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ELT in India: A Brief Historical and Current Overview

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Bio

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Abstract

ELT in India is vibrant and dynamic today. The context of the whole teaching paradigm has changed totally. This article traces the course of this change, along with the causes and consequences while comparing this with the course of ELT in other contexts where it has always been a first language.

Key words

ELT in India, evolution of ELT, ripple effect, limited success of CLT,

Introduction

Due to its association with the British coloniser, English started life in India as not just a foreign language, but as a much-hated language. From the despised instrument of oppression to the reluctantly adopted lingua franca to the status symbol of the upper classes to its position today as a second language, English has come a long way. In fact, it won't be an aberration to label it a first language for some echelons of Indian society. Just as the status of the language underwent constant reinvention, the whole ELT paradigm also travelled the complete gamut of modification. In the closing years of the Twentieth century when English began to emerge as the global language, the Indian classroom was transformed because of the change in the environment of the learner. Whereas the earlier surroundings had been acquisition poor with regard to English, suddenly every language user seemed to be jumping upon the learn- English- bandwagon.

The liberalisation of the Indian economy ushered in all kinds of reasons to learn the language. While earlier in the century students who had specialised in English joined either teaching or the civil services, now a whole new spectrum of job opportunities has opened up. There are now call centres that need trainers to equip their employees with communication skills, there are multinationals who have been recruiting marketing staff who needed to be taught spoken English, there are medical transcription centres which need efficient translators and reporters. Those desirous of immigration to the west needed professional help for clearing tests like the IELTS. Hence, the avenues where ELT came to be required in India are unlimited today.

The change was first observed at the social, political and economic levels. Suddenly, English ceased to be the badge of status for the upper crust. Earlier, only the upper classes and a few limited size groups were seen using English in everyday life. The middle class

reserved it for official purposes or those social occasions where they wished to leave an impression. The lower classes thought the use of English was beyond them and since the government schools of India made no effort to teach any kind of spoken English, this category of people had no exposure to it. However, around the year 1995, the whole paradigm began to change. The liberalisation of the economy led to the advent of multinationals resulting in many developments like varied job opportunities that demanded a command of English, more English channels on the television, an increasing number of English publications and international lifestyles becoming a tempting option.

Fluctuating and Varied Institutional EFL Developments in India

The developments that have taken place in ELT methodology in the West took some time to reach Indian classrooms. The evolution of ELT in India, as in any other EFL country is linked with factors that are not pedagogic alone. Today, English can not be termed a foreign language in the Indian context, but in times past, it was a foreign language and its teaching had to take cognisance of all factors, pedagogic or otherwise. The two figures tracing the growth of ELT given here are different because ELT pedagogy developed primarily in the West where political and social realities were different and the status of English was fixed whereas, in India, ELT pedagogy depends upon the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which the status of English keeps changing. No diagrammatic representation can be complete without taking into account the fluid nature of the position of English in Indian society.

Figure one is this author's representation of the development of ELT as a discipline in countries where English is the first language and figure two is the development of ELT in India, it is obvious from the two figures that developments in ELT take time to take root in India. The causes behind this gap are three:

1. Only around the year 1980 did English achieve adequate attention from policy makers, administrators and teachers. Due to its chequered history in the country, its complete importance was realised more than three decades after independence.
2. Apart from a One-year course in teacher training for schoolteachers, no formal teacher training is given to new recruits or practising teachers. There are orientation courses and refresher courses for teachers in general, but no course deals with ELT. It is only recently that the British Council has introduced CELTA and other such programmes; these are quite expensive, teachers do not want to spend money on them and their institutions rarely sponsor them.
3. The examination system is more achievement oriented rather than performance oriented, leading to an emphasis on grades and positions rather than issues of fluency or proficiency. Indirectly, the teacher remains in many classrooms even today, the facilitator of examinations rather than of linguistic or communicative proficiency.

In spite of the slower rate of evolution, English Language Teaching in India has been widening in its approach and methods. The result is that there is an increasing tendency, scope and intent of reaching the end of the ELT cone. At its own eccentric pace, ELT in India is today in step with the rest of the world today. Where the issue of methodology is concerned, ELT seems to be in three transient stages according to the different levels of the paradigm and its demands:

1. The first level is that of the institutions run by the government, mainly primary, secondary and high schools. Since the primary goal of these institutions is to provide education at affordable and subsidised levels to the public, ELT teaching can not be placed at the widest end of the cone for the basic reason that the teachers there do not have much access to latest research and materials for reasons economic as well as geographic. Most of these institutions are the sole providers of education

