

## 2. Teaching of English at the undergraduate level in Kerala: Problems, Perspectives and Possibilities

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### **Abstract:**

*It goes without saying that English language is a hard nut to crack even at the undergraduate level. In spite of having spent ten to twelve years to learn the language and explore its nuances, the state of English learning in Kerala point to a very dismal state of affairs. It is disappointing that after spending immense time, energy and effort on the language, students end up enrolling in spoken English centres to hone their linguistic skills. Students, and sometimes teachers fumble when it comes to expressing themselves, either in speech or writing. In fact, the words 'teaching' and 'learning' any language are inappropriate because language cannot be taught or learnt, but acquired. This acquisition of language is a gradual, incremental process, which is easy and interesting once the ball is set in motion. Focus must be on setting a strong foundation on which students can grow and develop. This paper tries to explore the blocks and hurdles faced by the academia in imbibing and imparting the language. It explores the function of language in relation to expressing oneself and in relation to human lives and culture. It also touches upon the strategies to be adopted in teaching the language in a multilingual setting. It also tries to relate the learning of language to literature, which has always been a subject of debate.*

### **Keywords:**

*Language through literature, bilingual position, mother tongue influence, Intercultural dialogue, social equity, grammar and language*

# Teaching of English at the undergraduate level in Kerala: Problems, Perspectives and Possibilities

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It goes without saying that English language is still a hard nut to crack even at the undergraduate level. In spite of having spent ten to twelve years trying to learn the language and explore its nuances, the state of English learning in Kerala points to a very dismal state of affairs. It is disappointing that after spending immense time, energy and effort on the language, students end up enrolling in a spoken English centre to hone their linguistic skills. Students, and sometimes teachers, fumble when it comes to expressing themselves, either in speech or writing. In fact, the words 'teaching' and 'learning' any language are inappropriate because language cannot be taught or learnt, but acquired. This acquisition of language is a gradual, incremental process, which is easy and interesting once the ball is set in motion. Focus must be given on setting a strong foundation on which students can grow and develop. This paper tries to explore the hurdles and bottlenecks faced by the academia in imparting the language effectively. It explores the function of language in relation to expressing oneself and in relation to human lives and culture. It also touches upon the strategies to be adopted in teaching the language in a multilingual setting. Besides, it tries to relate the learning of language to literature, which has always been a subject of debate.

Students at the undergraduate level fail miserably to express themselves in English. Even more shocking is the fact that their level of comprehension of the language is rather disappointing. Our students reel under the burden of incomprehension, which is potentially more problematic than the blocks they face in expressing themselves. How can we expect our students, who are unable to comprehend the language, to express their thoughts in a logical and coherent manner? It is quite surprising to have students who blame the teacher for taking English classes in English. Why does teaching English become boring and even traumatic for the teacher? Before we address the roadblocks in the teaching and learning of English, we need to probe deeper on how we perceive the language and the relation of languages to human selves, to society and to culture in a bilingual setting and the need to define the function of language. English is a beautiful and simple language; the only thing is that we should learn to love the language. When language is taught merely for the sake of employment, the very purpose of learning language is defeated. English language is looked upon as a tool for accessing the world. The word 'tool' is a materialistic term. The fact that the relevance of the language has multiplied manifold (given its functionality in the global market) cannot be overlooked. English is commonly addressed as a window to the world and as a link language, hence is approached with a utilitarian perspective. Attaining fluency in the language becomes the aim of any ordinary graduate aspiring for global opportunities. Hence the profusion of spoken English courses that guarantee proficiency in the language within thirty days. Hence the mushrooming of institutions that

train students in American or British or Australian English as per their job requirements. Such a superficial approach to the language prevents us from fathoming the beauty and depth of the language.

Is language just a medium for expression or is there something more to it? This question would open us to a much debated domain of the connection between language and literature. Should language be taught through literature or should we go for a delinking of the two? There has been a strong argument that an overdose of literature in our syllabi hampers the learning of the language. This argument is rooted in the presumption that language is primarily for communication and hence the communicative aspects and grammar have to be foregrounded and that the literary aspects have to be backgrounded. They argue for a separation of courses on language and courses on literature. Of course such a specialization may be required at a post graduate level or at a specialization stage but until then I advocate teaching language through literature and that both language and literature have many meeting points. Pure communication packages would reduce language to a rudimentary level. It robs students of the joy of learning the language. Literature deals with the sublime use of language. A learner can appreciate the nuances and subtleties of the language only through literature. The real beauty of language manifests itself in literature. The study of literature has far greater aims. It delves deeper into the human psyche. It broadens one's perspectives, hones sensibilities, and sensitizes on the deeper realities affecting mankind and culture. Rudimentary language skills would only form the base on which the larger structure has to be built.

