

Teacher Education in India: A Training Programme in ESL

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Abstract: *Research on the importance and centrality of language training in teacher education programmes has shown that language improvement components in such programmes may stimulate overall development among teachers. In the light of this, the present paper looks into the absence of serious efforts to include language training components in ESL teacher education programmes in India. The first part of this paper focuses on the views of some experts about language proficiency of English teachers: the second part critically presents an overview of language teacher Education programme in India; and in the last part, a few feasible solutions to the problems are highlighted.*

1. Introduction

Although it is generally agreed by researchers, teachers, curriculum designers and teachers in the field of English language teaching (ELT) that teacher language proficiency is a tool, using which English teachers can grow professionally; teacher education programmes in India seem to surprisingly ignore this crucial aspect of professional development. The programme designers do not seem to take notice of the fact that a linguistically incompetent teacher, even if methodologically aware, may feel handicapped while attending to the language problems of his/her learners. Contrarily, knowledge of and about the use of English language may help teachers to achieve a better grip of their professionalism. In addition, a linguistically competent teacher may be more successful than others who lack proficiency in the language, when it comes to correcting errors of students, guiding them to using the language accurately, choosing challenging and interesting teaching material, communicating with students fluently and accurately, giving proper instructions, getting involved in professional activities at a personal level, knowing about current research and practice, etc.

Defining 'language proficiency' for language teachers

Generally, language proficiency is referred to as one's ability to use the four macro skills that is listening, Speaking, reading and writing effectively. But a report prepared for National Asian Languages/Studies Strategy for Australian Schools (NALSAS) in 1999 to study the language proficiency of language teachers quotes Bachman and Palmer, who associate language proficiency with six interrelated areas of language knowledge. They include: organizational knowledge pertaining to the way in which texts are structured; grammatical knowledge including knowledge of vocabulary, syntax and phonology/graphology; textual knowledge, which includes knowledge of cohesion and knowledge of rhetorical or conversational organization; pragmatic knowledge, related to the communicative goals of the language user and the context in which the language is being used; functional knowledge including an understanding of ideational, manipulative, heuristic and imaginative functions, as well as

sociolinguistic knowledge. As the ultimate aim any language teacher education programme is to prepare teachers for the classes they are required to teach, an such programme may fall well short of being effective, if it does not include components from the areas of language knowledge mentioned above-not only what Chomsky calls linguistic competence as used by Hymes. It may be apt to put it as 'competence to impart competence'.

Language training for English teachers in teacher education programmes

There is plenty of research evidence to support that language proficiency, an important part of teacher knowledge, is the most essential characteristic of a good language teacher. The language proficiency of English teacher trainees was being taken for granted till some researchers in ELT like Widdowson, Richards, Bolitho, Wright, etc pointed it out that it has not got its due attention in teacher education programmes. However, making language training 'prescriptive' in teacher education programmes may be a debatable issue considering the fact that there are sociocultural and cognitive factors which have varying impacts on the making of a teacher's language abilities across the globe. Thus it may be logical to decide the required levels of proficiency for a teacher depending on the sociocultural background of students, the amount of exposure to English language they have, the purposes for which they will be required to use the language etc.

Wright (2003) argues that "proficiency in language use, knowledge about language, and knowledge of teaching methods" are essential to successful language teaching and emphasizes that language awareness can operate under three domains corresponding to the three areas in teacher education-user, analyst and teacher. While the first one involves using language successfully in addition to knowing the rules of use, the second one includes knowing the system of the language, and the last one is all about facilitating language learning. Wright's suggestion is indeed an interesting option since current research in language teacher education has shown a lot of sensitivity towards sociocultural factors, explicit training of and about language and affective factors related to teachers.

Volume 10 Issue 4, April 2021

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English language teacher education in India

The number of educational institutes in the country has been growing at a healthy rate in India since independence, but teacher preparation in the country has not been able to keep pace with it. In fact, teacher education in the country has not had enough attention until recently. It is evident from the fact that it was only in 1995, that is 20 years after its establishment, that National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) got statutory status. There is even less to talk about the education or training for English teachers in the country. In the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2010), hardly anything is mentioned about the education of English teachers.

Hiring policies for English teachers

Talking about teacher education programmes for English teachers in India will remain incomplete without having a look at the hiring policies for them in the country. Until recently, in the most state run government schools there were English teachers from all sorts of academic backgrounds. They were only required to have English teaching methodology as one of the elective subjects during their Bachelor of Education course. Their language proficiency never seemed to be a matter of importance and concern. It is obvious from this that language proficiency was never a criterion in their selection. Since the hiring policies in the majority of Indian states include employment of teachers with non- humanities background as English teachers regardless of their linguistic abilities, there should be some effort to ensure that the selected teachers are competent enough to handle the challenges in the classroom. At least a standardized test of English language proficiency for candidates aspiring to do a B.Ed. to become English teachers could be a part of the selection process. Such a test may encourage students to improve their language skills before getting into the profession of teaching English. Unfortunately, the efforts in this regard have been far from satisfactory.

Recent Developments

The disheartening scenario in English teacher education seems to be giving way to progressive changes in teacher education curricula and hiring policies. Recently, state governments like West Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Goa have decided to employ trained English graduates and post-graduates as English teachers. This shows that English teachers are finally on the way to getting their much- longed status of 'specialists'. But it remains to be seen if there are enough trained English graduates in the other remaining states to prompt a similar step by their respective state governments. It may not take long until we have a government-recognized body to take care of the education of English teachers.

Another pleasant surprise came recently in the form of a B.Ed. syllabus proposed by NCTE. The central has tried to compensate for the lack of proficiency among teachers who teach English with the inclusion of components for language training in the syllabus. It is a very encouraging step considering the long silence on the part of policy makers in this matter.

Solutions: Accepting the truth and acting promptly

Teacher Education programmes must help teachers to identify the features of the language that are different from that of their own and lead them to integrate local reality with it while learning and teaching it. If teachers are trained and educated to be able to control their own learning, they may be expected to promote it among their students. Favorable changes in policy may set the stage for infusing such practice into teacher education programmes and make them socially and linguistically responsive. However, changes in policy involve many factors like the political party in power in the center and the stages the appointment of curriculum designers; the political agenda behind employment of teachers; etc that do not directly come under the preview of ELT. But we may hope that all the stages to implement NCTE's proposed syllabus and take necessary steps to equip teachers into the required linguistic and communicative competence to teach English at school level.

In addition to above, introducing language training models in pre and in-service teacher training programmes may be a solution to the problem. The modules should contain language items necessary for English teachers. It may be made mandatory for English teachers the prescribed modules to obtain degrees like certificate in teaching, bachelor of education, etc or receive increments and promotion. However, the onus will still be one teacher to improve their language proficiency in their respective sociocultural context using suitable self development strategies, which can be taught during formal training programmes.

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