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Review Article

Challenges in Teaching English as a Second Language in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

English occupies a central position in Indian higher education as a language of instruction, academic discourse, and global communication. Despite its importance, the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Indian universities and colleges face numerous challenges. These challenges arise from linguistic diversity, socio-economic disparities, inadequate pedagogical practices, examination-oriented systems, and varying levels of student proficiency. This research paper examines the major challenges encountered in teaching English as a Second Language in Indian higher education institutions. It highlights learner-related, teacher-related, curricular, and institutional constraints that hinder effective language acquisition. Drawing upon classroom observations, existing scholarly studies, and practical teaching experiences, the paper suggests learner-centred and communicative pedagogical strategies to enhance ESL instruction. The study concludes that a context-sensitive and skill-oriented approach is essential to address these challenges and to promote meaningful English language learning in Indian higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

English has become one of the most powerful and influential languages in the modern world, functioning as a primary medium of global communication, knowledge exchange, and intellectual discourse. In the Indian context, English holds a particularly significant position, especially within the domain of higher education. It is widely used as a medium of instruction in universities and colleges and is also taught as a compulsory subject across various disciplines. Academic resources such as textbooks, research journals, reference materials, and digital learning platforms are predominantly available in English, making proficiency in the language essential for academic achievement. Consequently, command over English is often closely linked with educational success, professional opportunities, employability, and upward social mobility in contemporary Indian society.

Despite its central role, the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) in Indian higher education institutions continues to be a complex and demanding task. A significant proportion of students enter colleges and universities with limited competence in English, particularly in terms of spoken and written communication. For many learners, English is not a language used in everyday interaction but remains largely confined to the classroom. This limited exposure results in difficulties related to comprehension, expression, and confidence, thereby affecting students' academic performance and participation in higher education. India's multilingual and multicultural environment further complicates the process of English language teaching. Students enrolled in higher education institutions come from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, speaking a wide range of regional languages and dialects. Such diversity creates heterogeneous classrooms where learners possess varying levels of English proficiency and learning abilities. This disparity often leads to a noticeable gap between institutional expectations and the actual linguistic competence of learners. While higher education assumes a certain level of language proficiency, many students struggle to meet these expectations, resulting in anxiety, hesitation, and a sense of inadequacy. Teachers of English in Indian higher education are therefore faced with the challenging responsibility of addressing these linguistic disparities within limited instructional time. They are expected to balance syllabus completion, examination requirements, and the development of communicative competence among students. However, rigid curricula and examination-oriented frameworks often prioritize theoretical knowledge and written skills over practical language use. As a result, opportunities for interactive learning, speaking practice, and skill-based language development remain limited. These constraints significantly reduce the effectiveness of ESL instruction and hinder meaningful language acquisition. In this context, it becomes essential to examine the challenges associated with teaching English as a Second Language in Indian higher education in a systematic manner. This paper seeks to explore the major learner-related, teacher-related, curricular, and institutional challenges that affect ESL teaching

practices. It also aims to propose practical and pedagogically sound strategies that can enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching. By adopting learner-centered, communicative, and context-sensitive approaches, higher education institutions can work towards making English language education more inclusive, effective, and empowering for diverse groups of learners.

❖ Status of English in Indian Higher Education

English occupies a privileged yet complex and often contested position in Indian higher education. It functions as a link language that connects students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and serves as a primary medium for academic instruction, research, and scholarly communication. In most universities and colleges across India, English is either the medium of instruction or a compulsory subject, particularly at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. A vast majority of academic textbooks, research journals, reference materials, and digital learning resources are produced and disseminated in English, making proficiency in the language essential for meaningful participation in higher education. At the same time, the dominance of English creates significant challenges, particularly for students from rural, vernacular-medium, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many such students enter higher education institutions with limited exposure to English, having completed their earlier education in regional languages. This linguistic gap often places them at a disadvantage in understanding lectures, engaging with academic texts, and expressing ideas effectively in written and spoken forms. As a result, English becomes not only a medium of learning but also a barrier that restricts equal access to educational opportunities. While English facilitates academic and professional mobility by opening doors to higher studies, research, and global employment, it simultaneously reinforces existing social and educational inequalities. Students who lack adequate competence in English often experience psychological challenges such as fear, hesitation, and low self-confidence within academic spaces. They may remain silent in classrooms, avoid participation in discussions, and feel marginalized among peers who possess greater fluency. Such experiences can negatively affect their academic performance and overall educational experience. This paradoxical status of English—as both an empowering tool and a source of exclusion—poses significant challenges for teachers and institutions in higher education. Teachers are required to negotiate between maintaining academic standards and addressing the linguistic needs of diverse learners. Institutions, on the other hand, must balance the global importance of English with the need for inclusivity and accessibility. Understanding the status of English in Indian higher education is therefore crucial for developing effective language policies and pedagogical strategies that promote equity, competence, and confidence among learners.

