

ADAPTING SPACED REPETITION SYSTEM (SRS) AMONG OTHER METHODS FOR OPTIMIZING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

Seeing that the world is progressing as a global village, making every single country interdependent for various factors, the call for a common language becomes unequivocal. English serves the very purpose which is considered a global language - *lingua franca*. As a consequence, teaching and learning of English as a foreign language and a second language is cardinal. English, regardless of being taught as a second language in India, is a language spoken by a majority of people predominantly, the urban population. English for the most part, helps in breaking the language barrier, thereby used as a medium of communication ensuring smooth operation of almost all the organisations and institutions including government organisations. The evolution of English Language Teaching commenced long back which dates back to the seventeenth century and the process still continues. The methodology of teaching English keeps evolving, having the students' requirements and available resources in mind and attempting to put all these resources into practice. Right from the Grammar Translation Method, the techniques keep changing and advancing. From teacher-centred teaching, the ELT has transformed into a student-centred teaching. The paper is a sincere attempt to discuss the significance of learning English as a second language with respect to Indian scenario and the emergence of different methodologies, techniques and strategies of English language teaching.

Key words

English Language Teaching, Spaced Repetition System (SRS), *Lingua franca*, communication, methodologies.

Introduction

Language is fundamentally a system of communication that comprises a set of sounds or symbols. However, language is not mere communication, as animals do communicate through their cries and noises but they never use language. There are various theories on the origin of language: some opine that the language came into existence as a vocal imitation of the natural sources of sounds made by animals, birds, wind, etc. Hockett in *The Origin of Speech* asserts that “Man is the only animal that can communicate by means of abstract symbols.” (p. 5). It is generally believed that language is an important thing that differentiates humans from any other animal. Thus language is used in intentional communication by humans to express their ideas, feelings and emotions through the vocal-auditory channel. According to Harrub, Children are expected to communicate orally by the age of four and if a child fails to do so at that particular age, the child is considered to have some abnormality. There are roughly 6500 languages spoken across the globe and among all these, English is considered to be *lingua franca*.

English as a global language

English has expanded across the world over the last few centuries and it has become the medium in almost all fields like science, technology, law, business, internet, and so on. In the present day, English is used as a first, second or foreign language in many parts of the world owing to the former colonial and imperial activity, the slave trade and of late, economic, cultural and educational activity of the country from which the language originated. In India also, English became the official language in the early twentieth century, though with a smaller number of people speaking in English who lead India in various fields like industrial, political and social life.

Need for English

The most important reason for learning English is scientific and technological rather than political. In the present information or digital era, eighty percent of the data stored and processed in a computer is in English which makes learning and mastering the language mandatory. Fluency in the English language is considered to be an important skill required for a job and the lack of which makes the graduates unemployable. Therefore learning a language, which helps one to communicate effectively with each other, makes one get a job and be successful in both personal and professional life becomes imperative.

Language Learning

Learning is impacted by numerous factors – most of which depend on the learners, like their inclination towards learning, their social and economic background, and so on. Attention, awareness and focus form the basis for effective learning. Language learning, which forms the subject of this paper, is also a perpetual process which commences in infancy. The deep learning of the language which starts when the infant listens to people conversing around since it not only observes but also assimilates all the aspects of language, including syntactic structures and vocabulary. The infant takes all the data into the memory and this process continues nonstop till the end of one's life. The ability to store the acquired data in the brain and retrieving the same at the required time is termed as learning and this applies to learning language skills as well.

Learning English

The prowess of an individual to put forward the ideas and emotions effectively orally or through written mode in a comprehensible way is termed as language skill developing one's proficiency in language. English becomes obligatory as it is the widely spoken language in the world. Learning an additional language emerged in the west during the seventeenth century when learning Greek and Latin was considered to be intellectuals' job and only those who learnt Greek and Latin were regarded as intelligent. The status of English in India is significant as English is the medium for intra-state and inter-state communication though Hindi is the official language of the nation. English is also termed as a link language as each state in India has its own language while some states have two.

Status of English in India

People in India, who even protest against learning Hindi, which is India's official language, never seem to have any issue with English being taught and used as a medium of communication even in government sectors. Moreover with growing technology and booming internet culture, the importance of English is growing day by day. English is the most commonly spoken language in India only next to Hindi. Even when Indians speak their own mother tongue, they mix up English words in their conversations. Sometimes, they even switch to English in the middle of their conversation. The usage of English language in the day-today life of Indians is so prominent that certain words and phrases are added to the English dictionary which are basically

Indian. For instance words such as 'chapati,' 'curry,' 'idly,' 'dosa,' and the word like 'prepone' is a typical Indian usage of the conventional form 'advance.' From this, it is evident that learning English is inevitable and is the most important element of India's culture and communication.

