



Teaching English At Undergraduate Level In Rural Indian Colleges: Hurdles And Opportunities

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Abstract: English, as a compulsory subject in the undergraduate curriculum across Indian universities, poses a significant challenge for students hailing from rural backgrounds, especially first-generation learners. Despite its increasing importance in the public sector within multilingual nations like India, rural students often struggle with English acquisition due to the predominantly vernacular medium of instruction in their prior education. This paper examines the stark performance gap between rural and urban colleges in the Compulsory English paper, evident even after its integration into the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) curriculum. Rooted in empirical evidence, the discussion highlights the dearth of modern pedagogical methods, teaching aids, and resources in rural classrooms. Additionally, it offers insights into tackling these challenges and proposes strategies for enhancing English language proficiency among rural college students. Emphasis is placed on empowering students to effectively utilize English in local and global contexts, thereby fostering academic progress and enhancing employability prospects.

[Key Words: English, India, CBCS, Acquisition]

Introduction

In the contemporary era characterized by rapid globalization, English has ascended as the quintessential language of influence, embodying multifaceted linguistic, socio-cultural, and political dimensions. Particularly in third-world nations such as India, English assumes the role of an unspoken arbiter, wielding considerable power as a global linguistic intermediary. Yet the present scenario of the English language education in terms of teaching and learning presents a very appalling picture particularly among the students in the rural India. Though English has been included in the UG syllabi of all the Indian universities as a compulsory language, the dichotomy lies in the fact that while most of the teaching-learning process in the rural India from primary to higher secondary level is done in the vernacular languages, students from the rural background, particularly the first generation learners among them, often face challenges in learning it properly in the UG level. They consider English as a subject to 'pass' only, not as a language to learn. This paper attempts to portray a realistic scenario of English teaching-learning process in the CBCS curriculum in rural colleges and delves deep

to find out remedies to the challenges of English language teaching as well as provides strategies of developing the language acquisition among students of rural colleges and their competency in its practical use in local and international communication, academic advancement and employment prospects.

The hegemony of the linguistic dominance of English is deep rooted culturally into the psyche of the natives in the erstwhile British colonies like India. For the average Indians English is considered as a gateway to the better education, better culture and higher intellect. In fact, English is the most preferred language in all the public sectors in the country. Over the years the language holds an undisputed position among the Indian minds unchallenged by any of the official and recognized languages of the country. Currently, English serves as a gateway for Indian youth to access higher education, advanced communication technologies, information resources, employment opportunities, and financial stability. Recognizing its paramount importance, all states in India adhere to the three-language formula prescribed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), with English typically positioned as a second or third language in school curricula from elementary to higher secondary levels. However, despite this concerted effort, a glaring disparity persists in linguistic proficiency, language acquisition, and practical application between urban and rural students. This discrepancy does not imply a deficiency of latent potential among rural students compared to their urban counterparts. Rather, it underscores the substantial gap in English language proficiency. Despite governmental and non-governmental initiatives aimed at addressing this issue, the ground reality often belies these efforts. Upon transitioning from rural areas to colleges, students frequently approach compulsory English courses with a focus on mere "passing," resulting in dismal performance and continued weakness in fundamental grammar and linguistic skills.

After the introduction of CBCS curriculum in the UG course, the scenario still does not change. Under this curriculum all the universities in India recognized by UGC have been bound by a common set of guidelines in the formation of syllabi. In this new Choice Based Credit System more emphasis has been given on the English language learning. With a view to strengthen the students' competence in the language acquisition, English has been made the compulsory subject side by side with the subjects on their respective vernacular languages for all the students of the General Degree Course for the first two semester in UG, Part-I. In these papers on the English language students' basic grammatical and literary skills are tested through objective questions, to be more particular, in MCQ format in most universities. But if we consider the performance index in the compulsory English papers in the recently added CBCS curriculum, the students from the rural colleges of India remain far behind those from the city-based colleges. The urban college students benefit from a more conducive environment for English language acquisition, replete with advanced teaching-learning methodologies and abundant resources tailored to enhance listening, speaking,

reading, and writing skills. Conversely, rural students contend with limited access to such facilities, constraining their opportunities for comprehensive language development.

In 2019, the rural populace of India accounted for over 68.86% of the total population, yet a mere 60.53% of colleges are situated in rural areas. Despite these statistics, the proficiency and performance of rural students in English language acquisition and learning present a sobering reality. Many hail from first-generation learner backgrounds, predominantly engaged in agricultural, day labor, and unorganized sector occupations to sustain their families. Even upon gaining admission to colleges, these students often find themselves compelled to seek employment to support their families financially, covering college fees and associated expenses. Consequently, upon entering college with rudimentary English education from their schooling years, these students encounter formidable barriers, their confidence eroded, leading to subpar performance in English-related assessments.

For a sample analysis for my research in this regard, a case study was pursued on the randomly selected 20 students studying in Semester-II, BA stream of General Course in a general degree college located in rural West Bengal, affiliated to West Bengal State University, West Bengal, India. They were given a set of 20 questions for a total of 20 marks, containing 01 mark for each question on English grammar containing various items like articles and prepositions, voice change, narration, change of degree of comparison, error correction, synonyms and antonyms, idioms and phrases, etc. and asked to answer them. Their responses were collected and analyzed minutely and the following observations are found accordingly:

Figure-1

Total Marks	Very Good	Good	Poor
20	01	04	15

Figure-2

Total Students	Fast Learners	Slow Learners
20	05	15

All the 20 students who are mostly first generation learners come from the surrounding villages. Their abilities in English language as shown in Figure 1 and 2 indicate the poor learning conditions of the learners. The case study certainly throws a serious challenge to the existing education system that could not implemented proper policies to meet the expected result.

