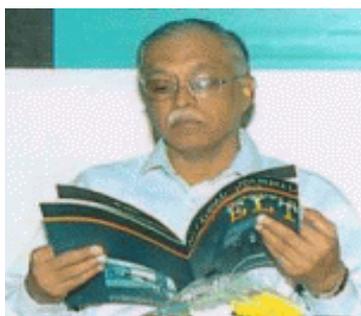RESEARCH ARTICLE

JOELL
Veda Publications

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
GENERAL SURVEY OF ELT IN TODAY'S WORLD

Prof. Mohan Raj sathuvalli

EFLU , HYDERABAD

 In the first place I would like to congratulate the organizers for choosing a very relevant theme in the field of English Language Education especially in the context of present day education where there is rampant criticism against the teachers of English for not doing their work properly. Please do not bother about it and suffice it to say 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they say'.   Having said that let me reclassify the sub-themes of the seminar into five broad categories such that our discussions remain focused and the repetitions are avoided. Here is how I would like to present the five themes and their sub-themes. A Language teaching in the present day:

    i.   Teaching English in Global Scenario

    ii.   Innovative Practices in ELT

    iii.   Communicative Competence in English

    iv.   Classroom management and Practice

B English for Specific Purposes:

C Teaching English Through Literature (relate to authentic materials)

D Technology in Language Teaching

    i.   Computer Assisted Language Learning/Teaching

    ii.   Technology enabled ELT

    iii.   Multimedia classroom

    iv.   Language Through ICT

E. English Language for Employability

    i.   soft skills training   (Link it to Communicative competence)

To begin with let us look at the first major category, Language Teaching in the present day.

To understand this we need to know the wide spread of English and the objectives we need to formulate such that we may teach English in a proper perspective. To know this, let us see how wide

spread English is in our country, and whether a common man needs English to survive in the society.

Here are some questions I leave with you to ponder:

When you get back home this evening take a look at the following:

a. The monthly bill you receive for using electricity (the power bill)

b. Your city bus ticket which is computer generated

c. Your railway ticket or the monthly concession pass

d. A leaf in your cheque book

e. Your grocery bill

f. A receipt you get from the post office

g. Handbills you receive in your newspaper announcing a new product, or advertising a sale etc.

h. A currency note of any denomination

The list can go on. My choice of items has been those related to our everyday life which is not exclusive to the educated gentry, but to the common people as well. There is no academic slant whatsoever in any of the items mentioned above. Almost all the items listed are in English or at least a major part of the information provided on them is in English. If a common man (e.g. your domestic help, an attendant in your college, or a small child yet to be introduced to the letters of the English alphabet) is involved in any of these transactions, necessarily needs to have some knowledge of English such that he/she is not taken unawares.   English is so widespread in our society, that we call it a second language and not a foreign language in our school/college curriculum as well as in the national language policy document.

English has been acknowledged as an associate official language and has been entered as one of the languages in the VIII schedule of our Constitution. This gives the English the status of an Indian language and the label 'foreign language' no longer holds good to describe it. If this is the case, the reason for which we teach English should be different from just developing language proficiency. What should it be?

Let us look at a phrase called '*Language Across Curriculum'*. What does this mean? It simply means that any language that needs to be learnt needs to be learnt for a variety of reasons. For example we learn our mother tongue to communicate with our immediate family and the society around us. It has a social purpose, and sadly it is losing its academic purpose rather hastily. English on the other hand is gaining the academic purpose. This needs to be understood properly. We learn English to facilitate better understanding of the content subjects. My understanding of the concepts in Physics,

Prof. Mohan Raj sathuvalli

Chemistry, Mathematics, History, Geography, Philosophy and what have you is refined because of my knowledge of English. Learning English may not give fluency, but certainly provides me with greater competence. If this objective is achieved we have taught English as a language across the curriculum.

To realize this objective the best suited method or approach would be one of Communicative Language Teaching – CLT for short. CLT is more like a camel in the Arab's tent – it is all pervasive and comprehensive. What are some of the basic tenets of CLT? What is its origin? Let us look at these two questions.

CLT is a product of social sciences. It firmly believes that a human being needs language for he is a social animal. A social animal cannot live alone without communicating. So any language that is taught/learnt has to serve the larger purposes of communication. A purpose for communication needs to be created in the class by the teacher.

Secondly, the language of communication in the world outside does not confer with the language used in the classroom. There are significant differences. To iron out these differences, is it possible for us to approximate the language of the classroom to that of language used in the world outside. e.g. allowing learners to talk by giving them the right purpose, allow for some noise, accept errors by focusing more on meaning than correctness of expression.

