

To Each Their Own: From Appropriation to Subjectivity in ELT

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Abstract

ELT in countries like India where it is not the first language should not be a blind imitation of the British or other European models but should rather be generative in nature owing to/ depending upon the different needs and socio-cultural/linguistic backgrounds of our learners, who are differently equipped to cope with a 'foreign language'. In absence of this understanding, ELT in India becomes an elite appropriation of English as a medium of instruction creating a cesspool of comprehension crisis and becoming rather intimidating than creating a conducive atmosphere for English learning through effectively using the local language ecology. The current paper is an attempt to theoretically analyse—by borrowing richly from my own experience of teaching English at a small town in Haryana---how ELT in India can be of generative nature i.e. each teacher creating their own methods and approaches, by understanding the need of the learners.

Introduction

Noah Webster (American Man of letters and lexicographer, known for his American spelling book and the first American dictionary of the English language) has affirmed "Language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generation of humanity, and has its basis broad and low, close to the ground." (Shopen, Timothy; Williams, Joseph M., 1980 p. 23)

The above quote explains in the most simple terms possible- the need to understand the subjectivity or the subjective nature of language verses the commonly and unconsciously recognized 'abstract construction of the learned' premise, emphasizing that language does not only belong to the elite, the learned, the literate but also stems out of the basic human emotions, passions and affections of humans, humanity as a whole. The edifice on which language stands is close to the ground, away from the megalomaniac supremacy of the nonpareils, the exclusivity and limitedness. This can very well be deconstructed in the context of ELT in India where English was first imposed upon us with an aim to establish a "class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect and to create a "demand" for the European institutions, and though it was aimed at benefitting the rulers and not the ruled, it proved to be a blessing in disguise for us as it became the unifying factor

for the multilingual India during the freedom struggle. English in India has come a long way from there- from being despised first owing to the its being a tool of oppression to being limited to the elite class of Indian society to being almost indispensable for the liberalisation of Indian economy and telecommunications, technology and other sectors emerging in the changing world bringing with them a whole gamut of job opportunities. Robert McCrum (2010) calls it 'globish' combining 'global English.' However, English teaching in India is far from gaining any kind of autonomy with regards to our pluralistic socio-cultural backgrounds of the learners and multiple native local languages. Indian universities and premier educational institutions continue to be dependent on the European and western ideas and ideologies, materials and methods of teaching English. The colonial hangover and inheritance is far from being over, ELT in India being one the fields where it is pervasive.

Policies and Curriculums

First of all, our policies and curriculums are highly elitist in that we make the learners study English writers from Chaucer to modern age expecting them to appreciate the aesthetics, who lack a basic understanding of the language. The pedagogic gap between language and literature is so gaping that it's hard to believe why does it escape the purview of the policy makers. A functional, needs based curriculum of English is the need of the changing times. Apart from a very low percentage of Indian

students who get the advantage and privilege of convent or urban education, our multicultural, pluralistic settings leave underprivileged learners (like the ones I have) find themselves continuously grappling with the essentially elitist curriculums expecting them to appreciate culture specific pieces like "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" as a poetic marvel, 'A thing of beauty' while our poor learners are left wondering what is so flattering about being compared to a 'summer's day' as what they have experienced as summer in a tropical country like ours is no less than a nightmare as opposed to an English lover who finds the month of May pleasant, bringing respite from the bitter, freezing winter. Indian ELT should be specific to Indian context, with a premise and autonomy to develop syllabi keeping in mind the need of our learners which breaks free from the colonial inheritance and chauvinism and appropriation. The purpose should be to achieve competent comprehension rather than a comprehension crisis by the elitist propagation of age old materials which are losing plot specially for the undergraduate courses in semi urban areas where English is a compulsory subject and the students have no choice but to struggle with treacherous curriculums, owing to their limited knowledge of English and its questionable relevance for those who are not going to opt for it as their Major or pursue masters. Our learners do not need this 'English' but a functional, workable English that works for their own eco system in their own country- socially, culturally and professionally.

Teachers Training, Research and Syllabi Development

Unfortunately, India has been majorly a consumer country and like being a market of innumerable western goods and brands, we have not been able to invest a lot in the research and development in the field of ELT in India and have been for the most part dependent on the west for the ideas and methodologies despite a very evident and yet ignored fact that the needs of our learners are totally different. Even after so many years of independence from the rulers and seeing English language change its status from an imposed language to becoming an important tool of communication and entering the job markets in the new era, we suffer from a kind of dominance of ELT materials by native teachers and reluctance in developing them on our own as per the Indian Educational System and pluralistic and multilingualistic socio cultural backgrounds of