Approach to Language Learning

Developing the four aspects of language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing is extremely crucial for a successful personal and professional life. Among the four skills, reading and listening, are receptive skills as these skills involve receiving the language and storing, processing of the same so that the vocabulary and syntaxes are imbibed in the brain. The stored information is later on retrieved when needed and thus enhances the productive skills like speaking and writing. These two skills are termed as productive skills as they involve in the production or creation of language in the form of speech and writing. By practising all the four skills, the learner is exposed continuously to the target language, it gets into the subconscious memory of the learner and the observed and stored information can be retrieved and used when needed. This is the process of language learning.

Oral Communication

"A picture is worth a thousand words" goes the popular adage. Nevertheless, a picture may be interpreted in any number of ways based on the thinking faculty, mind set and exposure of the onlooker. In the process of interpreting the picture, the real idea or emotion of the artist may be lost. That is why a picture is "interpreted" whereas a piece of communication whether it is written or spoken is "understood". Though there are different methods of communication – oral, written, sign language, symbols, pictures, so on and so forth, oral communication provides distinct advantages to the communicator. Speaking clearly and confidently with appropriate choice of words and well-developed verbal ability can increase one's persuasive skill and thereby builds confidence of the speaker. The speakers whose skills are honed and improved by continuous application, become master communicators who are able to form their thoughts into sentences and deliver them in a well-organized way. When the two modes of communication like spoken and written are compared, oral communication is more widespread because when people relocate to other states and nations they rely more on their oral skills in the target language for their basic communication rather than written communication. Moreover, oral communication is

also considered to be the quickest, transparent and flexible and it receives the feedback instantly. This prompts the learners to become efficient oral communicators making the role of English language teachers who can train the learners in the speaking skills remarkable.

English Language Teaching Methodology

There are different methods in teaching and learning a language and this process has been emerging for so many years, especially in the twentieth century. Right from the ancient Gurukul System of education till online teaching in the present scenario, there is a tremendous change and development in the methodology of teaching in general. From the chalk-talk method which focuses on the lecturer's voice and the activities, to the activity based learning which is learner-centric, the teaching methodology has been undergoing a sea-change. English language teaching tops the chart with regard to employing new techniques and methodologies of teaching. This paves way to an increased number of researches in the field of English Language Teaching. Learning a language is different from learning a subject - while learning a subject, it is sufficient if one understands the subject and applies the concepts. On the other hand, while learning a language, in addition to learning and applying, the learner has to create or produce language which is considered to be higher order learning according to Blooms Taxonomy.

Grammar Translation Method

Grammar Translation Method is derived from the classical method of teaching Greek and Latin to teach a foreign language. Grammar Translation Method encourages the learners to learn the grammatical rules and apply those rules while translating sentences between the native language and the target language. In the nineteenth century, this method emerged as a popular methodology. However, it lost its lustre as the main focus was on the sentence structures and grammar alone and not on improving the communication skills especially the oral skills of the learners. Hence, researchers understood the importance of arriving at a method in which the learners are encouraged to use the target language spontaneously without translating and analysing the grammatical rules and syntactic structures. According to the above mentioned method, the medium of instruction in the classroom was the target language. Grammar was approached in an inductive method and only vocabulary used on an everyday basis was taught to

the learners. Owing to the constraints of budget, time and classroom size, this method lost its sheen in due course and led to the emergence of Audio lingual method.

Audio Lingual Method

Audio lingual method was widely used in the 1950s and 1960s when the focus was not on the grammar or vocabulary, but on the acquisition of structures and patterns in mundane dialogues. This method also depends on mimicry and memorization of words and phrases, and it also involves repetitive drills without explaining the grammatical aspects. The phrases and structures are repeated and tested until the responses and feedbacks given by the learners are involuntary. This methodology was followed by many other methods and strategies and one among them was Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This method focuses on teaching a language in a natural way – by communicating with the learners and exposing them to actual communication. The CLT emphasizes interaction as both the mode and the eventual purpose of learning. Hence, the CLT can rather be called as an approach than a method which focuses on all components of communication like vocabulary, grammar, fluency and accuracy. These two methods especially the audiolingual method narrows down to another method called Spaced Repetition System (SRS).