Learning is a cooperative process and not an isolated process. Therefore the learners should be allowed to share their views freely. Each view may be a new input to learning and this can be shared by all the learners and the teacher in the class. The teacher basically becomes a person who can monitor learning and also be a learner at the same time.

The right to ask question rests more with the learner than with the teacher as it happens in the world outside. I have stated the tenets in a simplistic way to appreciate their significance. And in teaching language this way, the larger differences between the language of the world outside and the language of the classroom get ironed out. This also paves way for global communication.

Just a word about the global communication. There is no single variety of English that is accepted as the variety which is prescribed and needs to be learnt. The British variety which ruled the universe for a long period is slowly making way for the American variety and even this seems to be transient going by what the linguists have to say. In between we have the Indian variety which is also spreading at a rapid pace merely because of its magnitude – or the number of speakers it has. The educated Indian variety with no regional accents marking it is fairly a safe model to practice for purposes of international communication. We are understood by others, and we can understand

Prof. Mohan Raj sathuvalli

others through the medium of English. By saying this, I do not mean to make ourselves complacent, but help ourselves from refraining from one more strain in the process of learning English. This aspect is closely associated with one more sub-theme we are discussing here in the next two days – Communicative competence. This is a term given to us by Dell Hymes, a Sociolinguist, in the year 1963. How does he define this term? All languages have three different types of competences – linguistic, social and communicative in the same order of hierarchy. Linguistic competence provides us with essential grammar competence and helps us frame our sentences correctly according to the rules of grammar. This is merely like a parrot memorizing a set of sentences and repeating them. This is not how we want to learn language. Social competence provides us with the knowledge of social behaviour, principles of politeness, respecting elders, choice of what to say to who etc. When we super scribe these two competences, they overlap and certain areas are created where one gains both linguistic as well as social competence. The overlapping area constitutes communicative competence. In other words, it is not adequate to know how to use language accurately; we also need to know how to use it appropriately. A fair combination of accuracy with appropriacy helps us gain communicative competence.

One of the major themes of this conference is on ESP - This abbreviation has two expansions for the letter's' – special and specific. When the whole movement started way back in 1965 it was simply called EST – English for Science and Technology. A pioneering work was undertaken by Ewer and Lattore to identify words and sentences patterns occurring in scientific discourse using frequency counts. The book produced then has validity to date. Soon linguists saw that the vocabulary of each of the subject discourses was different and the term 'special' gave place to 'specific' signifying a paradigm shift. Today the focus has once again shifted back to EGP – English for general purposes with the argument that unless there is a proper foundation in language aspiring for special or specific language is difficult. This makes a lot of sense. One feature that needs to be understood here is that the larger structure of the language remains the same, but the vocabulary acquires significance in terms of its connotation. David Carver when ESP was at its peak in a light hearted manner commented, 'in dealing with ESP we have forgotten TENOR – Teaching English for no obvious reason. And this indeed is true to this day.

While teaching English using CLT, we often come across a term called 'authentic materials'. What do we mean by this? In lighter vein one of the linguists defines it as follows: 'anything written without the tacit purpose of teaching' is authentic (Vivian Cook). Let us however take it seriously and

examine if any literary text was written with the tacit purpose of being taught in our classrooms. Therefore all literary texts become authentic materials. This term needs to be understood more in the spirit of how we use materials in our class rather than what we use. Any text becomes authentic if proper exercises are designed based on them, and these materials help the learners think and see their usefulness in their own life. A story in our textbook should spring itself into life and help the learner relate himself/herself with it to become authentic. And the onus of doing so rests solely on the teacher. Let me give you a few examples to illustrate this point. (User instructions in a bottle of medicine, instruction manual that comes along with equipment etc. are examples of such materials.)

Literature can be taught for two purposes, one as content leading to appreciation and criticism. Here the focus is merely on content such as use of imagery, symbolism, the development of the plot, character, inter-relationships between the characters etc. While using the same text for teaching language the focus shifts to expression. How does the expression help in conveying the intended meaning? Are there alternative strategies to do this? If I were to express the same idea, how would I do it? Why do I need these expressions? What can I do with these expressions in my life? These questions help converting the materials we use into authentic materials. Literature is no exception to this field.