the learners. Undergraduate and post graduate courses are mostly literature oriented but teachers are supposed to teach language in classrooms for which no formal training is given to them. And though they are taught various methods of teaching English during the two year degree course in Education but most of those methods are unworkable in Indian classrooms. We all have heard of various methods- GT, SLT, CLT etc. but are yet to come across methods developed by Indian researchers to work in our classrooms. Little has been done to understand the special learning needs of students here and even lesser attention has been paid to prepare them to communicate effectively in other than academic scenarios. Students hailing from small towns, suburbs or rural areas suffer from geographic as well as cultural disadvantages the focus of our teaching is mostly to complete the prescribed syllabus and let them appear and pass the exams which they do without having gained any hands on learning of the language. We need to break free from these fallacies of language learning at the policy level and some serious steps must be taken to find alternatives suitable for Indian classrooms. Though English has formally been designated the status of a 'second' language in India, for many people including my learners- it shall always be a 'foreign' language. There is no justification whatsoever in teaching a love sonnet of Shakespeare to a poor child of a farmer who works on his land before and after the college and has no desire to pursue English further academically or professionally. The syllabi should be developed in a way that there is some functional, vocational or other special purpose behind teaching of the language to these learners, like the ones that I teach in a small part of Haryana. It is observed that the kind of syllabi that is designed for them is highly unpragmatic and serves no purpose than appearing to be aesthetically pleasing to a colonial mind, satisfying to a certain type of linguistic and literary chauvinism advocating teaching the moralist ideas of a culture that the learner knows nothing about. The compulsory, prescribed canonical texts in the syllabi are there on the pretext of familiarizing the learners with the literature of highest order to develop their literary appreciation and aesthetics but this makes no sense when the learner struggles with the basics of the language itself. In the changing times, when English has come a long way

from being just the language of the crown and hence looked upon in some awe, the current syllabi should be developed keeping in mind the current need of the learners- to facilitate them in some way or the other for the job market. For example, if most of the learners are interested in taking a Combined Graduate Level exam after Bachelor's degree, some portion of the syllabi should focus on that comprising of specific requirements of composition, common errors, language/diction/vocabulary component rather than only pieces from literature that serve absolutely no purpose after their answers are ruthlessly crammed and spewed on the answer scripts of the exams and then soon forgotten. There is a serious misrepresentation or lack of representation of our own culture and our textbooks are replete with colonial ambivalence. We need to create and develop text books that are conducive with the idea of 'glocal subjectivity' i.e. the creation of self that appreciates ingredients of both local and global spaces(Gutierrez 2013) This is highly relevant to the development ELT material to help it remain relevant across pluralistic cultures. Pennycook (2017), emphasised the need of home grown materials in ELT which gained currency in the academic circles. Rehman and Khan (2019) say that resistance against 'native speakerism' (Philipson 1992) and the paradigm of English as an international language gave birth to a movement that encouraged the local production of ELT books by local experts.

Local Language Ecology and ELT

In sync with the concept of 'glocal subjectivity' is the use of 'local language ecology' to attain the desired results. The subjective reality that different elements of the teaching-learning process take for participants is the main focus of the 'ecological perspective' on language instruction, which calls for a "local" approach to pedagogical decision-making.

Ian Tudor in his article *Learning to live with complexity: towards an ecological perspective on language teaching* has used the term "ecological" to describe this perspective on language teaching. From an ecological point of view, language instruction and learning are investigated in the context of the diverse participants' lives as a whole rather than as a single, isolated aspect of their life. In order to comprehend what truly occurs in our

classrooms, we must view them as independent entities and investigate their meaning for the people who are enrolled in them on their own terms, rather than in light of an external, purportedly universal set of presumptions. In order to comprehend classroom teaching and learning, one must investigate the significance of these activities for both teachers and students, with an emphasis on learner-centeredness. Tudor mentions various writers to substantiate his viewpoint: for example, Holliday (1994) says that one evident implication of this line of research is the need to develop "appropriate" methodology. This entails being sensitive to students' sociocultural identity (Susser, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Kubota, 1999) and to their sociocultural based expectations with respect to various aspects of the learning process (Ellis, 1996; Ho and Crookall, 1995; Riley, 1988).

In the foreword to the novel *Kanthapura*, prominent Indian novelist Raja Rao (1938) says about the 'Indian' novel that he wrote in English: "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own: the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien' yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make up, like Sanskrit or Persian was before, but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English, we should not. We can write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or American. Time alone will justify it." He wrote the novel using the technique of defamiliarization- in sync with Indian sensibilities and appealing to Indian mind and spirit. The eminent critic BB Khachru looked at this foreword as 'Indian English saying farewell to British English when Rao wrote his credo for creativity.' Since there was a hint of suggestiveness here towards transcreation and using our own unique cultural authenticity to create a piece of work. Raja Rao further said that the "tempo" of Indian life must be infused into our English expression. It would not be an aberration to say that these words can hold as good for ELT in India

something of our own—'Indianisation of English' as Khachru calls it, matching the frequency with various cultures and languages. What's wrong in giving reference of a piece of literature in learners' native language to bring home the point which is culturally alien to them. I teach a chapter on the concept of eco criticism with a reference to Sumitranandan Pant's *Yeh Dharti Kitni Deti Hai* which the students grasp immediately and are able to make sense of this alien and convoluted concept. A reference to Kabir's '*Mat karmayaka abhimaan, mat kar kaya ka ahenkaarkaayagaar se kaachi..*' works wonders in teaching 'Most friendships are feigning, most loving mere folly..'. Even when these references are not cross cultural, references from the native/local language comes handy. Teaching of a translation of Bhasa's *The Envoy* always makes me recite *Krishna ki Chetawani* by Dinkar. A question might arise as to what are the ends achieved by this kind of ELT, it's not helping them to write answers in the exams. my humble answer is, they are anyway going to write the exams the way they want and would be required to, to clear their grades but at least some lifelong learning they are carrying with them if taught in this way. English idioms can never make sense to them if not taught with cultural references to ones in their own dialect. for example :

