Review research paper

ENGLISH FOR STUDENTS FROM MARGINALIZED SECTIONS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL: AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

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Abstract. *The present qualitative study reviews the status of tertiary-level English education in India and suggests a more inclusive approach wherein the needs of students pursuing degree courses in traditional disciplines viz., Arts, Commerce, and Science are addressed. Adopting the participant observation method, the study puts forth some of the observations related to English pedagogy and learning outcomes at the tertiary level in Indian higher education institutes (HEIs), especially in rural and semi-urban areas made by the present researcher during his academic career both as a student and teacher. The observations reveal that most learners at the tertiary level need help in developing basic English skills. English in their curriculum becomes the hurdle in the academic performance and achievements of these learners. Indeed, English is one of the major reasons for the increase in dropout rate at this level. Based on the observations and underscoring the relevance of communication skills in English for these learners at the tertiary level, the study suggests an inclusive approach to pedagogy and learning outcomes, emphasizing the needs of learners from marginalized sections.*

Key words: *English, inclusive approach, marginalized, tertiary, traditional disciplines.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The discussion on inclusive education has come to the forefront recently. Many studies (Ainscow, 1999; Carrington, 1999; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Allan, 2010; Winter, 2020; Claes, 2021; Norwich, 2022) have emphasized and discussed the need to develop inclusive education that provides access to mainstream education for all learners regardless of differences by considering the needs of all learners. Inclusive education has become a major concern for educational systems in both developing and developed countries. Ainscow & Sandill (2010) underscore the crucial role of 'leadership practice' in equipping education systems for 'inclusive values and bringing about sustainable change' and emphasize the organizational conditions needed for developing a conducive environment and fostering 'inclusive cultures'. An inclusive approach aims at enabling learners to accomplish their goals by accepting and validating their learning needs and creating appropriate learning environments accordingly. Thus it ensures the inclusion of students at a whole-school level

through the inclusive policy. According to Winter (2010), "A key aspect of inclusive education is the philosophical approach underpinning the inclusion of all students in the education environment based on inclusive attitudes, beliefs, and values of all stakeholders and founded on principles of social justice and human rights." The study by Carrington (1999), underpinning the role of 'teachers' beliefs and values in inclusive education, discusses a critical aspect of the changes needed to develop inclusive schooling and the associated professional development for teachers. Ainscow (1999) puts forth 'theories about inclusive schooling that arise out of a detailed scrutiny of practice'. Norwich (2022) while reviewing the research in inclusive education attempts to answer the question about the scope, reach, and limits of research in inclusive education. Allan (2010) discusses the prospects and possibilities for inclusion in Scotland and Europe and acknowledges the significance of the barriers to inclusion. She argues that there is an urgent need to address the competing policy demands within education and the problems associated with fragmented provision. Exclusive education refers to the education of students by selective merit or exclusion and may or may not involve discrimination by educational authorities, representatives, or other stakeholders (Winter, 2010). Constantinou (2023) talks about the multifaceted role of the ESP practitioner stemming from the specialized needs of learners and the multiple duties they are expected to perform. In the editorial note of the special issue of ESPEAP, Bakić-Mirić (2021) focuses on the issues that are changing perceptions of relevant topics in teaching ESP and EAP.

2. Is English Education in India Inclusive and Exclusive

In light of the above discussion, the present study argues that English education in India, although claimed to be 'inclusive', has always been 'exclusive' in reality. Although English has established its deep roots on the Indian subcontinent for more than four centuries, it has remained the language of a 'select few' (Dasgupta, 1993; Montaut, 2010, p. 83). Despite the command these 'select few' have gained in the English language, the English in outer-circle countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania is often looked down upon as a "low standard non-native variety" (Kachru, 1985; Higgins, 2003). However, within the "outer circle, the hierarchical stratification is discernible. In India, the English spoken by the urban upper class, learned in reputable private institutes, enjoys the prestige of being a standard variety while the urban middle class, understanding the role of English for lucrative careers, strives to expose their children to a better variety of English by admitting them to private institutes with English as the exclusive medium of instruction (MI) imparting high standard English education." (Chaudhary, 2002, p. 49; Kachru, 1986) Likewise, some moderate or low-income parents from urban or metropolitan areas, knowing the significance of English education, manage to send their children to private English medium schools (EMSs) charging moderate fees by minimizing the expenses incurred in their daily needs to pay off the school fees. Of course, schools imparting education in English medium (EM) have spread their wings to reach semi-urban areas too. However, the standard of English taught in both these contexts could be better on account of the unavailability of well-trained teachers to teach English. Trained teachers with the required fluency and accuracy in English are unwilling to join these private schools mainly because they are paid low salaries. Besides, they do not like to work in semi-urban areas as they aspire to be part of urban or metropolitan culture. Nonetheless, urban, semi-urban, and rural parents, with high and moderate incomes, aspire for better

career opportunities for their children but are ignorant of the existence of the 'so-called standard variety of English' and the importance of trained teachers for teaching English, are obliged to admit their wards to such schools.