Spaced Repetition System

Language skill has to be acquired and can be done by constantly repeating and reviewing the content learnt periodically. This methodical reiteration of words, phrases and clauses enhances the language skill of the learners as it strengthens the neurons in the brain. This process of reinforcement improves the learning speed of the learners by boosting their confidence. Thus, learning vocabulary and other aspects of a language through this process is the most efficient methodology. Here is the context the technique called spaced repetition system plays a key role. This can also be called as reinforced learning. This system employs the technique of introducing a concept to the learners and encouraging them to revisit the concepts at a specified interval of time thereby reinforcing what is already learnt. Revisiting or reinforcing is done on the verge of forgetting and hence this technique is considered to be one of the most efficient methodologies in English Language Teaching.

Origin of Spaced Repetition System

The Spaced Repetition System was employed in full swing during the period from 4400 B. C. to 3000 B. C. In India, this methodology was followed when Gurukula system was prevalent, in other words during the ancient Vedic period. The learners were taught orally as many of the Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads and spiritual ideas were transmitted by the words of mouth to the next generation. From this, it is obvious that this system is not a newly emerged one but an age old, time tested methodology which has been in use for ages. In ancient days, to learn a language, the technique of rote learning and translation method was used when oral communication in the target language was not a top priority. Language was taught for reading and augmenting the knowledge of the learners and not for improving their communication skill in the target language.

To learn vocabulary which forms the most important tool for language learning and effective communication in that language, spaced repetition system is considered to be appropriate. Prof. C. A. Maze propounded the idea of spaced repetition for better learning experience in his book "Psychology of Study." This methodology is found to be effective even now as the technique which can, without doubt, be employed by means of the technological advancements. There are already many apps and online sites and forums from where one can learn vocabulary based on spaced repetition system. Flash card method, which is proved to be one of the best methods to enhance one's word power, can now be made use of in a more effective manner thanks to the technological development in the field of Computer Sciences.

Cramming Vs Spaced Learning

According to the concept of spaced repetition or reinforced learning, vocabulary when learnt and revisited at a specified interval of time, gets stored in the memory permanently. On the other hand, if the same is not revisited, the concepts, instead of getting imbibed in the long term memory, get erased from the short term memory leading to poor and unproductive learning. When the information is crammed on a single day, as it usually happens before an examination, the data stay in the temporary memory of the learners and in course of time, if not reinforced, gets erased from the memory system. From this, it is obvious that for a long term retention of what is learnt, spaced repetition system is considered to be appropriate and learning a lot of

information on a very short period of time, in other words, cramming of information in a short span of time may be productive for a short term, especially before an exam but does not provide long lasting learning experience.

Three phases of language learning

Language learning happens in three phases. While the first phase includes learning vocabulary, intermediary level includes gaining fluency in the target language where the main focus is on language fluency rather than language accuracy. The highest and final phase of language learning is attaining proficiency or mastery over the target language. As beginners in schools, the learners are exposed to rhymes and poems in the kindergarten level, where they are trained to repeat the rhymes recited by the teacher, of course with appropriate body movements and expressions. The kids learn the pronunciation of words and structure of sentences without even understanding the meanings. This forms the first level in language learning. In the tertiary level, solving word quizzes, puzzles and verbal reasoning repeatedly in specific time intervals helps the learners in enhancing their thinking skill and problem solving skill. At this level, the SRS does not act as effectively as at the other two levels. The technique can be used in order to improve the vocabulary of the learner, which forms a lifelong process.

Limitations

There are many limitations in employing the SRS as a technique in the teaching learning process of the English language. The first and foremost is the monotony of the system. Learners are likely to become tired and uninterested as the same task is repeated continuously. Sometimes repeating without understanding the concept changes the whole process of learning into just a ritual. Moreover, the learners start performing the act in a mechanical way even without paying attention to the task in hand and hence get distracted easily from the primary objective of learning the language.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is apparent that learning English opens one up to a myriad of opportunities both in their personal as well as professional life. People who are proficient in English have the advantage over others who are not very proficient, since competency in English

is considered to be a trump card for climbing their career ladder rapidly. English Language Teaching has been remodelled several times over the years to employ utmost efficiency and it is a continuous process even in the present scenario. Hence, the field of English Language Learning attracts a lot of research. New techniques, methods and strategies are being invented and employed.

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