- in rural and remote settings where they can fulfil adequately the basic requirements alone. In the urban locales the planning bodies are now moving towards up gradation through teacher training, syllabus modification and improved resources. In another decade or so, this level of ELT should be more communicative in nature with language and literature fully integrated.
2. At the second level are those institutions that are semi-government or are run by private managing bodies, assisted through government funds. These also include undergraduate colleges and postgraduate universities. Growth and development can be seen here in spurts. In some classrooms, teachers have reached the widest end of the cone, are aware of learner needs and adjust methodology accordingly and use a judicious blend of interaction and communication in the class. In others, an observer feels caught in a time warp with pure talk-chalk lectures that are mostly teacher-centred. The positive observation is that there are practising teachers between these two poles, who are trying to change their teaching practice and are looking at alternate methodology. Just as there is a mixed bag of teaching practice, the institutions also range from indifferent to proactive. While there are places where even a small audio player is not accessible, there are administrators who have invested heavily in state of the art, perfectly equipped language laboratories.
 3. The third level comprises pure private sector academies that undertake to make learners proficient English users within a stipulated period, of course by charging a fixed amount of fee. Since time means money for them, they are equipped with the latest materials like interactive, multimedia software. Jobs in the academic area are few and far between, so an increasing number of qualified teachers find their way to these places. The teacher profile gets younger and younger, resulting in increasing amounts of innovation and experimentation where methodology is concerned.

While teachers belonging to the first level are content to remain followers, the second level is being influenced by the third. When learners are in a rush as they need part-time

employment or have an IELTS to clear, they often join academies in addition to their undergraduate classes. This creates a ripple effect and the ripples can be felt in three ways:

- I. Young teachers who work in undergraduate colleges work part-time at these academies. At the academy, they use the latest teaching aids and materials since the purpose is to achieve fluency at the earliest. At their regular place of work, their teaching methodology undergoes a transformation because they tend to use the interactive, task-based and communicative methods more than the usual lecture methods used there normally.
- II. On taking into account the roaring business the academies are doing, the administrative bodies of undergraduate colleges are coming to realise that a whole untapped market needs to be explored. Along with their regular degree classes, they are gearing up to introduce revenue-earning courses in the field of English proficiency, open to the public. This leads to a spill over effect in the undergraduate classes too as some teachers would be common to both courses and the same campus sees a lot of innovative teaching.
- III. Parents of learners form an important component of the teaching paradigm in India. Earlier, any kind of change in courseware or teaching methodology would result in stiff opposition from them¹ and the administrative body would recommend the continuation of age-old practices. Observing the winds of change resulting from the acceptance of the global status of English, parents today encourage innovation and experimentation in the classroom.

After attending interactive classes at the academy, learners search such stimulation in their regular classes too. This is a radical change, especially if one looks into the past. When communicative language teaching was introduced in India in the 1980s, it was a dismal failure for the first few years because of the lack of the right context. This context stands established in India today, so learners are receptive and are actively encouraging more learner-centred classes.

The context of the whole teaching situation started changing around the year 2000. Socio-economic factors played a major role in this change that is dynamic even today. The liberalization of the Indian economy led to the entry of many international brands into the learners' mindset. Call centres, shopping malls and trade fairs, all need young personnel, fluent in English. There is a mushroom growth of institutes and academies of the third category above, offering the whole range of proficiency in English from clearing the IELTS to speaking fluently. The Internet has played a major role in creating a resource-rich environment by giving a wide range of exposure to English. Becoming web-savvy has emerged as the need of the day and this is possible only through English. These are just a few of the factors that have created a panacea for the deadlock that CLT had found itself in.

Today, in India, a whole new generation is coming up; a generation that travels a lot in countries where English is a first language, works in places where English is the lingua franca and as a result, carries home to other generations the same English as a medium of communication. Hence, the empowerment that Bax² looks forward to for teachers in times to come has come sooner due to changes in the context of the complete teaching paradigm. Unless the context is supportive of upgrading English performance of the teacher –which should be inclusive of communicative competence- no teacher training or upgrading of methodology can be productive and fruitful. This is a significant conclusion that can be drawn from the Indian situation.

The results of all the changes listed above stand reflected in the classrooms where CLT is still practised. The whole process of curriculum change is riddled with cumbersome

and time-consuming procedures in India, so in spite of the limited success of CLT, it has not been removed from courses. This, in the long run, has been for the better because while on the one hand, the teachers have been able to familiarize themselves with its approach and methodology; on the other hand, the changed and changing context has encouraged its growing success today. Since learners are a part of the whole context, they are aware of the growing need for proficiency, both linguistic and communicative, in English. Today, more and more students take up part-time work (that requires fluency in English) along with their studies, this was earlier an aberration, now is the norm.

The Road Ahead in India: More CA Inclusive

ELT in India has come a long way from year 1880 when only 60% primary schools used English as the medium for teaching. (See Figure I &II) Up to 1940, the grammar-translation method flourished and the spread of English remained confined to education and office circles, yet again in a haphazard manner. By 1970, structural linguistics started making its presence felt in Indian classrooms in the shape of drills and exercises. Around this time, all professional courses began to be taught in English, which had also become established as a library language and a subject for independent study. As compared to its establishment as an autonomous subject in other English-as-first-language countries around 1940, ELT emerged as an autonomous subject in India as late as 1980.