Interestingly, social stratification is reflected in the boards these private EMSs are affiliated with. The private EMSs affiliated with the International Baccalaureate Board (IB), the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), the Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE), and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination (CISCE) enjoy the prestige of being reputed schools (Borkala, 2022). The upper-income groups prefer sending their wards to such schools with high fees, while the parents with moderate incomes have to be content with the EMSs affiliated with the state boards. Thus, the importance of English education is underscored through the aspiration of parents from different income groups to provide their children with better exposure to English at an early age.

One other group of parents, although aware of the value of English education in the career of their children, cannot afford to send them to any of the above schools. There is yet another group of parents who are neither aware of the value of English education in the career of their children, nor can they afford to send them to private EMSs as they are busy struggling to meet their daily ends. The children belonging to these socio-economically 'marginalized sections' must study in government-funded schools imparting education in local languages. Of course, English is taught as one of the three languages, along with Hindi, the official national language of India, the official and regional language of the concerned state[1], under the 'three-language' policy[2] adopted by the Government of India. Although many government/ government-funded schools introduce English from class I itself, it is taught merely as one of the subjects in the school curriculum not as the MI, and the teachers there, though well-paid by government, are either not competent enough or lack the apt training required to teach English to these children. Besides, the pedagogy of English is less learner- and outcome-oriented. Consequently, English is taught and learned only for the sake of passing examinations; the learning outcomes are seldom taken into account.

The present study observes that children from privileged sections, especially from urban and metropolitan areas, get better exposure, at an early age, to English and its correct usage in real-life situations with accent and decent. Further, other semi-urban privileged children have also been getting good exposure, although not satisfactory, to the English language from an early age. However, their counterparts from the socio-economically underprivileged sections learn English as one of the subjects without appropriate exposure to its usage at primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels for twelve years. Still, the outcomes are seldom visible in their learning. Rather, learning English becomes a kind of 'burden' for these learners. Some of them, managing, anyhow, to get passing marks in English at all levels, enter the tertiary level to carry this burden on their shoulders further, while others never reach this level as they collapse in between by the weight of English (Sultana, 2018). There are studies (Steinberg et al., 1984; Stevenson et al., 1991; Driscoll,

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[1] There are 29 states and 8 union territories in the federal union of India. A state in India is a self-governing administrative division formed by the major homogeneous linguistic groups residing in the given geographical territory.

[2] The policy was recommended in 1961 and implemented in 1968 by the education commissions. As per this formula, students in Hindi speaking states have to learn English, Hindi and any modern Indian language while students from non-Hindi speaking states have to learn English, Hindi and one Indian language of their respective states.

1999; Sheng et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2011; Morton et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2020) concerning the factors contributing to high 'dropout' rates. The studies by Sheng et al., 2011, Maxwell, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2020 attribute it to the failure of English language learning (ELL). Further, the gap between the students' marks - either high or low - in their English exams and manifested language skills, keeps room for doubt about the reliability and validity of the overall evaluation system. The examiners often tend to be lenient in assessment as teachers are held accountable for students' low performance or high failure in their subjects.

The concern here is for the learners from these 'underprivileged' sections who reach, anyhow, the tertiary level by getting passing marks, often on account of 'examiners' leniency' (!), in their English examinations and continue to bear the 'burden' of English which is taught as one of the mandatory subjects in their curriculum for one, two or three years, as per the directions by the concerned university to which the higher education institute (HEI) is affiliated. The argument above may underscore certain negative implications of English education in India. Still, the present study is not against English education, nor does it doubt the government's and policymakers' honesty of intention behind giving appropriate exposure to English to underprivileged students at the tertiary level. Indeed, it recommends teaching English to these students, but the ways to make the English pedagogy more inclusive and outcome-oriented must be explored. In other words, the study suggests that these learners' ELL needs must be taken into account while designing the English curriculum and determining the evaluation system at the tertiary level. This suggestion is crucial in the context of the implementation of the new National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 (NCERT) which aspires for equitable and inclusive learning for all at all levels of education in India.