The solution to our poor language output does not lie in deleting portions of literature and adding more of language content. It lies in exposing students to literature but evaluating them by asking questions beyond the text. The text should act as a springboard to ignite the linguistic skills and imagination of the student and not as a means and an end in itself. Divorcing literature from language limits the student from appreciating the language in its entirety. Students have to be exposed not just to the basic structures of language but to the most sublime thoughts and expressions, which is possible only through literature. A separation of language and literature is called for only at a specialization stage.

Language for everyday use is the starting point and not the goal of language learning. The goals of a language curriculum are two-pronged. The fundamental goal is the attainment of a basic proficiency in the language, so that the learner can feel at ease with it as in a first language. The second, and the higher goal is the development of language into an instrument for abstract thought and knowledge acquisition. It concerns itself with reading with inferential comprehension and expressing thoughts with conceptual clarity in speech and writing. This is important but sadly ignored in our curriculum. These higher order skills including literary appreciation can be developed only after fundamental competence is acquired. Fundamental competence can be attained only if language is learnt in the natural way. When the foundation is set, higher order skills can be learnt independently. Mastering a language is beyond acquiring listening, speaking, writing and reading

skills. It should finally result in thinking in that language. A language becomes a medium of our thought process only when it is learnt in the natural way.

However, English cannot be learnt in the natural way because it comes to us as a second language. We are first exposed to our first language, its sound systems, its structures, its grammar and its codes of culture. This opens up another much debated question – should language be taught through mother tongue or should mother tongue be excluded from English classrooms. The fact that we are bilinguals and hence we have our own language-specific and culture-specific limitations in approaching the language cannot be overlooked. It is to be understood that our bilingual position is not a limiting or inhibiting factor but an enriching one. Our bilingual position enables us to navigate adeptly between languages. An argument that is gaining ground in ELT is that there is no harm in using mother-tongue in English classrooms. I would subscribe to the view that English should be taught through English only. The structures, rules and sound systems of the two languages are different. Teaching one through the other would, no doubt, be to the detriment of learners. We conceptualize the world initially through our mother tongue. Therefore, mother tongue cannot be excluded completely from any learning. The two languages should be learnt independently. The two can be learnt in relation to each other after acquiring basic competence. Otherwise, one will hinder the other. Language skills are transferable. A person who has acquired proficiency in one language can easily acquire proficiency in another language, provided he is ushered into the language in a natural way.

English can operate perfectly well in any cultural milieu. Learning English does not mean leaving behind one's language and culture because English language is no more a foreign tongue. Though we insist on learning British accent, pronunciation and usages, I would reiterate that rules of language are not as rigid as is normally conceived of. Learning the rules must not be a restrictive factor. It must endow us with the flexibility to adapt the language to our own needs and requirements. This is what we have been doing since the British left. The language has been adapted, assimilated and indigenized to suit our purposes.

However, current educational practice continues the colonial tendency of privileging an English only education for students whose mother tongue is not English. Learning English in this way is dangerous, since it would lead students to internalize colonial values. Students assume that English is a superior language and they assume an air of superiority when they master the language. They learn to detest their mother tongue and everything it represents. Each language is steeped in the context of its culture. However when we learn a foreign language like English, we should bear in mind that we are learning it because English has become our own language, thanks to the colonial legacy. We use English not the way the Englishmen use, but in our own way. To quote Salman Rushdie (1996): "... we can't simply use the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes ... To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free." (p. 5)

Raja Rao calls English the language of our “intellectual make-up.” A dogmatic adherence to “standard” English is not advisable because standards keep changing with the changing dynamics of the politics of power. At the same time, flexibility in the usage of language should not be misconstrued as freedom for anarchy. We should be wary of making mistakes that masquerade as Indian English.

As far as we are concerned, English does not stand alone. It can be learnt only in relation to our regional language. Proficiency in both the languages should be encouraged. Being bilinguals, we should be able to manoeuvre through both the languages with equal adeptness. For us, English and the regional languages do not exist in mutually exclusive environments. One language enriches the other. We should also be able to see the world through the languages. We should also learn to appreciate our own indigenous culture, which again happens in language classrooms. Learning English should not be at the cost of learning to look down upon ones mother tongue and the culture it represents. We should be able to exploit the potential of both languages. We should master the language and not let ourselves be mastered by it. After learning the two languages, students should be able to bring their stories into English. However sadly enough, at undergraduate level our students know neither English nor Malayalam. Initially the child sees the world through his or her own language and culture and learns best from that familiar context. From a strong foundation of learning in the mother tongue, learning other languages and bridging the gap to the wider world becomes easier. However introducing mother-tongue in English classrooms might cripple second language learning. The two languages should be learnt on independent lines. Once the base is set, the dynamics of both the languages can be compared and this will be a rewarding act. Translation exercises can be given at a later stage after gaining sufficient mastery over the languages. Parallel textbooks and newspaper reports can be introduced to familiarize the learners on similar items.

