ENGLISH LANGUAGE-TEACHING AT THE CROSSROADS

DHANYA MENON

Associate Professor, Department of English, Prajyoti Niketan College, Pudukad, Thrissur, Kerala, India

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to highlight the urgent need for drastically restructuring the approach, execution and teaching strategies that pertain to language-teaching in the 21st century context. There is felt a need to blend conventional syllabi that include poetry, fiction and the other major literary genres with more tech-friendly literary techniques which are e-friendly, to suit the modern context.

KEYWORDS: Approach, Execution and Teaching Strategies

INTRODUCTION

I begin with a question: What do we do when we teach English in the graduate or post graduate classrooms?

English teachers of my generation have been enviably told time and again of the ‘good old days’ of excellent English teachers who, with their chaste pronunciation, always held their students enthralled, be it a lecture on T.S. Eliot or William Shakespeare. There are senior English teachers in our university who reminisce about a particular lecture on Henry James, Matthew Arnold or the Romantic Imagination, delivered by some of their all-time favourite teachers. What were communicated in those classrooms were not perhaps only semantic or morphological categories but rather, an agenda that was re-localized within more than twenty regional languages. This means that though there are claims to similar influences in other languages and disciplines, English has had its own mode of growth within the institution and without, being constantly engaged in a cheerful quarrel with the regional languages.

However, such a quarrel does not remain ‘cheerful’ all the time. A certain fundamentalist coloring soon takes over. For instance, I remember a Tamil play was shouted down and had to be taken off stage a couple of years back, thanks to the fundamentalism of the Akhila Kannada Dr. Rajkumar Abhimanigala Sangha. The next day we hear from the President of Karnataka Vimochana Ranga that the true enemy of Kannada is English, and only English. These two incidents reveal the flair that these fundamentalists have to simulate a kind of fear-psychosis over personal identity and through that, regional identity. Here gets posited a virtual struggle and victory of a vested language, creating an illusion of the real and the end result of a ‘linguistic’ struggle.

A serious student or teacher of the English language, however, knows that linguistic struggles waged among languages are never destructive, but on the contrary, inter-illuminating.

Recent studies on the English language are sites of such inter illumination as it focuses on the changed global order, termed ‘informationalism’ by Castells. It then proceeds to read the consequences of this phenomenon in three broad areas called ‘Global Englishes’, ‘employment patterns’ and ‘technology’. These studies promote the
idea that reading practices are shifting from the page to the screen. This shift in reading practices and processes is what the English teacher of the present should be able to address. Here then is proposed, in a humble way, an agenda for the teaching of English, in the light of the new global academic order. It is an agenda which is conditioned by particular communicative and social needs of the environment. Let the English teacher first accept the hard fact that he/she has been re-located in an ecosystem where reciprocal relationships constantly monitor and re-form the agenda in English teaching. This development in itself is a challenge that has to be negotiated in the dynamics of the classroom by keeping within the parameters of the syllabus and yet be keenly conscious of the human dimension.

Most often, as in the case of all other academic disciplines, what dominates the teacher’s mind more than anything else is the issue of covering the syllabus on time. There is therefore, no room for the element of affective or emotional responses to a creative text—the student ‘gulps’ down the entire text as a matter of solemn duty. Rather than accuse the teacher, one has to look at the issue as an offspring of a kind of hidden agenda that is concealed within the syllabus. What are we teaching—and, more importantly—why are we teaching it? Very often, changing the syllabus and the design of the curriculum is the classic mode of binary thinking, which bases itself on the ‘us-them’ syndrome. The syllabus then comes to mean a group of texts that can be prescribed for study for, one, two or three years. Curriculum-design now functions as an agent that carries texts in clusters that make explicit the binary agenda.

Any attempt—however small—to redesign, amend or alter the curriculum, is met with fear, pessimism and intense resistance, especially by the teaching fraternity, whose protests zero-in on the point that there will be no takers for the course if it is too ‘difficult’. Added to this is the general view regarding the competence of the student in the subject. Most teachers of English hold the view that since the students are not at home with the basics, it would be a heavy-handed attempt to change the existing syllabi—ie, the prose- poetry- fiction pattern per se. It is argued that such revisions could end up as kind of deterrence rather than as a change for the better.

Sadly enough, post graduate courses, especially Humanities, are often tailor-made to suit the civil service examination in which English is a core paper in the finals. This is certainly a deterrent to the learning of pure literature. My own strong feeling is that it simulates the Victorian attitude which looked upon the learning of British classic texts in the classroom as a reason “to prepare white anglo-saxon males for professions, and white anglo- saxon women of the middle classes to become the best wives, mothers, hostesses and community servants”. This is exactly what is reincarnated in the grotesque garbling and perpetration of an outmoded agenda in the name of higher education. The most recent trend among students who have completed their masters is to apply for the UGC NET examination. This trend pre determines a career as an English teacher at the University level and confirms the institutionalization of higher education. Of course, higher education does not mean that it will provide secure jobs for all. But the converse is true: it is a vision that empowers. But how is that empowerment to be made possible in the present scenario? It has to be admitted that the English teaching community of our country have by and large remained indifferent to the dynamics of the shifting emphasis in their own profession. The attention of English teachers at the university level has only focused on the minimum requirements of teaching as a vocation. Their attempts to problematize the profession in the light of its essential parameters have been glaringly inadequate.

The issue therefore, is whether we now have a serious and critical English teaching that opens up to the changing dynamics of our environment. The thrust therefore should not be on a job generating system where the university will degenerate into a factory printing a degree on one side, and a bond for a job on the other. Language teaching certainly
opens up avenues to read cultures. It is an inquiry into the dynamics of social and cultural production and of the changes that radically erupt in the environment. English teachers should open their eyes to the fact that many a university in the west has mothballed their English departments and their programmes. Instead, they have come up with Culture Studies Departments. This development is viewed by many as a potential threat, while others see it as a western fad. This is happening in India too—this provides an excellent opportunity for the language to locate itself more firmly in a tech-savvy world and make creative use of the openings provided by the web. Here again, the human agency can play a critical role in cultivating a more alert and sound habit of reading.

To train our students to read is nothing new—we live in a world where the reader becomes the author of multiple modes of communication. Reading is the agency of power. In a way we see the democratic impulse in language and its interrelationships every time we ‘read’. This vital impulse could form an important part of our courses and curricula, which will bring us to the Ground of Babel. The Ground of Babel could be our own classroom, where one will—or should—hear the voice of language, the voice of democracy.

NOTE

The author has not made any hard and fast conclusion, since it does not apply to a paper of this kind. References of any kind have been avoided since emphasis is given to observations and classroom teaching experiences that the author has had as an English teacher for twenty-odd years.

REFERENCES


