom because of the time limit and the teacher-student ratio.

4.1.4 Classroom Language

For the question what language is being used while teaching the contents in the text, thirty percentage of teachers said that only English is used for teaching and communication during the English classes. Seventy percentage of students said that both Tamil, i.e., the mother tongue of the students and English is used for teaching, as well as, communication during the English classes. The former teachers who choose, only the usage of target language i.e., English, is of the opinion that English should be taught only in English, may be using simplified sentences and usage of other languages in the English class minimizes English exposure to the students. The teachers who are bilingual stated that as the students are first generation learners and they find difficulty in comprehending what has been taught if the teaching has been done only in the target language English.

4.1.5 Lack of Time

Another challenge that the teachers encounter in the English class is time constraint. The vast syllabus makes it difficult to teach English as a skill subject. The teaching of the lesson itself consumes the forty minutes of class duration and there is no time to train the students in using the language skills. The teachers felt that they would get more time if there are additional classes and teachers for English language.

4.1.6 Teacher-Student Ratio

The teacher-student ratio is a major problem and challenge faced by the teachers. They prefer thirty-five students in a class for successful teaching learning process. But, in the current scenario, the student strength is nearly fifty and even above fifty in most of the classes which in turn affects effective teaching and learning. The teachers find it difficult to pay individual attention to the students and monitor their progress.

4.1.7 Infrastructure

Infrastructure is another challenge that the teachers encounter while teaching English. Innovation in teaching learning process is necessary to stimulate the students' interest towards learning. In the current scenario, technology has become unavoidable in teaching and learning. The books also have inbuilt QR codes which gives an opportunity for the students to listen and watch the content related to the lesson in their textbook. Though the teachers welcome the incorporation of technological aspect in the text book, they find it difficult to make use of it or access it without the needed infrastructure. In most of the schools there is a common room with a projector to listen to the QR code contents but not individually in the classrooms. Incorporation of technology stimulates the interest of the students in learning. Projector facility in all the classrooms would enhance teaching-learning process.

4.1.8 Mark-driven Education System

The components that are to be tested in the exams were given prior importance and it has been taught and practiced by the students in order to score good marks. The other components were given least importance and this shows that English is taught as a content subject rather than a skill subject. This could be changed if all the components required for English language proficiency are being tested in the exams. There is a need to change this mark-driven education system.

4.1.9 Alien Content

The teacher finds the content in the textbook to be more alien to the students as they find it difficult to make the students understand what is in the textbook and this leads to rote learning. If the content is related to the culture that the students they belong to, they would find it easier to understand. Learning takes place effectively if it does follows the concept of Stephen Krashen (i+1), where 'i' refers to the knowledge of the students with reference to their culture and 1 refers to the extended knowledge about their culture.

4.1.10 Non-qualified Teachers

In some of the schools, the teachers who teach English are not specialized in English. They hold a degree with specialization in History, Mathematics, Economics etc., These teachers, in the interview, mentioned that they teach the lesson and give the answers for the book back questions and however make the students to memorize the answers through drilling. The grammar components are also memorized by the students. In these classes, English is seen as a content subject to a larger extent rather than a skill subject.

4.2 Findings from Classroom Observation

The data gathered from classroom observation was helpful in finding out the validity and reliability of the responses of the teachers in the questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire and interview responses were crossed checked by the researcher during the classroom observation. The findings from the observation, for some responses, aligned with the teacher's response to the questionnaire and interview. However, there were some discrepancies too as there were a few contradictions in the classroom observation which makes some responses of the teachers unaligned. Almost fifty classes were observed for better comprehension on the part of the researcher. As reported by the teachers in the questionnaire, though a minimum of ten percentage of classes employed only English for both teaching and communication, in most of the English classes, the language used was bilingual, both Tamil and English were used in the classroom for both teaching and communication. The first contradiction is that there were also classes where only Tamil was used to teach and communicate even in the English classroom, whereas in the question paper, no teacher had chosen the option 'only Tamil is used for teaching and communication in the classroom'. The reason is that as the students are first-generation learners, the teachers opt to teach bilingually and at time only in Tamil too.

Though there is no proper infrastructure to play the QR codes in the text book for the classes individually, some of the teachers tried doing it with their mobile phone. As the mobile phone audio is not audible to all the students in the classroom, the teacher grouped the students into ten in a group and played the QR code contents moving to their respective places. This shows the dedication of the teachers because without getting exhausted the teachers constantly repeat the QR code content and listen to it. In spite of technological achievements, lack of needed infrastructure too affects language learning.