Learning two languages will help promote use of intercultural dialogue and social equity. Language learning has the potential to promote attitudes which encourage curiosity about other cultures. Language learning enables the learners to understand the connections between language and culture and thereby to combat social exclusion. It opens up generational gaps in societies, effecting a repositioning of minority languages. Language curriculum should mould a culturally responsive pedagogy where teachers/learners are sensitive to the cultural background of students and help them make connections between the local, national, racial, cultural and global identities. Students should be exposed to stories like Alice in Wonderland and Tenali Raman, Laurel and Hardy and Shuppandi, Aesop’s fables and local folktales. The child will be able to relate itself to these stories in more meaningful ways. In ‘Black Skins, White Masks’ , Franz Fanon talks about the exclusion a black boy experiences when he watches movies where blacks are always villains and rogues. To overcome such a feeling of exclusion, a culturally responsive pedagogy is to be mooted. This will have far-reaching effects on the child’s linguistic as well as social-emotional skill development. The aim of teaching language should not be to merely equip the student with communication skills. Language

classes are not meant to produce automatons who articulate the language with robot-like precision and sophistication. It has more to it. It should enable the child to relate to its own environment. It should create in the student a sense of self-worth and dignity. It should install in the student pride in his own culture, a sense of appreciation of one's own cultural values and a sense of accommodation of the 'other'.

Another major issue that needs to be addressed in the teaching of English is the question of grammar. Should grammar be taught first and usages later or should they go hand in hand, what is the quantum of grammar required for an undergraduate student does teaching of grammar aid or inhibit language learning – these are very pertinent questions. I subscribe to the view that drilling grammar at the initial stage is like putting the cart before the horse. The horse can never move. In fact grammar need not be taught at all. A native speaker writes a correct sentence in the SVO pattern, without ever realizing that there exists such a pattern. Language acquisition is an unconscious act. It should come to us as naturally as the sprouting of leaves and blooming of flowers. Grammar should be learnt automatically. A native speaker uses type I and type II conditionals without bothering to know what it is. A student writes a sentence like 'the boy is running' without having the need of knowing that the sentence is written in the present progressive. Noam Chomsky conceives of language as a mental organ. To borrow Chomskyan terms, 'performance' is commensurate with 'competence'. A student can perform only if he has acquired competence. Competence is the intuitive knowledge of grammar that enables a person to produce sentences. It is the internalization of tacit rules that govern language. For a person to produce good English, structures have to be fed in. Structures are internalized by constant and consistent exposure to good English. This grammar of a language is largely in place by the time a child is ten years old. Hence language learning should focus on exposing students to structures in a consistent manner. Teaching rules of grammar is necessary only for serious learners of the language. A minimal amount of grammar will suffice for the undergraduate student. Curriculum developers should bear in mind that grammar is not a route for developing a primary or usable knowledge of language. Language is acquired through exposure. Regular exposure to a variety of meaningful language inputs alone can aid language learning. When you pierce the balloon with a pin and tell the child that the balloon has burst, he knows what it means. On the contrary, a student who is thorough in grammar might not understand the meaning of the sentence 'My mother was cross.'

Our undergraduate curriculum presupposes that the learner possesses a working knowledge of the language. In fact, such a presupposition makes unattainable demands on the learner. The learner who is unable to read or write proper English is fed very complex essays. Other barriers to effective learning of the language in undergraduate classrooms of Kerala are overcrowded classrooms, unscientific student teacher ratio, hectic semester system, conventional evaluation methods, overloaded and rigid syllabi, inflexible internal marks system and lack of student and teacher autonomy. To top it all, the learners do not have even elementary knowledge of the language.