Similarly, the language laboratory also became a part of the ELT paradigm around 1985 as compared to the 1940 of these countries. CALI or Computer Assisted Language Instruction reached most classrooms in 1960 but it came to the Indian classroom around 1985; at present, in some places it has evolved into CALL or Computer Assisted Language Learning. Both CALI and CALL have not been adopted widely due to the obvious constraints of finance and the typically Indian mindset that learning cannot take place without the presence of a human teacher. In the Indian context, Tickoo's distinction between CALI and CALL took on special significance³.

While it is true that multinationals, call centres and some private institutes are encouraging CALL, it is CALI that has gained wider acceptance.

Communicative Language Teaching reached both regions (India and the West) between the years 1970 – 1980, with the difference that the Indian context was not ready for CLT. Hence, it took around two decades to gain acceptance among learners and teachers. Language-literature integration gained recognition among teachers around the same time. India after 1995 has made up for the slow elephant years by broadening the apex of the ELT cone with a generous mix of so many methodologies that come under the generic category of CA or the Communicative Approach⁴.

It is true that mostly this CA is practised in the institutes that belong to the third category above but the ripple effect created is gradually reaching the ELT classroom. Most institutes that target the language users who need proficiency in a hurry or who need to clear certain examinations invest heavily in teaching materials from publishing houses like the Cambridge University Press. Since all materials published in such places of repute are state-of-the-art in terms of methodology, teachers and learners are in a position of maximum benefit. Moreover, teachers at these centres are usually young postgraduates who are receptive to novelty and innovation.

They borrow heavily from their materials and often create a methodology of their own by using combinations of audio lingual or situational or functional or interactive or task-based or communicative -or even the direct method language teaching. All these approaches and methods could be spread through a course or could even be used in one class, depending upon learner response. This pedagogy is still CA (Communicative Approach) oriented even if not restricted to one approach. Again teachers –especially the younger ones- are increasingly moving towards increasing the extent to which lessons are centred around CA.

The most significant impact of this approach is its sensitivity to learner needs and response. This sensitivity is what has been lacking in the academic aspect of ELT in

India. The whole academic process is so unwieldy that it fails to respond to learner needs; learner response is too often ignored. The ELT cone of India is broadening at the base today because of factors that have little to do with the ELT classroom in academic institutions. The irony of the situation is that while academicians label these learning centres ‘shops’ or ‘commercial institutes’ it is these establishments that are a major influence behind the changing face of the ELT paradigm in India.

NOTES

1. Richards, J.C. and Rodgers, T.S. 2002. Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching. Delhi, Cambridge University Press. 248. ‘...attempts to introduce *Communicative Language Teaching in countries with very different educational traditions from those in which CLT was developed (Britain and the United States and other English-speaking countries) have sometimes been described as “cultural imperialism” because the assumptions and practices implicit in CLT are viewed as “correct” whereas those of the target culture are seen in need of replacement.*’
2. Bax, S.2003. ‘Bringing context and methodology together’. *ELT Journal* 57/3: 295-296. Bax writes, ‘In my view methodology can – if treated with excessive reverence- act as a brake on teachers. If we are not careful we hinder teachers from developing their abilities to analyse and respond to the context productively. ... some teachers do break out of the straitjacket, but why can’t the profession empower them to do so? ...The teacher is not to be merely ‘reactive’ to the context – teachers should not only be sensitive to the context, but also provide the key ingredients for language learning such as opportunities for input, output, attention to accuracy, and so on...’
3. Tickoo, M.L. 2003. Teaching and Learning English. New Delhi, Orient Longman Pvt. Limited. 274-275. Tickoo writes, ‘CALI was mainly an

extension of programmed learning which was extensively used alongside language laboratories in the 1960s. It uses linear or branching programmes as a kind of self-instructional support. The learner mainly responds to stimuli on the screen and receives positive or negative feedback or, in the case of a branching programme, some analysis of the wrong response followed by some additional information. Although such a lesson does facilitate a limited amount of self-learning, it does not provide much room for learner involvement or interaction...CALL ...marks a shift from teaching to learning. Computers with multimedia facilities are now used to offer far more interactive programmes...CALL's reaches have of late been spreading fast with language media centres being seen as an integral part of a well-equipped language classroom.'

4. Richards and Rodgers. 2002. *'Mainstream teaching on both sides of the Atlantic ...opted for Communicative Language teaching (CLT) as the recommended basis for language teaching methodology in the 1980s and it continues to be the most plausible basis for language teaching today, although ... CLT is today understood to mean little more than a set of very general principles that can be applied and interpreted in a variety of ways.'* 244.



