

## English Language Classroom Quagmire

PARDEEP

Assistant Professor, English

DPGITM College of Engineering,  
Gurgaon.

**Abstract :** This paper is an attempt to get into the myriad world of students of English language...is a tryst with students' take on this language. Classroom is the best laboratory one could have sought for...this is particularly true when it comes to language teaching and learning. Students have their own way of dealing with language challenges...have their own training of grappling with the questions that a language hurls at them. Through this paper I hope to get answer to few of the endless questions that brew in a classroom...daily, year after year.

I, very often, am at my wits' end, explaining, to the curious minds throbbing on the benches in my classes, apparent, or linguistically inherent, commonalities of the language, English here. The heads change; the minds, the questions remain since I was one of the minds on one of those benches once; struggling to comprehend the answers given; tugging and twisting along with the explanations put forward; sometimes in a comfort-zone, moments later even more puzzled, since answers, many a time, haunting more like questions. Why English is the way English is; or, why any language is the way it is; a funny language, if we trust Mr. Natwar Bachchan? If it's English, a funny language, shouldn't it be fun, learning it, teaching it? I ought not list the questions, which I reckon are many, here. Instead, I attempt to share the delights, this language has offered to me, first as an eternal pursuer, and then as a teacher. I disclaim not to offend Derridan deconstruction or Saussurean structuralism, rather intend to pick a few threads in the 'lighter-vein' effort to paint things so variegated with straight white brushes.

In the case of language, in the philosophically implicated wrap of Noam Chomsky, one must explain how an individual, presented with quite limited data, develops an extremely rich system of knowledge. One must wonder what is this implicit system of rules, conventions, or whatever which

makes it possible. The child, placed in a linguistic community, is presented with a set of sentences that is limited and often imperfect, fragmented and so on. In spite of this, in a very short time he or she succeeds in 'constructing', in internalizing the grammar of the language, developing knowledge that is very complex, that can not be derived by induction or abstraction from what is given and is experienced. Whenever we encounter a similar situation, where knowledge is constructed from limited and imperfect data in a manner that is uniform and homogeneous among all individual, we can conclude that a set of initial constraints plays a significant role in determining the cognitive system which is constructed by the mind. Simply put, we all humans are endowed with an implicit mechanism which once triggered takes care of all that lies in our bonnet to be spewed out.

This explanation is none the less plausible and tongue-warming, since it has come from one of the greatest linguists our generation has been bestowed with. But I self-consciously, and no less class-room conscious, doubt if it can pierce through the ear-dreams which have been accustomed to explanations which please hearts than entertain quixotic minds. Language is probably the best window we have on the workings of human mind. Language gives us the extraordinary ability to describe the contents of our thought, an ability that no other animal has. Yes ... though they, poor animals, have a few gibber-gabberish garrulations, but that can at best be an example of 'signalling' rather than a system of rules and conventions that a native user of a language so

masterly masters. And of course, there are many unconscious aspects to cognition that we can't put to words to their exact meaning, but these properties are apparently also reflected in what we say. The units of language- elements, forms, words, grammatical patterns, conventions of usage- are in the same sense also units of cognition. The implication is that the study of what all languages share is also the study of what it is to be human, something that is certainly an important topic for any educated person. It's the language that makes the human, the human ; no hyperbole is intended.

My inspiration to write this paper was certainly not to delve deep into the psychological cavern or to peep into the philosophical abyss on and about the language, but to seek simplistic explanation for those concerns regarding languages which have been bothering the anxious, and sometimes hapless, minds who intend to learn this particular language, English, because it simply and essentially runs across horizons, each and every, they may aspire for. It's an integral part of every notion the term career spell out, at least in Indian context. These students have their specific questions which have, over the years, become challenges so rampant, all pervading, that answer to them have become vital to the sustenance of the language in question itself. We have a plethora of literature, in the Latin sense of the word, on the subject, but that offers more descriptions than that ought to offer prescriptions. Questions loom larger over the answers. Agree, there have been answer, and there shall be, but few of them are workable. And it's not the pure and idle philosophy which brings students to these benches, but an urge and essence for growth which can be realised only by workable something. Further, deep structures of a language can't be fathomed without soaking oneself into the colours philosophy offers.

What we can learn about human mind by studying how languages differ from one another is more controversial. Linguistic and other cognitive scientists disagree on how deeply the nature of a person's first language influences, how the person thinks and views the world around them. Language is such an important part of our lives that learning about the languages of other people, including how those languages differ from ours, is in a very real sense learning about those people. As with any other aspect of culture, lack of knowledge can lead to intolerance. Oh! I'm again onto the same plain. I intend to put it

clearly that I have more questions and probable explanations to those questions than I have answers or solutions. I seem to belong to those questions, seem to touch and feel them, since they have been part of my learning...they have been part of my personal linguistic journey. Scouting for simple approach to those seemingly, as of now, complex paradigm may someday ,hopefully, open a Pandora's box which, in turn, may trigger another revelation and eventually, some 'solutions' may appear. A workable, practicable panacea which is simple, sweet and entertaining.