3. METHODOLOGY

Adopting the qualitative approach, the present study, first, reviews the nature of English education in India. Further, the English curriculum at the tertiary level is analyzed in light of some of the representative Indian universities. The universities selected for the present study represent all four regions - East, West, North, and South of the country. Finally, the study proposes a course in English that can be more inclusive. The proposed course uses the model of the Certificate Courses in German which are offered by Prof. Milind Bramhe of IIT Madras, through SWAYAM, the MOOC platform run by the Government of India.

4. GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS TO PROMOTE ENGLISH EDUCATION IN INDIA

English has been an integral part of the Indian education system since 1835 with the enactment of Macaulay's Minutes (Chaudhary, 2002:38). Since India gained independence from British rule in 1947, the governments in India - both central and state- have strived, with the concern for social welfare, to integrate it at all levels of education by implementing the 'three-language formula' as recommended by various education commissions formed by the government of India (Kachru, 1994:497). English is recognized as one of the 22 official languages listed under the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution (Agnihotri and Khanna, 1994).

After independence, English was, initially, introduced as one of the language subjects at Class VIII. Later, it would be introduced in Class V and now it is introduced in Class I in government and government-funded schools (Chaudhary, 2002:49; Dutt and Bala, 2012: 4). However, the government/s permits private schools with English medium instruction (EMI) right from the playgroup and nursery level. Thus, children from privileged sections have an advantage in learning English early. Unlike their counterparts from underprivileged sections, they learn all subjects, except one of the Indian languages, of the curricula in English and the medium of instruction for all pedagogical activities is exclusively English. Although the option to choose the school is available to parents, the fees charged by private schools with EMI are too high to afford for economically underprivileged families, mainly from socially marginalized and rural communities. The seeds of discrimination in the Indian education system are sown herein. While the proponents of mother-tongue-based education (Skutnab Kanga, 2007), including UNESCO, underscore its vitality in a child's emotional and educational development, some other studies have pointed out the challenges involved in it in terms of career opportunities. Kioko et al. (2014) talk about the frustrations of foreign language learning among children and the misconceptions about mother tongue and success in education. Some studies (Reith-Hall, 2022) talk about the availability of careers and the success ratio of graduates with good communication skills, and many other studies specify the relevance of good communication skills in English (Graddol, 2010). The point here is not the controversial debate on 'mother tongue education versus English education', it is the imbalanced provision of good or poor exposure to the English language in the education system. The education system in India ostensibly reveals this imbalance in English education. English in India has been a language of 'confidence and opportunity' for a select few, while for the majority, it has always remained the cause of 'fear and anxiety' (Author, 2015) in their educational and professional journey.

Having set the background, the foci of discussion, in the subsequent sections, would be English, introduced to the students of the faculty of Arts, Commerce, and Science, in tertiary education in India. The discussion on English at primary and secondary levels is out of the scope of the present study. We will first review the English curricula and evaluation system at the tertiary level which is thought to be 'inclusive,' but results in excluding a large population of students from marginalized sections from the opportunity to learn English through their curricula. Then we will discuss some suggestive measures to make English education at this level more inclusive and outcome-oriented.

5. REVIEW OF ENGLISH CURRICULA AND EVALUATION SYSTEM AT TERTIARY LEVEL EDUCATION IN INDIA

Many studies on English Studies (Gupta, 2016; Mahanta and Sharma, 2019) in Indian universities and colleges refer to teaching English as one of the special/major subjects that students opt for at the tertiary level. As mentioned above, English is taught as one of the mandatory subjects in Indian schools and colleges to develop good communication skills in English among students. The University Grants Commission (UGC), New Delhi, which is a statutory body under the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, the Government of India, set up in 1956 to regulate the standard of higher education in India. It recommends 'some instruction in English' as an integral part of all undergraduate programs in all faculties and disciplines. In light of these recommendations, the study of the curricula in

English of some universities in India would help analyze the overall approach to English language teaching at the tertiary level in India. It is beyond the limits of the present study to refer to the curricula of all universities in India. There are 1,113 universities in India as per the press information released by the Ministry of Education, Government of India (PIB, Delhi, 2023).