The city-based colleges of English boast of better access of modules and have the privilege of teaching and learning English through different upgraded models to improve the students' abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writings, while most of the Indian rural colleges have limited exposure to all such facilities. The methods used in rural colleges are mostly theoretical and bookish and English is taught only to 'pass' the examination, not to learn and apply in practical usage. All the other challenges and problems of teaching and learning English in rural colleges have been discussed below.

1. Economic constraints pose a significant barrier to rural students' access to higher education. Many hail from agricultural backgrounds, where meager incomes render college education financially prohibitive. Consequently, students often forsake their studies to assist their families in agricultural or entrepreneurial endeavors, perpetuating a troubling trend of increasing college dropouts. Moreover, as first-generation learners, parents often lack awareness of the value of English education, compounding the challenges faced by rural students.
2. The predominance of first-generation learners from rural backgrounds in India translates to limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Mother tongues prevail as the primary mode of communication, relegating English to a secondary role in daily life. This dearth of exposure impairs students' proficiency in English language usage.
3. Despite the advent of the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) curriculum and heightened awareness of modern pedagogical practices, English language instruction in rural colleges remains predominantly teacher-centric. Active student participation is notably lacking, impeding the efficacy of the learning process.
4. Rural college students, primarily educated in vernacular mediums, grapple with a pervasive sense of hesitation when speaking and writing in English. Insufficient motivation both within and beyond the classroom exacerbates this issue. Moreover, students' fear of feedback further hampers their engagement and growth.
5. Overcrowded classrooms, stemming from a dearth of teachers and inadequate infrastructure, plague many rural colleges in India. The resultant large student-to-teacher ratios inhibit effective instruction and hinder the acquisition of English language skills.
6. In addition to linguistic challenges and suboptimal learning environments, the absence of modern teaching methodologies and adequate teaching-learning materials exacerbates the plight of rural college students. The dearth of updated pedagogical approaches and insufficient utilization of teaching aids further impedes effective English language instruction in these settings.

In addressing these challenges, it becomes imperative to devise solutions that foster positive outcomes. In India, a rapidly evolving nation where even rural areas are experiencing swift transformations, it is essential for our students to adeptly navigate and utilize language as a tool for engagement in the globalized landscape of the 21st century. To

achieve this, a reevaluation of remedial measures through comprehensive reforms in teaching methodologies and associated infrastructure is paramount.

Primarily, there is a pressing need to revamp and restructure the curriculum for compulsory English subjects, making it more student-centric. Instead of solely focusing on select literary works, the syllabus should incorporate diverse writing skills such as storytelling, dialogue composition, essay writing, and creative expression. This approach affords students greater opportunities to apply their English language proficiency in examinations. Correspondingly, the evaluation system should be adapted to align with these reforms, employing updated question patterns and implementing continuous and comprehensive assessments throughout the academic year.

Furthermore, teachers play a pivotal role in imparting English language skills to undergraduate students. It is incumbent upon them to comprehend the socio-cultural backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs of their students. Utilizing modern teaching aids such as charts, audio-visual resources, and platforms like Google Classroom can enhance the learning experience. Additionally, activities such as aloud reading aid novices in correcting pronunciation, while English essay writing and speech competitions serve to stimulate English language engagement. Teachers can also promote the use of dictionaries, encourage newspaper reading, and incorporate audio-visual teaching methods to supplement traditional blackboard instruction.

Moreover, teachers should actively motivate students to integrate English alongside their mother tongues, fostering a supportive environment wherein students feel comfortable communicating in English both inside and outside the classroom. By embracing these multifaceted approaches, educators can instill confidence and proficiency in English language usage among rural college students, thereby equipping them for success in the globalized era.

Students' proficiency in English language acquisition can be effectively nurtured through the utilization of language laboratories. While such facilities are commonplace in urban colleges across India, they remain largely absent in rural counterparts. Equipped with modern technologies, these laboratories serve as invaluable resources for honing students' skills across all four facets of language learning: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Reforms are imperative in the conventional bilingual approach to teaching English as a foreign language. Alternative methodologies, such as the Direct Method and the Grammar Translation method, warrant consideration. The Direct Method immerses learners directly in the target language, facilitating rapid communication by fostering creativity during practice sessions. Conversely, the Grammar Translation method emphasizes comprehension of language structure, prioritizing grammar and vocabulary acquisition to cultivate advanced writing and reading proficiency. As elucidated by Manny Echevarria (2010), this method is optimal for students aspiring to excel in written and textual comprehension rather than oral communication. Deploying these methodologies judiciously holds promise for

yielding substantive learning outcomes among students, enriching their English language proficiency within the rural college context.

As previously noted, amidst the dynamic landscape of globalization permeating all facets of life, rural students are compelled to assert themselves with confidence and proficiency in utilizing the global lingua franca. The imperative now stands to confront the hurdles inherent in teaching and learning English within the rural college milieu of India, fostering unabridged engagement to yield optimal outcomes. Stakeholders across the spectrum—educators, students, and authorities alike—must shoulder their respective responsibilities with heightened accountability. Through concerted efforts, tailored to the needs and perspectives of the students, a conducive environment for pedagogy can be cultivated. This entails the implementation of refined, student-centric methodologies, fostering an enriched ambiance conducive to both teaching and learning, ultimately yielding substantive and enduring results.

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