❖ Learner-Related Challenges

One of the most significant challenges in teaching English as a Second Language in Indian higher education lies in the diverse characteristics and learning conditions of students. Learners enter universities and colleges with varying levels of linguistic competence, educational exposure, and socio-cultural backgrounds. This diversity directly affects their ability to acquire English effectively and participate actively in academic discourse. A major learner-related issue is mother-tongue interference. Students often rely on their native language structures while using English, leading to grammatical inaccuracies, incorrect sentence patterns, and limited fluency. Since English is not commonly used in daily communication for many learners, they tend to mentally translate from their mother tongue, which hampers natural language acquisition. Another critical challenge is the lack of adequate exposure and practice. For many students, interaction with English is restricted to the classroom, with minimal opportunities to use the language in real-life situations. This limited exposure affects the development of listening and speaking skills, which are essential for communicative competence. Without consistent practice, learners struggle to internalize language structures and vocabulary. Psychological factors further intensify these challenges. Fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and anxiety prevent students from participating in classroom activities. Many learners hesitate to speak due to the fear of ridicule or negative evaluation by peers and teachers. This hesitation leads to silence, which in turn obstructs language development. Additionally, first-generation learners often experience a sense of inadequacy when compared to more fluent peers, resulting in low motivation and disengagement. Socio-economic factors also play a crucial role in shaping learners' language proficiency. Students from underprivileged backgrounds may lack access to English-medium schooling, learning resources, or supportive environments. These limitations widen the gap between learners and place additional pressure on higher education institutions to bridge foundational language deficiencies.

❖ Teacher-Related Challenges

Teachers of English in Indian higher education face numerous challenges that directly impact the effectiveness of ESL instruction. One of the primary difficulties is managing large and heterogeneous classrooms. Within a single classroom, students may range from fluent speakers to those struggling with basic language skills. Addressing the needs of such a diverse group within limited instructional time poses a significant challenge for teachers. Another important issue is the limited training in language pedagogy. Many teachers of English are academically trained in literature rather than in language teaching methodologies. As a result, they may not be adequately equipped with modern ESL approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching, task-based learning, or learner-centered pedagogies. This gap often leads to reliance on traditional teaching methods that emphasize grammar explanation and translation rather than active language use. The dominance of an examination-oriented education system further

constrains teachers' efforts. Teachers are often compelled to focus on syllabus completion and examination preparation, leaving little scope for interactive activities that develop speaking and listening skills. Assessment patterns that prioritize written answers discourage communicative practices and reduce opportunities for experiential learning. Additionally, teachers face institutional pressures and workload constraints. Administrative responsibilities, large teaching loads, and limited access to professional development programs restrict teachers' ability to innovate or reflect on their teaching practices. The lack of regular training workshops and refresher courses in ESL pedagogy further limits teachers' professional growth.

❖ Curriculum Constraints

The curriculum for English in Indian higher education institutions presents another major challenge in effective ESL teaching. In many universities, the English syllabus is heavily literature-oriented, with limited emphasis on functional language skills. While the study of literature contributes to critical thinking and cultural awareness, it does not necessarily equip learners with the practical language skills required for academic and professional communication. A significant limitation of the existing curriculum is the insufficient focus on communicative competence. Essential skills such as speaking, listening, academic writing, and presentation skills are often neglected or treated superficially. Consequently, students may graduate with theoretical knowledge of English literature but lack confidence in using English effectively in real-life situations. Moreover, many curricula are outdated and disconnected from contemporary needs. They fail to incorporate emerging forms of communication such as digital literacy, online academic writing, and workplace communication. The absence of skill-based modules limits students' preparedness for global and professional contexts. Rigid curricular structures also restrict teachers' autonomy. Prescribed texts, fixed teaching hours, and standardized assessment methods leave little room for innovation or contextual adaptation. As a result, the curriculum often fails to address the diverse linguistic needs of learners and does not support a flexible, learner-centered approach to ESL instruction.

