

## THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION — A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS THROUGH FOUR CASE STUDIES

*K. J. Vargheese*

*Associate Professor, Department of English, Christ College, Irinjalakkuda, Kerala, India*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents an in-depth analysis of the proficiency or rather the inefficiency of the average college student in English language comprehension. For that a cross-section of the first year under-graduate students of Calicut University were taken and a case study of their dialogue writing attempt was carried out. This clearly illustrates the common syntactical, semantic, socio-linguistic problems faced by the bilingual student when learning English. The paper also discusses some of the measures that can be effective tools in overcoming the natural diffidence of the student in respect to English language acquisition.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Language Acquisition, Semantics, Bilinguals, Affective Filter, Natural Approach*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The birth of English education in India was delivered by Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay. Unfortunately, he had to undergo the agonizing pangs of the birth in the sense that from all corners of British India, poisonous barbs were directed at him over this. The adverse criticism against him was the argument that such a system of education would produce an elite corps of Indians who were to be Indians in their appearances but English in thinking, the aim of which was primarily to recruit clerks for the Colonial Government in India

But even prior to this occurrence, many eminent social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore had vociferously argued for the introduction of English education in India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's letter to Lord Amherst, the then Governor General of India written on December 11, 1823 echoing this thought bears ample proof for the demand for English education in pre-independence era. Consequently, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of thousands of English-educated Indians inspiring the nation with their speeches and writings in English. Many such other English-educated Indians rose to prominence while occupying the highest positions in public service. Many Indians crossed over the seas to England to be educated at the prestigious Oxford and Cambridge Universities and were transformed into eminent personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, KPS Menon, Ramanujan, and so on.

English education in India received a touch of the fairy godmother's magic wand at the same time as Indian languages received the life threatening anacondian embrace when the three universities were established in India in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857. The Punjab and Allahabad universities established by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bolstered up English education once again higher and higher until finally, it attained the highest stature as the sole official language of India till India became independent. As a result of this, Indians became so proficient in this foreign language

that they would speak and write in English as good as, or even better than native English speakers.

English education in India ascended to the peak of the growth pyramid till 1947. Any person scaling the heights, reaching the summit has to climb down. English education too was forced to descend down the slopes after independence. The awareness about the need for reviving the regional language and especially, Hindi, the establishment 'of Hindi Prachar Sabhas, efforts made by the Central and State governments to make the regional language as the official language- all these shoved down the rolling snowball of English education. The descending snowball gathered momentum as years sped by, and has come crashing down into the very trough of neglect in the present scenario everywhere in India and especially in Kerala.

### **Kerala Education Scenario**

Kerala education scenario is between a transition period, as far as English education is concerned. On the one hand, there is the loud hue and cry for Malayalam to be accepted as the official language; on the other, there is a greater need for mastery of English language due to increased placement of Keralites in the Gulf countries and IT sector. That is, in the bilingual context of Kerala education, the teaching of English as a second language should be more effective so that the students learn to use impeccable communication skills in English both at the spoken and written levels.

### **Study**

For an in-depth analysis of the proficiency or rather the inefficiency of the average college student in English language comprehension, a cross-section of the first year under-graduate students of Calicut University were taken and a case study of their dialogue writing attempt in their papers of March 2018 was carried out. This clearly illustrates the common syntactical, semantic, socio-linguistic problems faced by the bilingual student when learning English.

The first year degree students were asked to construct a dialogue on the situational context of a student coming late to the class and giving explanation for the same to the teacher. Majority of these students had started learning English from IV<sup>th</sup> standard syllabus of the State Board, five periods a week are set aside for teaching English in IV<sup>th</sup> standard — X<sup>th</sup> and XI<sup>th</sup> and XII<sup>th</sup> 7 periods a week- all of 40 minutes duration. So for these nine consecutive years from IV<sup>th</sup> to XII<sup>th</sup> standard a student will have been taught English for a total of 78400mts or 1307hrs. Equipped with this barrage of English education, ideally a student should have been transformed into a perfect gentleman or lady with impeccable English. But in reality, he/she is able only to limp and stumble across the sanctum sanctorum of perfect English communication skills. He/she has become a cripple needing the constant support of the perennial walking stick, i.e. his/her mother-tongue to be able to speak or write in English. How much these students have resorted to their mother tongue while writing this simple dialogue is very much evident by taking a glance at these case studies.

### **Sample 1**

Student: May I coming, ma'm?

Teacher: Why you late?

Student: Sorry Miss. The bus bombarded on a motor cycle at Kunnankulam ‘

Teacher: What?

Student: The front side of the bus broken by the strong bombardment.