Another major theme you will discuss in these two days relates to Technology. This again is not a new initiative. Teaching machines in the form of programmed learning were introduced in the field of education in early 30's of the last century. This was followed by audio visual aids, language laboratories, a number of projectors and finally the computers. Computers made way into language teaching sometime in the mid seventies in Europe and mid eighties in India. Computers were mainly looked upon as numerical processors. They can work very efficiently with numbers as numbers behave in a predictable manner. The results are always bi-polar (either right or wrong) and can be verified easily. Language does not behave like that. So how did a numerical processor become a word processor? To understand this we need to see some of the language features which are as precise as numbers – e.g. spellings and rules of grammar. There cannot be any compromise on either of these.

A computer is a device that has a fantastic memory. Once it stores some information, it cannot forget it. It can compare all other information it is fed with the stored information and say whether the new information matches with the old or not. This type of thinking (systematic comparison) is called algorithmic thinking. The computer compares, and having done so either accepts or rejects

the newly fed in information. A dictionary with almost all the words in English is stored in the computer with their accepted spellings (American spellings). When you type in a letter which is composed of different words, the computer can spell check these automatically and caution you when you go wrong. The same principle is followed to check the grammatical correctness of your sentences – a definite number of structures (frames of sentences) are available in English language. These are fed into the computer as formulas, and any sentence you type, if it conforms to the given structure, the computer accepts it, otherwise such sentence is rejected.

This aspect of CALL was first introduced in 1986 as part of CLASS (Computer Literacy and School Studies) Programme in India. However, this was soon withdrawn more for political reasons than academic. Computers were operated on DoS environment and had limited memory. But these computers helped the teachers in teaching words and grammar using a variety of exercises. Subsequently with the ushering in of Windows environment in mid nineties, computers have made a tremendous progress and we are able to harness our teaching to include reading, writing, speaking as well as listening. Besides the change in the environment, the evolution of computers helped reduce its size and make it more easily accessible at lower costs. The new systems could be installed without technical assistance and operated without having to know the special computer language. In short, computers became more user-friendly devices with unimaginably huge memory space. To this was added the benefits of research in the area of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Natural Language Processing (NLP). These two researches provided the computer with an ability to think almost like human beings and process language for creative use. Today these aspects are being looked into. We are able to work with huge copora, analyse them, and make estimates of frequencies and also concordances. This is a definite step towards progress in learning vocabulary and also lexicography.

ICT (information communication technology) has allowed for the use of computers in different ways for language teaching. One of the contributions is seen in a teacher being able to present the materials using PPT. The same can be made more interactive with certain exercises using what is called authoring programmes. Using such exercises, the learner can create his own files and a set of answers. Several instructional websites are available which can be used profitably for language teaching.   www.hotpotatoes.com;   www.nicenet.com;   www.wordsandphrases.info; www.zopeto.com are some of the useful sites which teachers as well as students can access without difficulty. Besides these, teachers can create portfolios for keeping records of learners and create classroom groups to facilitate interaction, sharing of assignments, feedback, results and monitor the

progress of each student. This provides for transparency in student assessment and teacher behaviour.

Finally we come to one more major thrust area of the seminar, English for employability. Education and employment go hand in hand. Macaulay in his wisdom said the same thing nearly 200 years ago and we are repeating the phrase once again. English is called a language of opportunity, this means that those who learn English stand a better chance of getting jobs, and this has been true in my experience. If that is the case, why do we need to revisit this question again and again?

The language variety taught leaves little to be desired. We gain skills of reading and writing and almost lack skills of listening and speaking. Michael West when he introduced his New Method in 1935 did mention that in a country like India, Reading and Writing Skills are more important than speaking and listening. He had said it in a different context and blindly following his dictum to the present day does not serve the true purposes of English education. Today we need people who are able to communicate fluently and master the language with native-like competence. Is this a tall order? Perhaps not. How do we do it? Today, like authentic materials, a term we discussed a few minutes ago, we have another term that is becoming popular – 'soft skills'. These are opposed to hard skills like LSRW. Soft skills deal with how we use language and the etiquette that is associated with it. For example, while making a presentation, how do I stand matters a lot? This is associated with my posture, body language and voice modulation. Do I understand the nuance of the language appropriately and in my speech, constitutes soft skills? Add to this, my ability to use technology, switch from one mode of presentation to the other and carry the audience with me to enhance your soft skills. Soft skills are acquired by two means, one practice and the other is to observe and imitate people who impress us. This we do any way.

With that note, I propose to end my presentation, and thanks for listening to me patiently and giving me this opportunity to share my views with all of you.

***