The teacher is faced with the task of deschooling the learners before beginning the actual learning process. The process from grammar to usage has to be reversed. The first and foremost task of the teacher is to install in the student reading habits. Reading is a prerequisite to language learning. Unfortunately our students do not even read the prescribed texts. Teachers do most of the reading in the classrooms. They paraphrase the text for the student. This 'heresy of paraphrasing' hinders the genuine reading experience of the student. Thanks to the proliferation of technology, students are averse to reading. Students should be motivated to read. When they experience the joy of reading, language acquisition becomes a natural and effortless process. Students should be trained in different kinds of reading - silent reading, reading aloud, choral reading and repeated reading. They should also be trained in quick reading, skimming and scanning a text, factual comprehension, reading for inference and detailed analysis and evaluation of a text. Classroom activities that foster reading would trigger language acquisition. Students can be divided into groups and assigned reading tasks. The grouping can be done on the basis of student abilities. The choice of the texts can be left to the students. The major hurdle that we face is the inflexible curriculum which leaves no room for teacher-learner autonomy. They can opt to read texts that suit their linguistic ability and literary leanings. Some students might prefer poetry or short stories, some others news items and articles. This is something that has to be done at the initial stage with illustrated stories. Students must be trained to guess the meaning of the words from the context. At the initial stage they should not refer to a dictionary. Dictionaries are not for novices but for experts. Passages with a few difficult words may be given to students and they may be asked to guess the meaning of the words from the context and write them down. Hints and related familiar words may be given. And the teacher can finally tell them whether the guess is right or wrong. Words and expressions learnt in this manner will linger in the minds of the learners. They may be encouraged to ask questions on commonly read materials. Answering them helps hone their inferential skills. If this is done consistently, students will be able to handle the language in a better and efficient manner. Besides, students may be given opportunity to share their reading experiences in the classrooms.

While providing sufficient reading input to the student, the teacher has to simultaneously provide writing exercises. Writing is a multidimensional activity that requires the use of linguistic and cognitive abilities to express ones thoughts in a logical and coherent manner. When students were made to write, it was found that their ideas were good but they had problems with structure. Lack of clarity and coherence, inappropriate register, mistakes in the use of complex sentences, absence of proper connectors and conditionals and repetition of words due to limited vocabulary were other major barriers to expression. Students should be asked to paraphrase the texts that they have read. When this is done effectively, they learn to apply the language to new tasks and situations. Students may also be asked to read simple stories and to retell and rewrite them in their own words.

Our present system follows the practice of awarding internal marks for assignments and seminars. Ideally each assignment is supposed to be a mini research paper. However in reality, given

the bulk of students, teachers end up evaluating assignments that students have copied from other sources. Open ended questions may be given as assignments and students may be asked to write them as classroom activity. Along with seminars, students may be encouraged to do live performances. Real life situations may be given and students may be assigned exercises of framing dialogues. Role-play goes a long way in enhancing the communicative skills of students. Theatre should be promoted as a genuine classroom activity. Students may author very short skits and perform them in the classroom as part of their internal evaluation.

Once the student gains sufficient skills in reading and writing, he can start building up his own language. Vocabulary building comes at this stage. We have active vocabulary or words that we use regularly and passive vocabulary or words and expressions that we know but seldom use. Vocabulary building is not just learning new words. Efforts should be taken to activate the words that gradually recede into passivity due to disuse. Vocabulary is easy to built and easier to forget. Students should be taught to fall in love with words, usages and expressions and learning them must be made a habit.

Rather than blaming the curriculum for its inflexibility, the learners for their lack of competence and the evaluation for being text-based and unimaginative, thrust should be given on what can be done. In fact, much remains for the English teacher to do. While the curriculum presupposes that the students know a fair amount of English, contrary to reality where students grope for the basics, teachers are placed in a quandary. Making the students read aloud portions of the lesson in the classroom is found to be effective. Throwing open ended questions at the end of each chapter, dividing them into groups and making them write have also proved effective. Giving them hints for essay questions and asking them to develop those hints into an essay have also been useful. Initially students might resist, because they are comfortable sitting relaxed in the classrooms, making the teacher lead the show. Teachers are also comfortable with their role as talkers. Classroom activities will ensure that students are not passive note-takers anymore and in the long run they will learn the art of expression. When feedback is taken from students, they also feel positive regarding their improvement in language as a result of extempore activities. There is an aura around English language. Students especially from government schools are scared of the language and hence one major task before the teacher is to demystify that aura and convey the message that the language is simple and accessible. Students should be made to read short stories and discuss them during the library hour and tutorials. Mutually supportive approaches and methods will go a long way in enhancing language. Teachers try to make scapegoats of the system, the syllabi and the students to hide their inefficiency in the language and then clamour for the 'paradigm shift'. Despite the obstacles that teachers face, they have enough room to make changes in their own little way, with the limited autonomy that they possess.



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