Coming to the particular. English, with all its epithets viz: 'window of the world', 'the language of development', 'the language of science and technology and research', 'the language of modernization', 'the language of opportunity' in the reckoning, is being accessed as a global and/or universal language. People, students in particular, who became acquainted with the culpable excesses of the competitive situations present in almost all the parts of the world, are sure to realize the benevolence in the intimation of this globally communicative language. The assimilation of the knowledge of the English in colleges provokes the development of individual personality. So much so that general perception of the personality development programme is steadfastly kneaded to English language class! Any one seeking socio-economic advancement finds ability in English an asset. They are, probably, more practical than policy-makers, because it's them who have to go out and seek livelihood, earn bread and survive in the modern cut-throat competitive world. Common sense.

India, though a linguistic paradise... 22 official languages, more than 1600 regional languages and not less than a few thousand dialects, English, still largely, plays an important role. Until very recently it was the language of instruction, administration and technical education; English has, now, leap-frogged to become the lingua franca of the nation. It has to be considered, quite consciously, not only a tool to communicate but also a tool to impress, a powerful communicative weapon of immense influencing potential. In my classes, I sweat it out almost every other lecture to nudge students off their slumber to bring home the simple and the single most conception about this language: English is just a language, like any other language, to communicate. It is what it is because it has travelled farther and wider.

And because it has a history of changing geography and creating history, it's like your distant uncle who decided to stay with you with all his belongings after trotting around the globe for a few decades... different tastes, accent, style, etc. but still a human being, your uncle... though distant. English is a language of sense and sensibilities, like any other language.

English in colleges, as someone wiser puts it, is like Sanskrit: people love it, respect it to the extent of being in awe of it, but can't speak it. Even after several years of instruction, students have difficulty in using this language for communication, effective communication. Writing exam is fine, but putting the same thing to tongue may send nerves for a jerky ride. Too much emphasis on strict Victorian rules of grammar, it was then that the language was codified, classified and defined, has hampered the free and, consequently, the growth and the penetration of the language. Too much stress on the Oxfordian pronunciation has stretched students' tongue beyond reconciliation. While the Australian, the American and the Chinese have been riding their English-wagon their own peculiar way, changing gear conveniently, and eventually having a fair share of the ride, our students are stuck in a gear-jam, first gear ride, top-gear collide, sort of. Born in a different and distant land, brought up in different lands and ages differently; English is still a language, just a language. Get to its core, try and understand it. And, it becomes your own, it becomes you. It has to do with common sense, my dear friends, common-tender-sense.

However grammar has not always been defined in these terms. Originally the term grammar, grammatical, referred to the art of writing, as compared to rhetoric, the art of speaking, as used today by many teachers and learners, grammar is understood to be a set of rules that govern language, primarily its morphology and syntax. In more technical sense even phonology is part of grammar. Semantics is another extension, meaningful. Communication language teaching and learning has brought a renewed emphasis on the role that semantics play in the definition of language. Communication language teaching is fundamentally concerned with "making meaning" in the language, whether by interpreting someone else's message, expressing one's own, or negotiating when meaning is unclear...language is, above all meaning.

Meanings are attached to pieces of words, to words, as to group of word, meaning are attached to the spoken signal of language, to the shifts and changes of grammar. Meanings are everywhere. They are here, then there. And sometime nowhere, still they have meanings. They come, nobody knows, where from. Where they head or tail... they say something or simply tell things...they are shapeless, but still have shape. It's chicken and hen story. Meanings give meanings to meanings or it's the meanings that define meanings. Everything has a meaning, yet many things have no meaningful meaning. The sound of words has no meaning to begin with. We attach a meaning to them... distinctly similar and similarly distinct. When someone utters 'car', my notion of car can be bigger, brighter and faster than your image of car. Your car may have been parked in your mind; my car may have sped away in the meantime. Your car may have same old four wheels, my car may have wings. Words are words, we trigger meanings to them. They lie dead on the pages. We enliven them in our mind space, we lip them meaningful life. They are dead as Dodo, our fancy gives them wings to take flight. Everyday, someone thinks up a new word. Or someone uses an old word in a new way. Some words have more meanings, more of what can be called outside meaning than others. Orange, for instance, means a reddish-yellow color, a fruit, etc. But it may also mean tigers, sunset, excitement, etc-meanings outside the dictionary pages. Some words mean less than they might have meant at some stage of their growth; 'that's really great' does not mean any greater, any longer. 'How are you' has become so cliché an expression that it seldom means what it ought to. This myriad meaning nature of language has wide scopes, but it comes not without its share of headache for the learners.