The driver of motorcycle was too wounded. After no problems.

Teacher : Thank God! Coming Maya. Don't repeat it.

Student : Thank you Ma'm.

Here the error is more or less a result of wrong assumption, an auditory error. When the teacher said 'come in', the student assumed it to be 'coming', a single lexical word instead of two separate words 'come' and 'in'. Again when the teacher tells the student 'don't repeat it' listener will be left with the impression not 'to repeat the accident' and not as it should be implied, 'not to come late again'.

### **Sample 2**

Student: Please, may I get in?

Teacher: Yes, Get in. Why you late?

Student: One bus was gone and the next was late.

Teacher: Why the bus gone? You late to come to the bus stop?

Student: Yesterday, the bus came very late and today, reach correct time in my bus stop but the bus gone.

Teacher: Ok. If you come to the institution at correct time, the rules have all students in the institution but you can't obey this rule?

Student: Yes, today only.

Why you Late? Why the bus gone?- The problem here is related to copula 'be'. The last words spoken by the student- 'yes, today only' actual intended meaning is - please forgive me, only for today, this is the last time, I won't repeat it'. But the way it has come out to the listener, it implies quite the opposite - the message of disobedience- 'Yes, today only...' I can obey this rules.....!

### **Sample 3**

Teacher: Why you late?

Student: I have a little sister. She is only three now. Don't you know?

Teacher: Yes, I've seen her when she came for signing report card with mother.

Student: Well, my mother always carry her when she accompany me to bus stop. Today also my sister's hand was hanging in the hand of my mother. But as the bus came and I run to catch it, my sister also ran after me.

Teacher: Oh, is any accident occur?

Student: Nothing happened, but she got afraid and also my mother and me.

And I catch the next bus after they reached home back.

Teacher: I'm sorry Raju. What an unhappy experience you had.

Please go to your seat.

'I've seen her when she came for signing the report card with mother. Sentence construction is in such a way that it would seem to the listener that his little sister came for signing the report card. The subject- verb agreement at the semantics level has gone wrong.

'Today also, my sister's hand was hanging in the hand of my mother'. The choice of lexical item is not appropriate in the context because such an expression will not occur in a genuine English speaking context. The student should have written 'My sister's hand was held by my mother'.

'After they reached home back' is a literal translation of Malayalam usage. They reached home is enough to convey the meaning. The word 'back' is redundant. The choice of lexical item is inappropriate because of mother tongue influence.

#### Sample 4

Teacher: Why you late?

Raju: When I arrived from my house, my bicycle got in an accident

Teacher: Accident! Now, how your position?

Student: I am completely ok, Miss. Thank you.

Teacher: Please explain what happen to you.

Raju: When I come to the main road, a scooter pass in front of my bicycle. It is very unfortunate to me. Suddenly, I caught my brake.

Then my tyres slipped and I fell from bicycle.

Teacher: You have any wound?

Raju : No Miss, It very shock to me. The scooter brought me to school and then he left.

Teacher : Now you can go to the class. And drive carefully.

Raju: Thank you Miss.

In all these sentences - 'Why you late?', 'Now, how you position?' and 'Please explain what happen to you' - the problem of the student is with regard to the use of copulas (linking verbs) especially 'be', the most ubiquitous copula. The sentence pattern of a copula is subject + verb+ subject complement as defined by Lynn Berk in her book "English Syntax From Word to Discourse." Here the student has not followed this pattern at all. "Suddenly I caught my brake". This sentence is word-to-word rendition of its Malayalam translation. Listening to the further explanation, we come to the conclusion that the student is an extremely possessive person- he says 'my brake' and then 'my tyres'. 'my tyres slipped'- that makes it rather interesting. 'Tyres' in local context may mean the fatty layers of flesh at both sides of a woman's back just above the waist, a sure sign of middle age corpulence. So if someone says my tyres slipped, that gives rise to naughty thoughts. The student should have definitely written 'the tyres of my bicycle slipped' instead of 'my tyres slipped'.

Another error is ‘the scooter brought me to school ‘and then he left’. These days We often anthromorphosize machines and treat them as agents even though they are technically inanimate. We sometimes say “the ATM machine refuses to return my card” or “My computer ate my term paper” or “The engine threw a rod”. Etc. But we have not yet begun to treat scooter as a doer or invest it with a masculine personality.

Again the teacher after listening to the explanation and admonishing the student allows him to enter the class room, tells him ‘you can go’ and then she adds the last piece of advice” drive carefully. We listeners are astounded because the consequent implication is that the student is allowed to drive carefully inside the classroom and we know that this is impossible in anywhere in the world let alone, in India where the student’s liberty is somewhat restricted.