The analysis of the curricula of Compulsory English in some representative universities from four major regions of India: East, West, South, and North, reveals that the major focus of the curricula is on teaching poetry and prose from the selection of English literature, mainly British literature. For example, one of the universities from the North-East introduces 06 poems (04 British poems and 01 American and Indian poem in English, along with passages for comprehension tests, letter writing (formal and informal), and report writing. The same university introduces an alternative course in English with 03 short stories in the Prose section and 03 poems in the Poetry section along with Grammar and Composition (correction of errors in Verb-subject agreement; use of tense transformation of sentences, Comprehension test of unseen passages). The other university from the same region introduces elementary grammar (Articles, Tense, Direct and Indirect Speech, Prepositions), composition (Essay Writing, Letter Writing, Comprehension, Précis/ Report writing), 04 poems (02 British and 1 American and Indian poem each), short stories (1 each from Russian and American and 02 Indian). One of the universities from the East introduces British Poetry as Compulsory English I and another course for the Arts, Commerce, Science Honors Program with the title Communicative English which includes content such as Language and Theory of Communication (Theory of Communication, Types and modes of Communication: Verbal and Non-verbal (Spoken and Written), Personal, Social and Business Communication, Barriers and Strategies, Intra-personal, Interpersonal and Group communication), Speaking Skills (Monologue, Dialogue, Group Discussion, Effective Communication/ Mis-Communication, Interview, Public Speech (Oral Presentation/ PowerPoint Presentation)], Grammar (Clauses and Sentences, Agreement of Subject and Verb, Vocabulary, synonyms, antonyms, one-word substitutes, Common Errors), Reading and Writing Skills [(Close Reading and Comprehension (passage with short questions & vocabulary test), Documenting, Report Writing, Making notes, CV and job applications, Formal Letter Writing].

Another university from the East offers multidisciplinary courses in Academic Writing and Composition (1. Introduction to Convention of Academic Writing: Strategies for Writing, Institutional Contexts; 2. Critical Thinking: Syntheses, Analyses, and Evaluates; 3. Writing in one's own words: Summarizing and Paraphrasing: Paraphrasing, Transitions, Summary writing, structuring an argument, Writing as a practice; 4. Citing Resources), Creating Writing and Business Communication.

The English curricula of one of the universities from the West include two units each of prose, short stories, poetry, grammar, and communication skills during the four consecutive semesters. One of the universities in the North directs the Board of Studies to include three textbooks consisting of 15 poems under Poetry and a section on grammar etc. 6 to 7 short stories under Short Stories and 6 to 7 pieces of prose essays for B. A. I. In B.A. II, there is the inclusion of 7 pieces of Short Stories and Prose Essays and a section of grammar, 15 poems, and 5 to 6 One-Act plays. There are 15 poems, a section on grammar, one British play, and an Indian novel in English in B.A. III. The university directs the Textbook Committee to include poems, short stories, and prose essays in consultation with the Convener of the Board of Studies. One of the universities from the

South introduces two units each on poetry and short stories and one unit on developing grammatical competence during the first semester. The same structure is followed in the second semester, except that the units on short stories are substituted by two units on essays.

The focus of the assessment/evaluation in most of the university courses is on testing the students' memorization and writing skills. A university from the North includes a question on explanation concerning the context of the passages set from the textbook for 5 marks each. Most of these universities rely on comprehension-based questions and questions related to testing writing skills through letter writing, paragraph writing, etc. Besides, the question papers consist of some questions about grammar and vocabulary.

However, it is observed that the curriculum and methods of teaching English at this level do not play any significant role in accomplishing the expected results as the learning outcomes are by and large` not visible in their communication skills in English among the majority of learners in India who have been learning English for 12 years or so by the time they enter the tertiary level. Hence, the present study argues that English education in India, although claiming to be inclusive, has always been exclusive, as quite a large number of students from marginalized sections remain deprived of the opportunities for socio-economic empowerment in the absence of the required competency in English. In this light, the present study proposes a revision in the English course curriculum and approach to make English education more inclusive.

6. SUGGESTIONS

The first and foremost suggestion is that there should be two options, English for Advanced Level Learners and English for Elementary Level Learners, within the Compulsory English courses taught in Indian universities. The course meant for advanced learners may consist of content including poetry, short stories, literary essays, etc., as the competency level of these learners is assumed to be as per the expectations of the English curriculum designed for the tertiary level. However, the learners from the marginalized, as stated above, are often found to be lacking the required level of proficiency for learning the English language through literature and the advanced level of grammar and vocabulary. Hence, the present study proposes an alternate Compulsory English course for these students and it may be taught either for four or six semesters at the tertiary level. It proposes that this course should be designed at three levels: Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced. The model is based on the course content of the Course in German offered by Prof. Milind Bramhe, IIT Madras, and it is subject to modification in terms of content and grammar. The elementary level course may be taught during the two semesters of their first year and it may comprise topics like:

Elementary Level
Topic 1: Introducing oneself and others; Grammar: WH-questions, personal pronouns, subject-verb concord, simple sentences, etc.
Topic 2: Talking about hobbies, the week, numbers, the alphabet, months, seasons /Grammar: articles, plural, the verbs: to have and to be.
Topic 3: In the city/naming places and buildings, means of transport, basic directions/ Grammar: definite and indefinite articles; negation; imperative.
Topic 4: Talking about food, drink, family/groceries, and meals / Grammar: Prepositions and Possessive pronouns.