❖ Institutional Challenge

Institutional factors play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of English as a Second Language teaching in Indian higher education. One of the most persistent challenges is the issue of large class sizes. In many universities and colleges, especially government and rural institutions, English classes often consist of a large number of students. Such overcrowded classrooms make individual attention, interaction, and language practice extremely difficult. Language learning, which requires active participation and feedback, becomes largely passive under these conditions. Another major institutional constraint is the lack of adequate infrastructure and resources. Many institutions do not have language laboratories, audio-visual aids, or digital tools that are essential for developing listening and speaking skills. Even where such

facilities exist, they are often underutilized due to lack of training or maintenance. Limited access to technology reduces opportunities for exposure to authentic language input. Time constraints further compound these challenges. English courses are frequently allotted fewer teaching hours compared to core or technical subjects. This limited instructional time restricts teachers' ability to focus on skill development, practice activities, and remedial support for weak learners. Additionally, institutional emphasis on syllabus completion rather than skill acquisition undermines the long-term objectives of language education. Administrative pressures and rigid academic structures also affect ESL teaching. Teachers are burdened with non-academic responsibilities such as documentation, examinations, and institutional duties, leaving little time for pedagogical innovation or professional development. The absence of consistent institutional support for teacher training programs further limits the improvement of ESL instruction.

❖ Impact on Employability

The challenges associated with ESL teaching in Indian higher education have a direct and significant impact on students' employability. In the contemporary job market, proficiency in English is considered a fundamental requirement across disciplines. Employers increasingly seek candidates who possess not only technical knowledge but also strong communication skills, including spoken English, writing ability, and interpersonal competence. Students who graduate with inadequate English proficiency often struggle during job interviews, group discussions, and professional interactions. Their inability to express ideas clearly and confidently limits access to employment opportunities, particularly in multinational companies, corporate sectors, and global organizations. As a result, even academically capable students may remain unemployed or underemployed due to poor communication skills. Furthermore, lack of English proficiency restricts access to higher studies, research opportunities, and professional development programs, many of which require advanced language skills. This limitation contributes to a widening gap between students from English-medium backgrounds and those from vernacular-medium or rural educational settings. Thus, ineffective ESL teaching not only affects individual career prospects but also perpetuates social and economic inequalities.

❖ Pedagogical Strategies and Suggestions

Addressing the challenges of ESL teaching in Indian higher education requires the adoption of effective and context-sensitive pedagogical strategies. One of the most important approaches is the learner-centered method, which focuses on students' needs, abilities, and learning styles. Teachers should design activities that encourage active participation, collaboration, and meaningful language use. The adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can significantly enhance language learning outcomes. CLT emphasizes real-life communication rather than rote memorization of grammar rules. Activities such as role-plays, group discussions, debates, presentations, and problem-solving tasks help students develop

confidence and fluency in English. The integration of technology into language teaching can also play a transformative role. Audio-visual materials, online platforms, language learning applications, and digital resources provide learners with exposure to authentic English and enable practice beyond the classroom. Technology-supported learning promotes autonomy and continuous engagement with the language. Teacher training and professional development are equally essential. Institutions should organize regular workshops, refresher courses, and training programs focused on modern ESL pedagogy. Such initiatives equip teachers with innovative teaching techniques and help them manage diverse classrooms effectively. Curriculum reform is another key area of intervention. English syllabi should be updated to include skill-based modules such as academic writing, presentation skills, interview preparation, and workplace communication. A balanced integration of literature and language skills can make English education more relevant and practical.

CONCLUSION

Teaching English as a Second Language in Indian higher education is both a challenge and a necessity in the contemporary academic and professional landscape. The difficulties associated with ESL instruction arise from multiple factors, including learner diversity, pedagogical limitations, curricular rigidity, and institutional constraints. These challenges collectively hinder the development of communicative competence among students and limit the effectiveness of English education.

However, these challenges are not insurmountable. By adopting learner-centered and communicative pedagogical approaches, integrating technology, reforming curricula, and strengthening institutional support, higher education institutions can significantly improve ESL teaching practices. English education should move beyond examination-oriented frameworks and focus on developing confident, competent, and independent users of the language. A more inclusive and skill-oriented approach to English language teaching has the potential to bridge linguistic gaps, enhance employability, and promote social mobility. Ultimately, effective ESL instruction can transform English from a source of anxiety and exclusion into a powerful tool for empowerment and academic success in Indian higher education.

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