These case studies make it apparent that the student has neither linguistic competence nor literary competence which together makes up communicative competence.

Several Factors clamour for our immediate attention:

- lack of corrective feedback
  - teacher- made bilinguals
  - pre-conditioning in mother tongue
  - affective filter
  - linguistic competence
  - literary competence
- } Communicative Competence

May be the answers are corrected but marks are awarded for the message conveyed by the student and the errors are then overlooked.

### **Lack of Corrective Feedback**

In informal second language acquisition errors which do not interfere with meaning are usually overlooked. Most people would feel they were being impolite if they interrupted or corrected someone who was trying to have a conversation with them. They may correct only when they cannot comprehend what the speaker is trying to say. Thus errors of grammar and pronunciation are rarely remarked on. The only place where error correction is typically present with high frequency is the language class room. The ultimate test of language proficiency in the class room situation is a test or exam. But while the language teacher is correcting the answer script, the proximity of the student for the teacher to point out and explain the error and correction is out of question.

### **Teacher - Made Bilinguals**

The Indian bilinguals who speak English as a second language are mostly teacher made bilinguals with a terminal behaviour ranging from next to zero to very high level of proficiency. That’s to say there exists a line of bilingualism, the terminal point of which could be marked ‘0’ and ‘100’. This latter point is referred to as ‘antilingualism’. But the truth is nothing can be done with zero level students and nothing needs to be done with the ‘100’ level students.

### **Pre-Conditioning in Mother Tongue**

It is intermediate proficiency level students that we are concerned with and it is these students who mainly resort to first language to express second language. In most of the cases, the first language raises a mental block in second language acquisition. Stephen. D. Krashen points out how if done correctly, bilingual education can hinder second language acquisition and how if done correctly, it helps it along. Before embarking on a study of second language, the student will have already mastered the first language and acquired CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). CALP is closely related to literacy — the ability to use language as an intellectual tool. So CALP when developed in any one language can be applied to any other language a person acquires. A second benefit of good education in the first language is knowledge - knowledge of the world and specific subject matter knowledge. But the pitfall is that, if the first language is not taught in the correct manner, it will become an obstacle to second language acquisition and this is commonly prevalent in the Kerala scenario.

### **The Affective Filter Theory**

Affective Filter as Stephen. D. Karshen has explained in his 'Language Acquisition and Language Education' is a barrier that can prevent information from reaching the Language Acquisition Device (LAD)

An affective filter can take the form of low motivation, high student anxiety and low student self esteem.

According to Frank Smith successful language acquisition requires two conditions.

- The students must assume they will be successful.
- They must consider themselves to be potential members of the club of 'users of that language'.

Earl Stevick notes that many language students are on the defensive in language class. They consider the class to be a place where their weakness will be revealed and not as a place where they will grow in competence. Affective filter is the first remedial measure towards English language skill acquisition, especially where it is taught as a second language. Teachers can do numerous things to lower the Affective Filter. Activities that allow students to get better acquainted with each other may help to lower anxieties and make students less self-conscious. Encouraging activities that supply comprehensible input on topics of real interest, not forcing early speech production and not insisting on high levels of activities in early stages will help to reduce anxiety in the classroom, anxiety built up by negative experiences in incorrectly taught language classes.

### **Communicative Competence through TPR and Natural Approach**

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a method developed by J.J. Asher, according to which, the teacher gives students instructions and commands in the second language. These commands are comprehensible. The teacher models the commanded action while giving the command. These commands require responses in physical action rather than the spoken word. Most go by a physical response (e.g. 'stand up', give your pen to the student sitting next to you. Etc). Subsequent research has proved that TPR students do well in language acquisition.

The Natural Approach developed by Tracy Terrell is a language teaching approach which claims that language learning is a reproduction of the way humans naturally acquire their native language. It is designed to provide comprehensible input. The class time is devoted to discussing topics of interests, games, tasks and so on. Students may

respond in either the first or second language and their errors are not corrected, the comprehensible input from the teachers causes language acquisition. Very little student talk in the second language is expected in the early stages. The student has to answer 'yes' or 'no'.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The above mentioned are only some of the measures that can be effective tools in overcoming the natural diffidence of the student in respect to English language acquisition, especially in Kerala both at school and college level. But the greatest test of English language teachers lies in their ability to lead their students to think that acquiring English language skills is imperative for them to be able to move on to a wider arena or greener pastures and also to inject into their very bloodstream the confidence that language skills in English is not such an insurmountable mountain after all. Herein lies the future of English language acquisition as far as School/ College education is concerned in India in general and Kerala in particular.

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