Topic 5: Talking about Everyday life, telling time, making appointments/Grammar: prepositions; modal verbs.

Topic 6: Talking about Leisure activities, celebrations / Grammar: Simple present

Topic 7: Contacts, writing letters / Grammar: Punctuation, Capitalization, basic sentences

Topic 8: My apartment, rooms, furniture, colors / Grammar: changing prepositions

Topic 9: Professions / Grammar: perfect tense

Topic 10: Clothes / Grammar: perfect tense

Topic 11: Health and the body / Grammar: the imperative and modal verbs

Topic 12: Holiday and weather

The next level should be intermediate. This level of the course can be taught at the second year of the degree (tertiary level).

Intermediate Level

Topic 1: Cooking and cuisine, eating habits, expressing feelings / Grammar: clauses with 'because', reflexive verbs, direct and indirect objects.

Topic 2: School and after, subjects, school types / Grammar: past tense of modal verbs, changing prepositions – position and movement

Topic 3: Media in daily life, film / Grammar: comparative and superlative, clauses with 'that'

Topic 4: Festivals and events, invitations and responses / Grammar: clauses with 'if', adjectives

Topic 5: Professions, work, train travel / Grammar: Nouns and their forms

Topic 6: Public transport, cars, getting to work / Grammar: clauses and prepositions

Topic 7: Learning, presentations, exams / Grammar: Gerunds and participles

Topic 8: Sports, fans / Grammar: clauses, action verbs

Topic 9: Living, shifting, conflicts at home, pets / Grammar: simple present, simple past

Topic 10: Music, describing pictures / Grammar: interrogative 'what kind of', indefinite pronouns, relative clauses

Topic 11: Time / Grammar: verbs with prepositions, Wh questions with prepositions

Topic 12: Festivals, stereotypes / Grammar: clauses, relative clauses

The next level should be advanced. This level of the course can be taught at the third year of the degree (tertiary level).

Advanced Level

Topic 1: Travel–related vocabulary, narrating experiences; Grammar: clauses with infinitive constructions, simple past, used to, and would.

Topic 2: Tech and gadgets – related vocabulary, understanding information about gadgets and technology; Grammar: simple present, modality.

Topic 3: Milestones – Historical and Personal – related vocabulary, understanding and narrating about the past; Grammar: Past Tense, temporal prepositions, expressing consequences.

Topic 4: All about Work-related vocabulary, job search, advertisements etc.; Grammar: Mood, Verb-Preposition combinations, Clauses

Topic 5: Environment–related vocabulary, Environment protection; Grammar: Comparative and Superlative adjectives.

Topic 6: Looking ahead – talking about plans, reading longer texts; Grammar: Future Tense (I), Relative Clauses and with Prepositions

Topic 7: Relationships – related vocabulary – men/women/family/conflicts; Grammar: Past Perfect, temporal clauses and their sequence

Topic 8: Body and Health – related vocabulary – Health, Hospitals, Schools, etc., offering help, talking about habits and memories; Grammar: Reflexive pronouns (continuation), Negation, Conjunctions

Topic 9: Art and Culture – related vocabulary – Art / Theatre / Films / Museums, adding emphasis to sentences, talking about art, films, etc.

Topic 10: Community / Living Together – related vocabulary – Social Values, Europe, Politics, understanding information about the EU, making a short presentation; Grammar: Passive Voice, Prepositions.

Topic 11: All about Money – related vocabulary – Banks and Money in a Globalized World, Conversations in a Bank, understanding instructions.

7. CONCLUSION

Finally, it should be noted that, whether it is liked or disliked, English has become the language of socio-economic and cultural empowerment not only in India, but also in many other countries. It is certain that the 'Englishless masses' will remain at the periphery if they are denied the opportunity of learning it. The universities and colleges should take the initiative to make it more accessible to students from marginalized sections of the society by considering their learning needs. The English curricula at the tertiary level should be made more inclusive by making it more need-oriented and learner-friendly.

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