More than the students, it's the teachers who face various challenges in their profession. The foremost of them is getting down to their spine explaining 'English is not a phonetic language'. When everyone, down from their snobbish school teacher to the know-all cousin, gaffes at the English explanation of homophones, homonyms, it becomes Herculean than the Herculean task to bring oneself to those terms. Often, I get jittery about my students' stony faces, and when they open up, about their apparently stupid but well-founded-in-their-language questions. I attempt, though, quite painstakingly in the beginning,

to clear the haze and enthrone some fresh air by trying to dig into their own language as even their dialect sometimes. Indeed, English is a language. But a different language than ours, and that's why needs a different treatment. Get to it, pursue it like you would have pursued that girl at the fair, and you surely get along well. Once into your bonnet, the language will set your tongue-floor rocking. Steady. Persistently.

Language learning is a natural process for the natives which we term 'Behaviourist Approach'. For all students who speak other tongue than they intend to learn, it requires deliberate efforts which could be termed 'Mentalistic Approach'. The students of the rural and semi-urban areas in India face variegated challenges because English is not their mother tongue. It is neither instinctive nor intuitive. Language seems to be a process of analogy and application, nature and nurture. This analogy and application is the purple patch that often leads to colourful amalgamations;

Sample this:

- I am eating round-bubbles.
- He is my underwear friend.
- He has killed my hundred rupee.

Though we have over 30,000 words from Indian language into Oxford lexicon, still the sense and sensibility of the language, any language since every language nurtures that, prevail. The sentence, 'Akbar roamed around his empire in his Ferrari and maintained communication with his ministers via Whatsapp', wouldn't have made any sense during Akbar's time as words Ferrari and Whatsapp simply didn't exist. So the language has its own sense of socio-economic-political history that pulls, pushes and propels it into different horizons at different stages of its development. These pushes and pulls, however gentle or harsh, give a language its own breathing space, its own nature, character, and its own sense of being and sensibility of belonging. In that context, English and the language/languages spoken by the learners have different connotations. They are analogous in the sense that they share and express human experiences, albeit in far-fetched lands and not so common situations. Their phonetics are different, their syntactic have variations and their semantic, altogether uncommon. Still, every language has an inherent commonality. Language is the reflection of history of all human endeavour, everywhere. And that's where the sense and

sensibility of a language comes into play. We must translate the sense, not the word. Words are the physical representation of that inherent sense, and keep transforming themselves or are being transformed, continually and continuously; but the sense remains unchanged, the sensibility lives on.

After the jovial discussion we have had in the previous paragraph, it seems quite plausible to lower the guard and get ready for some philosophical rendering. I would like to take a detour into the ramblings, if the word is suitably used here, of Noam Chomsky. Though I, vehemently, disclaim not to be cast into Chomskian mould, he has offered a few glimpses into the problems and mysteries in the study of human language; and English, without an iota of doubt is a human language. There arise roughly two kinds of issues in the study of language and mind: those that appear to be within the reach of approaches and concepts that are moderately well understood; and others that remain as obscure to us today as when they were originally formulated. Humans are innately endowed with a system of intellectual organization. Through interaction with the environment and maturational processes, the mind passes through a sequence of states in which cognitive structures are represented. In this case of language, it is fairly obvious that rapid and extensive changes take place during an early period of life, and a steady stage is achieved which then undergoes only minor modification. What shall be the probable explanation for the problems and mysteries which those students face who have set out on learning English as a second language, say at the age of 13 or 14? Shall this be considered their initial stage and they will have the same experience through the cognitive learning as any native speaks would have had? Will this brain mapping be same since the child has achieved stable stage in its first language acquisition? Will there be same sort of convergence as divergence between the first language acquisition and second language acquisition, and will this not lead to over-lapping or overlap-mapping? Any specific answer to these questions may have had a tinge of a question, but experiences, supported by some sound studies, have shown that language is common to all humans and corroborate with our sense of living. Language may live cordially in our mindspace. As human experiences, senses, dwellings are structurally same everywhere. All languages lead to share the under currents of meanings and expressions. I assume, if there can be universally understood signs such that

laughing, crying, etc. there can be verbal correlatives. Human mind has universal language mapping and to initiate the process of verbal spot allocation, the trigger is needed; a sensible and persisted.

Many of the classroom quandary, if not all, can, thus, be understood and explained if we root our observations in the inherent commonalities of the language used by the learners and the language he/she intends to learn; furthermore, an insight into the language of the learners helps us to comprehend more clearly the puzzling web of complexities, the learner has created and seek to get rid of. It will, again, help to create sustainable 'teaching-learning' models that can enliven the approach thus giving the whole experience a much needed impetus. The common sense, is the word and the mantra.

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Some valuable inputs from Wikipedia

Pardeep, Assistant Professor of English Communication at DPGITM College of Engineering, Gurugram.