- गादड़कीतावळतैबेरनापाक्याकरै ('*Gadar ki taawal se ber na pakya karen*')(slow and steady wins the race)
- चोरकेमनमेंडूमकाढांढा ('*Chor ke man main doom ka dhaanda*')(guilty conscience pricks the mind)
- जड़ैदीखैतवा-परांत, ऊड़ैगावैसारीरात ('*Jade di Khaitwa paraat, ude gaaven saari raat*') (To look for greener pastures)
- जाटगंडानादे, भेलीदे ('*Jaat gandaa na de bheli de*')(Penny wise, Pound foolish)
- गोहकेजाए, सारेखुरदरे ('*Goh ke jaaye saare khurdare*') (cast in the same mould)
- आगै-पाछैनीमतळै ('*Aage paache ne mat le*') ("one and the same thing")
- जिसकैलागै, वोह-एजाणै ('*Jiske laage woh hi jaane*') (only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches)
- ठाढामारै ... रोवणदेना, खाटखोसले ... सोवणदेना ('*Thaada maare rovan de na, Khaat khos le, sovan de na*') (Might Is Right, or The Survival of the Fittest)
- नानीफंडकरै, धेवताडंडभरै ('*Naani fand kare, devta dand bhare*') (The sins of parents always visit their children)
- दूसरेकीथाळीमेंलाडूबड्डेदीख्याकरै ('*Doosre ki thali main laadoo badde hi dikhya karen*') (grass is greener on the other side)
- दानीकालपरखियो, गायनैफागण-माह-बहूनैजिबपरखियोजिबधाँसपल्लैना ('*Daani Kaal parakhiyo, Gayane Fagan maah, Bahut ne jib parakhiyo jib Dhaans pale na*') (A woman's loyalty is assessed when the man has nothing)
- गंजीकीमौतआवैजबवाकांकरांमेंकुल्लाबात्तीखायाकरै ('*Ganji ki maut aawe toh wa kaankra main kullabaati khaaya kare*') (When the time is bad, everything adds to the misery)
- कुत्तेभौंकेजाअरगाडीचाळेजा ('*Kutte bhonke jaa ar gaadi chaale ja*') (Elephants keep walking as the dogs keep barking)

This obviously pertains to 'subjectivity' of our Indian learners belonging to multilingual societies and cultures and not mindless appropriation of ELT as devised by the 'inner circles'. Human subjectivity is a reflection of our life experiences and how we decipher these experiences – a continuous process in which change is both possible and real. It can be argued that the study and teaching of English accelerate and accentuate this process, actively encouraging the production of certain kinds of subjectivities. Mostly, in our classrooms, students remain in passive position and teachers do not spend time in exploring their subjectivity and giving them autonomy in the teaching learning process to reap the maximum benefit out of it. We need to break free from the traditional fallacies and need to make our classroom environment conducive to learning as per the socio-cultural and socio-linguistic needs, experiences and the understanding of these experience by our learners. Teachers should be free to develop their own materials and devise their own methods, different from the ones that are considered to be

the 'norm'(the inner and outer circles in Khachru's terms). The subjectivity in education is the initiative, in which students actively involve themselves to teaching activities under the guidance of teachers.

Yanqing Ge (2016) quotes Light brown summarising the subjectivity with the autonomy, the initiative and the creativity. Students are the "centre of teaching English, therefore teaching methods and teaching materials should be arranged according to the learning of students. The teacher should guide the students to take part in the teaching as the main role instead of the person of passively getting knowledge. To solve the problems that exist in the process of preparation of students and the condition of listening lessons and the teaching, some positive and helpful teaching methods, which can explore the potential language ability of students and evoke the students' interest to use the language creatively, should be explored and developed. Therefore, students-centered language teaching is put forward in the English Curriculum Criterion".

Going even beyond the 'student centred' approach, we may sum up that that ELT needs a 'culture centred' approach, incorporating the local language and cultural contexts which can serve as a bridge to help students develop sustainable comprehension. This shall make learning process more relevant and culturally responsive, enhancing engagement and motivation and not dullness and boredom. ELT in India should often leverage Indian resources to make the learning experience more relevant and contextualised for students. This approach includes using local literature, newspapers, films and cultural references to engage learners and foster language acquisition. This shall prepare them for real world communication and not just the textual understanding of the language. An Indian scholarship, Indian discourse, Indian criticism, Indian academia and Indian perspective on development of ELT materials is required for the goal towards effective learning and motivating life-long learners.

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