A study of the students answer booklets revealed the practice of rote learning. The detailed answers were similar in ninety percent of the scripts. Only ten percentage of students had written the answers on their own. Almost the answer scripts had similar words, sentence structure and even punctuation marks like what they had written in their class work note book. The students being first generation learners, and because of lack of exposure to the language, they were made to memorize and reproduce the answers in the examination. The teachers had already mentioned in the questionnaire that the students are first generation learners and hence rote learning is adapted to make them score more marks. This kind of practice undermines creativity of the students.

The English classes at the high school level handled by other subject teachers were also observed during classroom observation. It was a shocking fact that in the hands of teachers of other subjects, English language learning suffers to a greater extent. These teachers tend to forget the fact that English is a skill subject and employ the methods used to teach other subjects in general, mere making the students to understand the content was given more importance than the usage of language. It would be better if only teachers with English specialization are appointed as English teachers throughout all the grades at the school level.

The classroom observation also revealed that grammar translation method has been employed to teach English in most of the classes. The language used was also bilingual, English and the regional language, Tamil. The teachers have a perception that the students being first generation learners', grammar translation method to be most suitable way of teaching English. In addition, because of the usage of regional language in the English classroom, the students have only limited opportunity of listening to English and hence lack enough exposure to the target language.

The English classes are more of teacher centered and students are more passive listeners. The classroom interaction was limited to teachers raising questions that demanded one-word answers from the students. There was no room or time for real-time interaction with the students. This may be because of lack of time, teacher-student ratio, mark-based education system, teachers' attitude or perception about the students' and the English language teaching itself.

4.3 Suggestions to Improve

During the interview and in questionnaires, teachers voiced their suggestions that would overcome the issues, obstacles and challenges they encounter in the current scenario. Their suggestions are listed below.

➢ Teachers wanted projector facility with audio players in all the classrooms individually, to stimulate students' interest in language learning. Even the facility of language laboratory would help the students to be more active.

➢ They wanted teaching resources, like text book to have content related to the culture they live in and this would foster better comprehension. This type of relatable content would also avoid rote learning i.e., memorization and reproduction.

➢ The also need a separate work book with lot more exercises to enhance grammar knowledge of the students.

➢ They needed separate period to teach and give practice to the students on the usage of English language.

➢ They also wanted increase in the number of teachers to meet the requirements of additional classes they request exclusively for enhancing language skills and communication skills.

➢ Teachers wanted all the four language skills to be tested frequently throughout the school level in all the exams, including mid-term tests i.e., monthly tests, and also summative exams.

➢ They request for an equal weightage of marks in all the exams for all the four language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing.

➢ Teachers look for a reasonable teacher student ratio, which is not more than thirty-five in a class.

➢ Teachers were very keen on continuous professional development through-in training sessions. They were very interested in updating their knowledge.

4.4 Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study are- the study has been conducted in the government schools in Chennai, Tiruvallur and Kanchipuram district. The sample chosen was also English teachers of these schools.

4.5 Scope for Further Research

• An extensive study can be conducted with the teachers to explore the teaching methodology used in private schools of State Board.

• A study can be conducted to understand teaching of English in other boards like, CBSE and ICSE too.

• Students input can be recorded through questionnaire and interview to understand the needs of the students and their attitude towards language learning.

V.   CONCLUSION

The findings on teachers' questionnaire, interview and classroom observation clearly indicates that the teachers do realize the problems, challenges and obstacles they face in their English language teaching scenario. There are also aware of the remedial measures that could improvise their problems leading to a better teaching learning environment. Though the initiatives or recommendations made by the committees are valuable, there are issues in implementing it. The issues revolve around, lack of teachers, over loaded syllabus, insufficient time, lack of infrastructure, mark-oriented education system and other facilities as discussed in the findings. Some of the classroom observation findings contradicted with the teachers' responses in the questionnaire. And hence, the contradictions explored more on the real- time scenario of

English language teaching classroom. There will be no improvement in the students' language proficiency until the voices of the teachers are addressed and fulfilled. The committee policies regarding English language education can be successfully implemented only with proper infrastructure, updated teacher training, manageable teacher-student ratio, all skills teaching and testing pattern etc., Based on the study it can be asserted that the prevailing conditions of English language teaching in Tiruvallur, Kanchipuram and Chennai schools are not conducive in developing all the four language skills. There are myriad problems, challenges, obstacles to be encountered when English is taught as a skill subject. The scenario will be improved only when all the stakeholders like, government, teachers, students, curriculum developers, material designers, work together to achieve the goal of making students proficient in English. The knowledge of English has become a prerequisite in all sectors across the country. The jobs like, hairdresser, waiters, etc., too needs minimum proficiency in English for their job security and has become non-negotiable with recruiters.

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